

# OPINION DIVERSITY: PUT IT TO WORK FOR YOU

What appears at first blush a subversive new internal communication concept is ultimately an old idea that political consultants have long understood. How internal communicators can use the diversity of employees' opinions to accomplish objectives.



By Mike Klein

A lot of work has been done in recent years to demonstrate the value of internal communication—work that has helped to solidify the role of communicators within organizations and to attempt to make organizations more solicitous of staff involvement.

While these efforts have yielded some results, the hierarchical, dictatorial, top-down model of internal communication has generally survived intact. Some new ground has been broken, but have any of the old rules really been overthrown?

A key limitation of the traditional “rulebook” of internal

communication is that it fails to allow for differences of opinion within organizations or to account for the dynamics opinion diversity unleashes within them.

Defining opinion diversity as the recognition that organizations harbor varied and often conflicting viewpoints, and that those viewpoints are what drive actions and behaviors, represents a legitimate, powerful and potentially crucial perspective to be deployed by internal communicators. It also suggests new tools and approaches that can address some of the most pressing challenges facing business today. >

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## Opinion Diversity: A subversive concept?

On the surface, the notion of opinion diversity in the realm of corporate internal communication is a subversive concept. Corporations are designed to make decisions at the top, and have them progressively implemented as they reach bottom. Decisions are made to be followed with alacrity; not challenged, questioned or delayed. Employees are there to do what they are told, regardless of the opinions they may have. Bellowed one London chief executive during a discussion of a possible employee survey, “We shall not run this company by referendum!”

Yet while corporations are clearly not run by referendum or election, their output is clearly a function of the “selections” made by individual employees on a moment-by-moment basis. And individuals make their selections on the basis of their opinions.

Traditional internal communication mechanics and strategies have generally ignored the role of employee opinion, and have been tightly aligned with the hierarchical model. But one need only look at the abysmal failure rates of line-management cascades to recognize that something is fundamentally out of kilter.

Line managers, like other employees within corporations, come to work with a variety of opinions from their “real lives.” Some are change-loving, enthusiastic, artistically minded Christian Democrats; others are skeptical, football-watching, financially oriented Hindu Conservatives. Their world views are shaped by their educational and cultural backgrounds, and their work views are shaped by length of service, job satisfaction level, career ambitions,

colleague opinions and perceptions of the company’s integrity and direction. The extent to which line managers encourage positive or negative behaviors from their colleagues—and the level of frequency or zeal with which they deliver messages from above—is a product of their full range of attitudes.

Beyond the personal opinions held by managers and employees, companies often inject considerable ambiguity into the mix, ranging from conflicting priorities, matrixed lines of authority, and the injection of value, vision and mission statements that are often ill-defined.

In an environment of ambiguity, individuals have considerable freedom to make their own selections. The resulting opinion diversity has considerable potential to influence the success or failure of organizational communication and change initiatives. It certainly plays a key role in the failure of management cascades, and can be a reason change programs and mergers fail.

By excluding opinion diversity, traditional approaches to internal communication are hamstrung in addressing the corrosive factors of cynicism, resistance and sabotage, and are equally constrained in using communication skills and tools to mobilize positive support and energy from those employees who are so inclined.

## What politics can teach us

While opinion diversity may be a new distinction in internal communication, it’s by no means new within the realm of communication strategy. Indeed, there’s a major communication discipline that has been consciously dealing with opinion diversity for more than 200 years—the realm of political consulting and campaign management.

Essentially, any political campaign is an effort to harness the diversity of opinion present in any community (an election district, legislative body, state or nation), and shape it to produce a positive outcome—an electoral or legislative victory.

As with corporate successes, political victories can come in many shapes and sizes. Some involve the winning of majorities—although these majorities often are highly motivated minorities after the number of non-voters is subtracted. And while most political races involve candidates, many of the most hotly contested involve the political equivalent of corporate-change programs, in the form of initiatives and referenda.

Political campaigns address the challenge presented by opinion diversity by taking a number of steps:

- Define victory criteria—particularly in terms of the number of votes required to win, which is never 100 percent and, often, well below 50 percent of the total electorate
- Identify expected supporters and opponents
- Identify supporters who have high credibility with fence-sitters and opposition voters
- Focus on identifying the issues that will persuade fence-sitters to move into the support column
- Turn out supporters on Election Day

In contrast, corporate initiatives traditionally take the following approach:

- Define the outcome the “company” wants
- Assume the support of the organization for that outcome
- Communicate repeatedly and indiscriminately with

staff/managers, including ones who may be indifferent or hostile

## What to ask, how to win

While opinion diversity presents a change in perspective, it's also something that communicators can act upon quickly. Here's how:

- **Survey employee opinions**

For companies with the wherewithal to do serious employee research, a battery of opinion-rich, open-ended questions can provide a comprehensive picture of what people in the organization think at a given time, and provide some guidance on how to address key issues in the near future. These questions include:

- What are the three biggest issues facing the company?
- What are the three biggest issues facing you in doing your job?
- What are you most excited about as you look at the future?
- What are you most worried about as you look at the future?
- Which senior managers do you see as most focused on business issues?
- Which senior managers do you see as most focused on people issues?

- **Define “the opposition”**

A key advantage presented to an internal communicator—to an extent even greater than to a political communicator—is that he or she is free to outline “the opposition” by identifying opposing arguments

and mindsets. In acknowledging the presence of “the opposition,” it then becomes possible to co-opt it, or to overcome it.

- **Identify what's necessary to win**

Most initiatives don't require unanimous support or uniform levels of participation to achieve success. In fact, many initiatives will be successful with the active support and participation of a minority of the organization, provided the benign neutrality of the rest of the organization can be secured.

Ideally, this research would be done at the earliest stages of an initiative—although it could have a corrective influence if done in mid-course.

- **Build source credibility/create resonant heroes**

When you have identified a coalition capable of gaining project success, and the key messages that could shift opinion and/or mobilize favorable opinion, it becomes crucial to identify individuals or teams with high credibility with other potential members of the coalition to deliver those key messages.

Fashioning of a message that reflects the existence of opinion diversity requires the creation of stories that appeal to those you need for success—without unduly alienating those whose active support isn't necessary.

- **Conduct an audit**

In addition to injecting the element of opinion diversity into new communication and

change initiatives, one should audit the existing range of communication mechanisms and messages. The goal here is to see if they can be adjusted to make them more effective at countering cynicism, responding to resistance and harnessing positive energies and actions. Initial actions may be as simple as inserting response points (e-mail addresses) in messages and ensuring that punchy, attributed quotes replace disembodied corporate pronouncements in every newsletter article.

## Time to reassess

The active acknowledgement of opinion diversity in a corporate context—and the recognition that there's much for internal communicators to reassess in making their activities more effective and powerful—represents a challenge and an opportunity for the profession and the organizations for which they work. As an appreciation for opinion diversity grows within the internal communications field, we will be able to trade ideas, approaches and measurements in a way that will expand their success across the profession. ■