

# Internal communication and the art of war

## How to get off the tactical treadmill and on to the strategic super-highway

### SYNOPSIS

In his book *The Art of War*, the ancient Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu discusses the interconnection between 'strategy' and 'tactics'. His words of wisdom go straight to the heart of one of the biggest challenges for internal communication: strategy vs. tactics.

One of the things that can fall by the wayside in a fast-paced, highly competitive environment is strategic communication. When there are organisational 'fires' to be fought every day, it is easy to slip into a reactive tactical mode. As a result, communication descends into a vortex of day-to-day minutiae. The bigger picture gets lost in translation: where is the organisation heading? What do employees need to know, believe and do differently to get there?

In the competitively-charged battlefield of today's marketplace, such an approach is risky. As Lewis Carroll states in *Alice in Wonderland*, 'If you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there'. If employees don't know where the organisation is heading, and if they don't know what's expected of them to reach that destination, then any kind of behaviour or actions will seemingly suffice.

Without a communication strategy to map the way forward, the constant fire fighting steals leaders' focus, energy and resources away from delivering on the big-ticket priorities: vision, values and strategy. As a result, the organisation can veer from its intended purpose. Its core differentiators falter. Its brand weakens. Competitors circle.

The Strategic Communication Roadmap is a tool that addresses this issue. It comprises a simple seven-step methodology for planning the most effective deployment of communication tactics to enable the organisation to deliver on its strategic intent.

## ARTICLE

Organisations battling for greater market share, or for talented employees, or merely for survival, could well heed the words of an ancient Chinese military general. In his book *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu states, 'Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory; tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat'.

His maxim for winning battles applies in an organisational context as much as it does in a military environment. In today's competitively-charged war for productive employees, profitable customers or prosperous shareholders, organisations with a strategy but no tactics take the slowest route to victory. Those deploying tactics without a well-defined strategy face the noise before defeat.

One of the key tactics for executing a business strategy is communication.

Communication is the life-blood of any organisation. It is the energetic force that when deployed in a purposeful and planned way (i.e. strategically) moves the organisation effortlessly forward to reach its goals. Equally, it is the energetic force that when deployed in a reactive and erratic way (i.e. tactically) stymies organisational growth and well-being.

Sun Tzu's words are applicable here too: a communication strategy without tactics is the slowest route to executing on a business strategy; communication tactics without strategy are the noise before strategic defeat.

How common is defeat? According to the findings of numerous studies, some 70% of change initiatives fail to realise the desired organisational outcomes.

For those responsible for employee communication (the organisation's leaders, managers and communication professionals) the difference between a tactical and a strategic approach equates to the difference between being ineffective and being effective.

Taking a tactical approach to internal communication is like being on a treadmill. It consumes energy, time and commitment but the organisation does not move forward. Running fast just to stay in the same place is fine for training purposes. If you wish to reach a desired destination, it is ineffective.

Tactical communication is reactive: it is the knee-jerk reaction to the ongoing flow of issues and challenges that organisations face on a daily basis. It can divert critical resources away from key priorities and leave the organisation no further along from where it started.

Being on the tactical treadmill means taking an output-based approach that:

- Treats only the communication symptoms
- Delivers tactical communication outputs in reaction to demands

- Is not based on measurable objectives
- Does not establish the desired outcomes of the communication: it's serendipity
- Does not establish the communication impact because there's no audit of effectiveness
- Does not learn from experiences to improve effectiveness of the next round of communications

Taking a strategic approach to internal communication is like being on a super-highway. Having selected the right mode of transport, the organisation moves forward with speed to reach its desired destination easily and quickly.

Strategic communication is responsive: it is a set of purposeful and planned tactics devised to shift the organisation closer to realising its vision, living its values and fulfilling its purpose.

Being on the strategic super-highway means delivering on desired business outcomes by:

- Working with 100% of the organisation's communication system
- Addressing the underlying causes, not just the symptoms
- Delivering creative communication outputs that are aligned to the organisation's culture and priorities
- Establishing measurable communication objectives based on key performance indicators
- Evaluating fully the impact of the communication tactics
- Feeding all learnings into the next round of communications

Three things stand in the way of getting off the tactical treadmill and on to the strategic super-highway. They are:

1. **Time:** it takes many hours to develop a full-scale communication strategy and being on the tactical treadmill leaves no spare time in an already action-packed day;
2. **Stakeholder support:** a full-scale communication strategy is usually a lengthy document. Key stakeholders often don't have the time to peruse it thoroughly, which makes it challenging to secure their buy-in and support for its implementation;
3. **Currency:** a full-scale communication strategy can quickly become out of date when the organisation's dynamics change in response to external or internal triggers.

Over the past 27 years, I have developed many communication strategies. It was always a frustrating task for the reasons cited above. I figured there had to be a better way.

Out of that frustration, I created the Strategic Communication Roadmap. The tool is a one-page map. It provides a detailed plan showing how communication tactics will be deployed to shift employees' knowledge, beliefs and actions enabling achievement of organisational goals and priorities.

The Strategic Communication Roadmap delivers the following advantages:

- It is quick and easy to use;
- It benefits anyone responsible for communicating with employees;
- It provides the framework for developing a full-scale communication strategy if required;
- It makes it easy to engage key stakeholders;
- It can be amended easily to accommodate changes in the organisation's dynamics or if the selected tactics are not achieving the desired momentum;
- It employs a methodology that equips entire teams with a common language and a common approach.

In partnership with the Ark Group, I am conducting two-day courses on the Strategic Communication Roadmap in Brisbane on 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> February and in Melbourne on 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> June. You can find more details [here](#).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lorri Lennon is director of the Centre for Leadership Communication. An author, trainer and advisor, Lorri draws on her 27 years' global experience in corporate communication to facilitate optimal leader-employee communications. She translates high-level concepts, such as 'strategic communication', into easy-to-use tools such as the Strategic Communication Roadmap. A sought-after trainer and speaker, Lorri has inspired audiences in Australia, Singapore, South Africa, New Zealand and the United States. She is author of *Tactics in a Box: 101 ways to communicate with employees*. Accredited by the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), Lorri is a triple winner of the IABC's Gold Quill Excellence Award.