



THE GAP IN THE MIDDLE

Why information doesn't 'cascade' through your organisation and how communications professionals can fix the problem.

SYNOPSIS

Most organisational-wide communication strategies rely on a cascade-down approach to connect staff at the frontline to leadership priorities. Managers are crucial to this flow of information but few have had any exposure, training, coaching or guidance on how to be an effective communicator.

For Communications Directors, charged with ensuring important business information reaches the ears of all staff, this can be a problem. Adding insult to injury, leaders can misinterpret the fault line; instead of asking 'how can we up-skill our managers', they demand to know 'what went wrong with the comms?'

This Insights Paper offers a deeper analysis of the problem, and suggests approaches for Communications Directors and other function leaders to tackle and fix the problem

Why does the communication 'cascade' fail?

Communications Directors charged with reaching and engaging their organisation's workforce with important business information have more, and more sophisticated methods for developing, producing and disseminating content than ever before. But there is one channel that technology has not made more reliable or effective. It is central to internal communication, but not controlled by the communication team. It is the most important information conduit in the business but is rarely resourced to fulfil that purpose¹.

This channel is the point beyond which critical business information from the CEO and executive management either does, or does not, flow onwards to the workforce. It is the point at which autonomous decisions are made daily about what information to pass on to staff and how to present it – or sometimes to say nothing at all. It is essential to the success of the leadership team, central to the workplace experience of all employees, and the point at which internal communication strategies succeed or fail².

The channel is middle managers.

The titles used to denote people in mid-level management change from sector to sector, and business to business, but middle managers are readily recognisable by their location in the hierarchy, reporting upwards to executive management and holding downstream responsibility for team leaders.

Middle managers decide how strategy will be implemented, but not what the strategy will be. They are responsible for the performance of about 80 per cent of the workforce but directly manage the team leaders, not the teams themselves.

And middle managers have typically been promoted from a team leader or rank-and-file role because of their technical or subject matter expertise; they have excelled in doing the doing³. But in the contemporary workplace the skillset

they most need, and the one their organisation most needs of them, is one they have almost never been taught; how to communicate for impact.

For Communications Directors and their internally-focussed advisors, the importance of middle managers as the key conduit of information from the board room and CEO office to the workforce is not a revelation; it is a core and unavoidable operating reality. It is why every internal communication strategy concludes with something like, 'and then we give the information to our managers, and they cascade it to their teams'.

The problem is, in too many instances the managers do not.

The UK Chartered Management Institute's (CMI) 2016 study, *The Middle Manager Lifeline: Trust and communications in your organisation* confirmed what Communications Directors have always known, that middle managers play a vital role in creating trust in the workplace precisely because they are the "filter and linkage" of communication between senior

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bosses and employees; and three quarters of more than 1,500 middle manager respondents to the study confirmed they were routinely expected to communicate strategic information down the line⁴. But here's the thing: Only 31% said they felt confident to speak to this content and a frightening 24% admitted that they simply did not do it. That's a lot of frontline employees coming to work every day without explicit information from the business about what, why and how they should be doing their work.

Research by CEB (now Gartner) released around the same time evolved a similar theme, showing that conservatively 66% of Australian change

initiatives failed because managers did not know how to talk to their teams about change⁵. For Communications Directors, whose internal work becomes even more critical during change, that is both a nightmare scenario and a daily lived reality.

No communication team in the world can know, document and publish every detail of every new workflow and metric during a big change program. No platform in the world can deliver and guarantee consumption of that level of detail to each member of an audience that includes 'everyone'. The only way an organisation can hope to keep its workforce committed to the often dull, hard work of change is to keep them connected to the next step, and the only channel with the credentials and the reach to do that is the middle manager⁶.

The CMI and CEB studies generate statistics that in other settings would signal an operational crisis. But for some reason an enduring deficit in the cascade of key business information – the context for all that employees do – is an accepted norm. Communications Directors and their teams, for whom this is common knowledge, may be the canaries in the coal mine.

When planning internal campaigns, communicators often talk about the individual middle managers who are their champions, their influencers, the people who understand how important communication is and know how to do it well.

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These are the managers who can be counted on to accurately and effectively share the information provided to them, to report back if content is tracking or not and advise what adjustments are needed. They are the managers who let communications teams know about upcoming departmental forums so that content

can be piggy-backed on an event that has currency with the target audience. These are the managers whose direct reports are well informed, and whose teams are typically high performing, and there is neither rhyme nor reason to where they may appear in the business.

The irony, of course, is that *these* middle managers – and the employees who report to them – are few, and rarely the ones who most need to be reached with important business information. Those for whom engagement is most important are the teams that report to all the *other* managers, the mid-level bosses who do not consistently or effectively share the information given to them with their teams; the middle managers who unwittingly reduce the cascade to a trickle.

The impact on communicators

Again, for internal communicators, this critical fault line is just an inherent challenge of the job and what drives much of the team's thinking and activity⁷.

It is why communicators write scripts for CEO briefings and town-hall meetings with middle managers in mind, knowing that engaging them in the mission is critical; why they labour over the content and wording of information packs trying to get them just right, so that they will speak compellingly to each member of a diverse cohort of middle managers and be more likely to be cascaded down to their staff.

Communications Directors have their teams produce vast volumes of content for the staff intranet or social enterprise network, hoping to directly reach a critical mass of individual employees so that they will know what is expected of them even if they don't – because they probably won't – hear it from their manager. They spend months negotiating logistical challenges and unforgiving leadership schedules to deliver roadshows that touch every employee in the business, regardless of location, because the information is too important to leave to chance – by which is meant the communication whims of individual managers.

Measuring the success of any of these forms of outreach is notoriously difficult. The number of views of the story on the intranet is knowable, so are the reactions to a post on the internal social media platform, who turned up to the briefing and the volume and calibre of questions asked of the CEO, but what do those metrics mean? They do not tell us what we really want to know: Did the message cut through? Are middle managers reiterating and enforcing the message with their own direct reports and their staff? Has the workforce heard and understood the call to action, and will it comply?

Problem? Bring in the comms team

The middle manager communication challenge contributes to what can, for Communications Directors, be a frustrating leadership dynamic. CEOs and executive teams may know that the information flow through middle managers is not consistent, reliable and accurate. But when the pressure is on to gain workforce buy-in to a leadership decision it can be easier to ignore this subterranean fault line, and instead bring you and your team in – often too late – to "do some comms", to wallpaper over hierarchical cracks with *en pointe* messaging that can be "cascaded to managers" so they can share it with their teams. When the approach fails, precisely because of the hidden fault line, it is easy for leadership teams to continue to focus on the wrong piece of the puzzle: "Why didn't the comms work? What went wrong with the comms?"

Mid-level managers need to be great communicators, but they are almost never taught how. Communications Directors need energised ranks of communication-focussed middle managers to do a great job, but have no control at that layer of the hierarchy. It is a paradox that is left to play out endlessly, unchecked and unresolved.

In my work with organisations and the people in them over many years I have heard frustrated CEOs, executive leadership teams and internal communications specialists attribute information flow failure at the manager level to what is seen as a lack of will. Managers do not share information with their teams because they do not

want to. They do not agree with the decision or direction, they are angry about an unrelated policy change, they are under performing, they are trying to sabotage their boss or they have simply 'switched off'.

When asked about their own communication work and the impact it has on the information flow, middle managers offer different explanations. They lack opportunity: "I don't have time", "my staff are all part-time, it's too hard to get everyone together" or even "we don't have the right technology". Sometimes the audience has a bad attitude: "I send emails, but no one reads them". And other times, the problem is upstream: "The executive never tells us anything, how can I be expected to communicate with my teams if I don't know what's going on?"

When the approach fails it is easy for leadership teams to focus on the wrong piece of the puzzle: "What went wrong with the comms?"

In my experience, the perceptions of both senior leaders and middle managers themselves are wrong. In almost all cases, I have found, the problem is simply a lack of skill. Even when they appear to be simply obstructive, the reality is that most middle managers do not know how to communicate in a way that has impact on the people around them.

Dr John Ullmen at the UCLA Anderson School of Management has coined the phrase 'intent-impact gap' to describe the underlying dysfunction that drives communication breakdown at the individual level⁸.

The intent-impact gap is the difference between what we expect the person or people listening to us to think, feel and do as a result of what we say, and what they actually think, feel and do. Ullmen notes that we judge our own communication performance on our intent – but we judge others on their impact. And drawing on sociological research from as far back as the

1960s, he warns that across human interaction the intent-impact gap is not only more prevalent than we think, but much wider than we imagine. Ullmen's training videos on LinkedIn have been watched more than two million times⁹. Individuals want help to become more effective communicators; organisations are not yet riding that wave.

To unlock the information flow in our businesses and organisations, we need to skill middle managers to communicate not in the service of their own intent, but in the service of what others

hear. We need to teach them to communicate for impact.

For middle managers, and the organisations they work for, the ability to communicate for impact is a game changer. Becoming a better communicator is like climbing a ladder. I have developed the model below to reflect this, and demonstrate the additional value that can be generated by an individual or group of middle managers through the development of high-impact communication skills.

Figure 1: Middle manager value through communication impact

CREATES OPPORTUNITY	CHAMPION	+10
	Committed	+8
	reliable	+6
Embeds risk	hesitant	+2
	reluctant	+1
	refusing	0

To apply the model to your business, determine at which level of the ladder your middle managers currently and predominantly sit (noting there will be outliers in both directions). Typically, there is a congregation around the

levels of 'reluctant' and 'hesitant'. Managers operating at levels from 'refusing' to 'hesitant' **embed risk** in processes, workflows and projects

because they do not know how to have the right conversation, the right way at the right time. The information flow is interrupted and staff are without the knowledge they need to do their job well.

By contrast, managers operating above the tipping point, from 'reliable' to CHAMPION, **create opportunity** because they expertly use

information to enable others' performance. CHAMPIONS anticipate and respond to communication needs, understand and utilise the power of words, and use deep inquiry to gather intelligence and build relationships.

The currency in this model, the numbers at right from zero to 10, show the size of the gains that can be achieved by giving managers the skills to communicate for impact. The model can be tested and applied using communication-specific metrics, or a broader performance measure (such as rates of employee engagement, compliance or productivity) that reflects the business's current needs and priorities. The model predicts that a middle manager whose communication skills are at CHAMPION level will generate five times more values than does a manager who is a 'hesitant' communicator, and so on.

The good news is that through intervention, all middle managers can shift up the ladder from 'refusing', towards CHAMPION. Managers exposed to customised, targeted learning and development (for details of how I do this, see the *Game Changers* box on page) can be expected to quickly transition two-three steps up the value ladder. All managers can rise above the tipping point; over time, and with support, many can become CHAMPIONS.

Three steps to impact

The skills that middle managers need to communicate with impact can be broken down into three steps.

STEP 1

First comes understanding that the way each of us thinks informs the way each of us communicates, and our personal preferences may not be shared by everyone, or even anyone, in our audience¹⁰.

A manager who likes to focus on processes, next steps and compliance, for example, will struggle to cut-through with direct reports who want to hear about possibilities and the big picture. The manager whose tendency is to communicate via anecdotes about people's experiences will quickly lose the attention of someone who likes

to share information via data, logic and analysis. To be able to communicate with impact, managers need to become aware of their own, natural communication preferences, realise that others' preferences are different, and learn to speak to all.

STEP 2

Second, managers need to understand that to be heard and understood, they need to talk about the things that *other* people want to hear, in a way that makes sense to *them*. This does not mean abandoning or compromising one's own communication agenda, but rather packaging and delivering information with care and consideration to win the right, rather than assume the right, to be part of the conversation. High-impact communication creates listening.

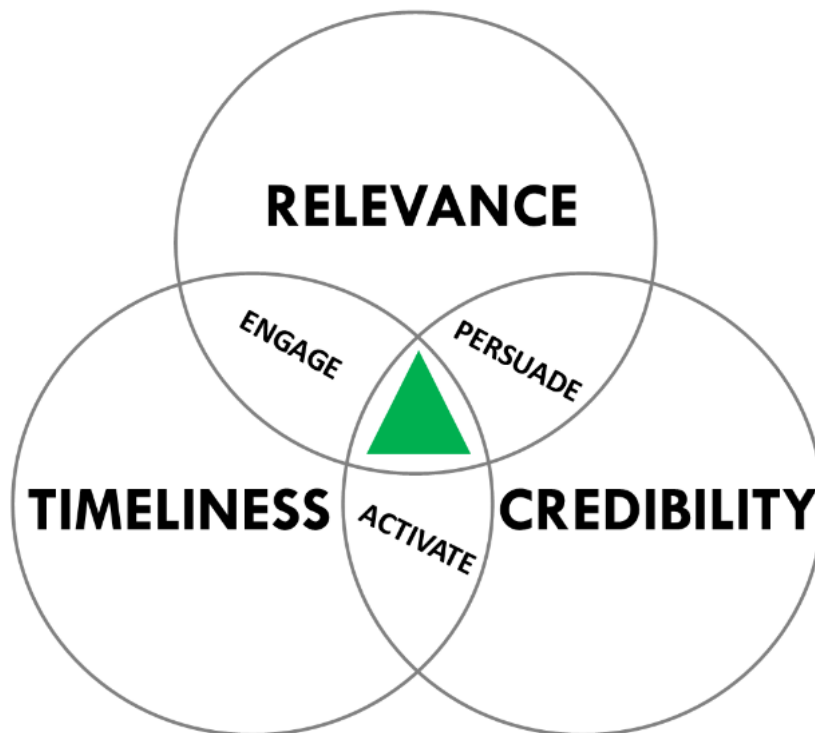
"To communicate with impact, managers need to become aware of their own communication preferences, realise that others' are different, and learn to speak to all".

This concept can be difficult to implement as practice for non-communications professionals. The model on the following page proposes a structure for guiding the development of high-impact content, whether the content is a speech, a casual conversation, an email or a newsletter. The impact comes from the successful attempt to shape what the audience thinks (engage), feels (persuade) and does (activate).

In the model:

- **relevance** means the information must be angled around 'what's in it for me', the listener; I need to know up-front why I should care.
- **timeliness** requires conversations to be had when the subject is current, when it is still 'news', not at the more distant time 'when I have all the answers'.
- **credibility** comes through acknowledging, rather than obscuring, the uncertainties and unknowns at play.

Figure 2: Creating high-impact content



All three elements of high-impact content are underpinned by the practice of asking questions first and last, to discover what others already think, feel and know. Inquiry is key.

STEP 3

Finally, managers need to embrace the truth that words matter, and that getting them right requires preparation. Middle managers need to do what communications professionals do; write scripts.

Communications professionals think and dream in key messages; messages that have been interrogated from every possible perspective, crafted with care using language appropriate to the audience and the mission, and used and re-used to build shared understanding. Middle managers need to use key messages. They need to be taught how to build the messages themselves, using language and structure that gives voice to their unique communication style, while consciously speaking to the needs and interests of the audience in the room – whoever, wherever and however that is.

The improved information flows that result from empowering middle managers to become high-impact communicators can transform how the work of Communications Directors and their teams is done, and the difference it makes to the business. But how can Communications Directors effect this vital change when they have no authority over middle management?

There is a way, and it aligns with another interest that is core to the profession.

Mission: Repositioning comms

One of the great challenges for many Communications Directors is the resistance that comes from some other parts of the business, sometimes at very senior levels, to recognising the communications function as a strategic and operational imperative. One that should no more be a candidate for FTE restrictions when budgets are tight, than should the finance or HR division. One for which a seat at the big table is just as necessary, for the sake of the whole organisation, as it is for either of those corporate services.

The opportunity for Communications Directors now is to begin to drive a shift inside their organisations, among the people who lead them and the people they lead, towards recognition that communication is a business's greatest asset, or greatest fail point. To shift perception away from communications as a service, towards communication as a culture.

In a communication culture the unlocking of individual communication capability, at scale, becomes an organisational goal – and the communications team the custodian of the mission.

Middle management is the appropriate point for this new communications work to begin because, as we have seen, middle managers are the linkage between leadership and workforce, and the point at which the link can be and is broken.

To begin the shift, the role for the Communications Director is that of advocate; leveraging their influence as trusted advisor to make the case for investment to build a communication culture, starting with middle managers.

The information flow inside organisations, from CEO and executives to directors, then to mid-level managers, and on to team leaders and ultimately employees, should work. It can work. It is the core purpose of the organisational structure and the lifeblood of the organisation. It is what converts hundreds, even thousands of autonomous individuals into a single organism, working for a shared goal, pulling in the same direction, all on the same page. Making it work well, will be worth the effort.

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ABOUT

I am obsessed with communication. My career has been a deep dive into how communication goes wrong, why it matters, and what it takes to get it right.

Through roles as a cadet reporter with *The Northcote Leader* to Senior Producer of the Jon Faine program on ABC Radio; from spin doctor for client companies who were getting too much attention to adviser to those who weren't getting enough; and from CEO of a national issues management firm to Executive Director Communications at The Royal Children's Hospital, I have learned how the things people do and do not say shape perceptions and relationships, enable and disable achievement, and make and break reputations.

In the past, I have worked at the organisational level. I have media trained leaders, and designed campaigns to help them win support for difficult decisions. I have supported businesses to avert and recover from reputational crises. And in the work that has held the most meaning for me, I have led projects to transform workplace culture and keep staff connected, confident and productive during change.



Now, I continue to partner with organisations but my focus is on individuals and teams.

I coach communications specialists to hone their craft, build influence and have the kind of impact they have always wanted to have.

And I show managers how to unlock success – for themselves, their team, their manager and the business – by learning to communicate for impact. The program is called *Game Changers* and you can read more about it, below.

GAME CHANGERS – LEADING POWERFUL CONVERSATIONS

A program to help managers unleash their leadership and become an effective conduit for the flow of business information and knowledge by learning how to communicate for impact.

Usually run as a full-day workshop, with three components:

- A facilitated group discussion of the foundations of leadership and the role of communication
- An activity using the HBDI framework to help participants get to know their communication style, see how it might help or hinder effective communication, and learn how to speak to all styles.
- A 'media training' styled masterclass in message development and delivery. Participants prepare for a pending conversation or situation, immediately implementing learning outcomes.

An optional extension module provides a 30-minute phone or Zoom coaching check-in with each participant three weeks' post-workshop, plus a presentation and written report to the client.

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