

Creating a communication culture

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Financial Planners who place as much emphasis on communication and relationships as they do to technical proficiency and compliance are destined to succeed.

Where is your financial planning practice on the pendulum? From its beginnings with a focus on people and sales, the financial planning pendulum has swung away to now focus on technical and compliance. These are important areas, but has it swung too far?

The 'x-factor' separating one financial planning practice from another is the people and the personality of the business. While regulators and the media focus on technical proficiency and compliance, your customers expect these things as a given and look to your people for something more.

Financial planning is intensely personal, and will become even more so as other parts of commercial life become remote. To thrive in this environment organisations will need to shun the stereotype of financial services as impersonal and numbers-driven, and instead build a 'communication culture'.

Consider that when a services business loses a client, in 70% of cases it is because of poor communication. In other words, what costs you business also wins you business: communication. That's why a communication culture pays off.

Moves towards a communication culture should be based on hard evidence: in one organisation, a business that prided itself on communication, my survey revealed that around 66% of staff would NOT recommend their company as an employer to friends and contacts. I also found it was a business that discouraged 'chit chat' while encouraging email communication. There is no coincidence in these findings.

In reality, 70% of all communication is informal, via 'chit chat', so the key is to make that chatting work for you. This communication is crucial to the bottom line because we the consumers choose to do business with people we like, respect and trust.

But communication can mean many things to many people, so the starting point has to be how do people in general prefer to communicate? While there is room for glossy brochures, forms and web sites, people love to communicate via stories. We can spend all day telling and listening to stories.

So what's your story? Suppose you've got sixty seconds to give me a glimpse of why I should choose you. How would you, or members of your team, go? If you can tell this story, you contribute to the bottom line.

Increasingly in communication we are training people in the art of storytelling; in the process, many organisations are recapturing who they are, and where they are going.

One terrific outcome of helping staff rediscover your organisational story is that, because they have created it this time, they are committed to it. This is powerful communication.

For the company where most employees would not recommend it, we began a 'be positive' campaign, along the lines from the old song that "You've got to accentuate the positive". In fact, research is suggesting that in most workplaces we criticise 33 times for every once that we praise, creating a negative culture.

The way we cheered things up was to encourage people to move on from the dry, legalistic approach. Instead, we began a campaign to use short, sharp and positive three-word statements. Once it began, we found that it was infectious – others used them too.

The three-word phrases included "Job well done", "What a team", "You work well" and "I like that". People enjoyed the change. Words like "I need you", "Is anything wrong" and "No, but thanks" became part of their repertoire. "Are you interested", "Can we talk" or "Please help me" were also there, along with the classic "Can I ask?" These little positive expressions made fantastic reminder posters in the office.

In another case, one planner asked the following at a regional breakfast meeting where I was guest speaker: "How can we motivate our receptionist, get her more involved, because she is the first point of contact and can be less than welcoming sometimes?" We talked about maybe using one of the FPA breakfasts each year for receptionists and support staff, perhaps with a general lifestyle or motivation speaker. Being invited along with senior management is a powerful way of telling that front line person that they are important. Actions like this speak louder than words.

Similarly with your senior people, focusing on the bottom line contributes little to their performance, but if the place is buzzing, if people are sharing and if we work as a team, then senior people perform. Improved bottom line is the result of creating a communication culture, but it is not the focus of it.

Creating a communication culture gives you an overall competitive edge, but first you need to accept some communication reality:

1. Everything has a cost

Communication does not happen to you, you have to make it happen. Most 'born communicators' have actually worked hard at it.

2. Things always change

Just when you think your communication with that person is fine, things fall apart. This change is a constant. That means you can never stop making the effort.

3. Assumptions make fools of us

Most of our assumptions about other people turn out to be wrong. In communication it is risky to assume anything.

Creating a communication culture (cont)

4. People love praise

Just as we all love a bargain, we all react well to praise. It's so easy to give praise – you did well; I liked that; you were good; job well done.

5. Supply and demand work in communication, too

In communication, when you reduce your supply the cost of starting again goes up. It takes more effort. Demand for communication is almost limitless.

6. There's no easy fix

People who succeed in anything have generally worked pretty hard to be 'overnight successes'. Communication is a slow build, but there is profit at the end of effort.

7. People do what they want

You can't control people and good communication means accepting the individuality of people. The key is how you react to what they do. Many of us react in a way that makes things worse (and more costly).

8. Always look for feedback

Feedback is to the communicator what evidence is to the economist. Giving your complete attention to the other person is a rewarding skill.

9. Networks provide the best returns

Networking is simply a way of reducing the amount of time you waste trying to find the people that matter to you. In that way, networking provides the best return for effort.

10. Communication is about happiness

It is said that economics is ultimately about human happiness – the rich are happier than the poor (up to a point). Communication ultimately contributes to happiness and every successful and thriving organisation that I have trained in is also happy.

But sometimes a growing business can be hit by what I call the 'feather duster tingle', that awful feeling that we're quickly on the way from rooster to feather duster. These are generally businesses that have kicked lots of goals, but suddenly get the yips and miss every time. An air of negativity, caution, and even a culture of blame start to creep in. Leadership starts to focus on the micro, clients seem to be difficult and staff resist everything.

What to do when the feather duster tingle hits? Too many decide as a first step to have casual Fridays or drinks on Friday night, or even a bonding weekend. All of these actions, without prior communication change, cement the problem, reinforcing the negative. So the first step should be to fix communication, then have your informal fun.

Creating a communication culture is harder work, but succeeds as it recognises that the key asset of the business all along has not been its systems, alliances or intellectual property; the key asset has been its people.

The biggest test of leadership is the ability to bring out the best in people. You get the best via communication. Inspired leaders, for example, know the importance of letting their followers solve problems, of listening, of giving good feedback. Above all, they continue to communicate their passion, even when times are tough.

At a recent fund manager conference I pushed the theme "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care". How true is this in the human endeavour of financial planning? The message is that you keep people (clients and work colleagues) coming back by showing your caring side.

Sure, we must reliably deliver what we promise and wrap up our dealings smoothly and simply. But to be the complete package, we also need to be happy and enthusiastic about people. We need to listen and show we are interested in others.

My experience is that the best leaders gain followers by telling stories, not by listing features, promoting benefits or issuing orders. We love to hear stories, we remember them and we understand them. But few of us tell good stories about our business.

Through creating a communication culture, we can all demonstrate *pride and passion*. It reinforces the truth and the good news for financial planners that:

- We all play a role in communication and marketing
- We need to clearly know our business story
- Building personal enthusiasm is a vital first step
- Every part of your communication impacts on "brand"

As Stephen Covey, author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* put it: "Communication is the most important skill in life".

By Stephen Manallack

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