

How to prevent a communication breakdown when deploying a new corporate policy?

In many circumstances and for many topics, the cascade down of information via line managers is an effective communication channel especially if you want to reach all employees. If played well, this channel also allows to quickly capture employee response. Question is whether it is the best communication channel to launch a new corporate policy. The more organizational layers there are, the more risk there is that the cascade comes to a halt.

What are some of the root causes of such a communication breakdown?

Usually the executive team underestimates the challenge inherent to line management communication. In other words they underestimate the need to carefully plan for it.

Without planning, a number of practical matters might be left open like explaining the background or why this policy is important to the organization, clarifying the line managers' role in the deployment, setting a time line...

Most importantly, executives often forget to define a compelling reason for line managers to act. It doesn't stop with executives motivating their direct reports to act, in effect each management layer in the organization needs to be motivated.

So why is it so difficult to mobilize all line managers in the organization? An important element is that line managers have operational responsibilities. The deployment of the new policy is competing with other urgent matters and depending on the perceived relevance of the policy, it will get the necessary attention or not.

In addition, if line managers have not been briefed properly or trained to handle the communication, they might feel uncomfortable with delivery.

In international or global companies, there are cultural, linguistic or structural barriers to overcome.

In some cultures, it is still not common to openly share policies with employees. If this is not addressed properly, communication will not happen. Another example is the situation where line managers don't understand the need for a policy because the topic addressed, is regulated by local law.

Above is only a short list of common causes that might stop the top-down communication of a new policy. In order to avoid a breakdown, proper preparation is really needed.

Executives need to be clear on how important full deployment is and why.

Do they believe all employees need to understand the new policy because employees need to align behavior? Or do they want all employees to be aware of its existence?

Continued and visible support by executives is necessary if successful full deployment is the objective! It doesn't mean that executives have to run the communication. It means that executives have to behave and make decisions aligned with the new policy. 'Walk your talk' it is as simple as that.

Last but not least, executives need to clarify their expectations with regards to the role line managers have to play in the top-down communication.

How to mobilize line managers to embrace their role? This is really the one million dollar question! A large group of line managers will of course execute because it was asked. However, if the topic is somewhat out of their scope or their comfort zone, the hesitation will grow. Therefore the call to action needs to be well thought through.

Segmentation of your line management audience will help you identifying the different level of interest and need for a specific approach. Segmentation should cut 'horizontally' over departments as well as 'vertically' over multiple organizational layers. Depending on the policy subject and the organization, it can be based on culture, region, function, department, generation...

Each segment has a different interest in the policy and this needs to be recognized upfront by development of adjusted communication packages (slide deck, FAQ...) and different calls to action.

*It is advisable to foresee some kind of **follow up** to identify as quick as possible a breakdown and to know when the top-down communication is complete.*

Last but not least, appropriate practical support needs to be set up to make it as easy as possible for line managers to efficiently present the new policy to their team. This includes simple things like distribution of policy document, slide deck, gadgets..., organization of line management briefings or training,



identifying a subject matter expert who can provide answers to policy questions that are not addressed by the Frequently Asked Questions etc.

When choosing to communicate a new policy through line management, the key to success is the ability of the organization to mobilize all management layers. The bigger the organization, the more layers to work through to reach all employees and the more vulnerable the process is for breakdowns. Therefore, proper preparation is needed.



Kristien Debounoux is an international HR Professional with strong business acumen. She recently founded HR Roads to help companies bridge strategy and execution through engagement of its workforce.

HR Roads stands for successful design, guidance and implementation of strategic change processes. Our successful experiences are situated in the field of HR Strategy, Change Management and HR Consulting & Projects.

Visit our website: <https://hrroads.com> or contact kristien@hrroads.com