



February 2017

2017 Is Off and Running: Are You Pushing or Pulling with Communication?



Six weeks have flown by since the start of the new year, and companies are off and running toward new goals to reach 2017 outcomes. There's energy in your hallways and on your conference calls as people feel informed about the company's goals and focused on what they need to do to support them.

Leaders spent January in the "pulling" position. I use that term to describe a forward tug as leaders and managers take the stage or lead from the front to set a new vision and direction. For any leader, it's the "launch the year" opportunity to bring clarity and conviction to the months ahead. The "Pull" is the idea of leading from the front and bringing people into your idea. These first of the year messages are designed to get others involved. Most leaders are good at this. They understand the importance of this launch, and they focus on these keynotes to rally employees and drive momentum at the start of the year.

But, now those meetings have occurred. Now, leaders and managers are heads down and trying to manage to those goals. And, it begs the question: When will the steady "Push" occur?

The Push is a term I use to explain the on-going support and repetitive messaging it takes to keep employees engaged with goals and motivated to stay the course. The message is no longer ahead of the group but instead right in stride with them. It keeps the vision of where we want to go, but it helps employees understand where they're accelerating and where they're hitting bumps or struggling with initiatives. The Push represents the nudge from behind that many employees need to feel some forward motion through the day to day and sometimes sluggish steps.

And, it's that steady Push where most communicators seem to fall short.

Why?

It takes planning. While the Pull moments also take planning, it's big event planning with set expectations. There are clear deadlines and clear endings. It's high visibility and high reward. And after the big event, most leaders brush their hands of communication and shift their focus to other priorities.

The Push events seem to come out of nowhere and take many leaders by surprise. I call it "pop up" communication where you see the quarterly update on your calendar and realize that next week you need to let employees know how things are going. These events seem to just pop up and are viewed as disruptions to the other priorities a leader has to manage. Communication doesn't get the same amount of energy and focus as the Pull event, and the messaging becomes more of an update and status report.

To employees, the Push and Pull messages seem unrelated. For the quarterly meetings, employees stay in their offices and listen to these updates remotely. They rarely hear a connection back to the big event and in just twelve weeks' time, a feeling of "here we go again" settles into the office. Some leaders will figure it out and spend second quarter trying to realign things. Others won't even realize this has happened until the midpoint of the year.

Communication hasn't stopped, but the communicator's role has shifted. Employees themselves fill the void and interpret information into messaging. And, that can be fragmenting. Groups hear different things so they believe different things. And, they seem to align to the topic of the month rather than the priorities of the year.

CASE IN POINT: Tom leads a mid-size company and knew 2016 would require stretch goals. His keynote was good, and he set the right tone and expectations for the year. But when I saw him at the end of first quarter, he had taken a different direction with his message and felt more frantic in trying to get employees to act quickly. His list of priorities had doubled. He didn't want to revisit the Pull messages and instead took a more tactical approach to communication. He got busy, and I didn't hear from him again until the end of the year. At that point, communication was fragmented, and he felt the group had lost their "mojo." In fact, he said that he had lost his as well. They missed some of the key benchmarks and were re-engineering their approach.

We did a simple assessment for him to help learn from the gaps in communication. His employees confirmed that they got a little lost by mid-year and felt that they were getting mixed signals.

The reason that clarity of communication drops off is clear. It's hard to keep messages alive and it takes time that leaders don't always have. But, the solve for it may be easier than you think. There are three things that can help the Push communication points be just as compelling as the Pull at the start of the year.

Plan it: While planning looks different, the Push communication points should get as much attention as the Pull keynotes. Build a communication plan to run underneath your year and create the messages and even visuals that will be used throughout the year to keep the group on a steady course.

Share it: A lot of effort goes into making the Pull communication exciting. From videos to music to tchotchkes, there's bling to the annual launch. Identify three elements that you used to illustrate the goals or bring your ideas to life and challenge your team to find ways to integrate the goals and messages into their own reports and updates.

Integrate it: In many companies, the leader's plan for the year is interpreted by each department and team. Encourage groups to take key messaging and make it their own. Build it into the way they report results and link their initiatives to broader goals. This happens in planning but rarely translates into communication.

Does it work?

CASE IN POINT: Larry approached 2016 differently. As a division leader in a large company, he was focused on using communication as a powerful tool to unite his group. And, it worked. He set the course, inspired other managers to bring the messaging to life and by the end of first quarter, the key messages were visible in their office, in their emails and in their own sound bites. They gave teams leeway to put their own spin on some of the goals, and it brought humor, competition and fun into the year. Larry hit a tough spot at mid-year and said that he was tired of the messaging and felt like a broken record every time he spoke to a group. Like Tom, he wanted to change the course and talk about something new. I reminded him that while he was tired of it, most employees had just begun to embrace it. It takes time to buy-in to messages and even longer to integrate into your work. So, he stayed the course and led his employees to an outstanding finish to 2016.

Maybe you feel that you are somewhere between Tom's dropped messages and Larry's strong finish.

Great communicators need a Pull strategy to project a future direction and clear strategies to a team. But, they also build a plan that helps them Push the messaging so that it is repeated and integrated into the twelve months ahead.

For 2017, we've helped Tom build a plan...just like we did with Larry. And, we can help you do that with your team as well. So, should you be pushing or pulling with communication in 2017? The answer is both. Call us when you need us!

