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From Insights to Outcomes:

Technologists as Reluctant Communicators



Within every company, there are influential communicators. And, they play a critical role in driving a company forward. They are the ones who take ideas and turn them into concepts...they take concepts and create strategies and they use strategies to drive actions and outcomes. Historically, some of the most influential communicators come from marketing or product. They could spin a tale and create energy behind ideas long before the company could see clear outcomes.

And while the marketing folks are still building storylines, the technology groups have emerged as owners of innovative thinking and are often the incubators of new direction in companies. But, unlike the marketing group, they are much more reluctant communicators. In fact, few of them have really thought about how to communicate their ideas and rarely have they been trained to develop a compelling story around an idea.

That's a pretty big roadblock for moving ideas forward. And, it's why great ideas get stuck in R&D and major initiatives get sidelined. As we've witnessed buy-in around technology becoming stalled, poor communication is often to blame.

There may be a few good communicators at the top of a technology organization, but they rarely have the bandwidth behind them to sell an idea up, down and across an organization. And that's what it takes to build momentum behind ideas.

How can this be and why does it occur?

We've observed three dynamics in technology organizations.

1. **Technologists speak in jargon.** Their day-to-day language is one of bits and bytes, not stories and analogies. So, when they think about communicating ideas, they approach conversations by talking through how things could happen rather than what should happen and why. This leads any listener into a barrage of details rather than outcomes. It's confusing because technologists work in details, and it isn't easy to transition away from the details to communicate concepts and outcomes.
2. **Leaders aren't role models of compelling communication.** There are certainly exceptions to that observation, but we rarely hear the CTO or CIO touted as the strongest communicator in the company. More often, technology leaders have communication styles similar to their teams. Many are also reluctant communicators. They go through the motion of sharing information, but they don't always provide clarity and conviction behind a message. And, if they haven't invested in improving their own communication impact, they aren't likely to invest in developing it in others.

3. **Tech employees can be siloed.** Today, many organizations have integrated technology into every division and function across a company. But, some still have more siloed organizations. And, this allows technologists to spend most days just talking to technologists. So, if the expectations for communication are low, they don't get much practice strengthening that muscle. Heads down in technology can prevent your technologists from experiencing compelling communicators and seeing the impact of compelling storylines across an organization.

So, how can you solve for any of these dynamics? We work with many technology organizations to strengthen communication expectations as well as to develop the skills of individuals.

Here are two things that could raise the bar in your technology group:

Communication Roadmap – We have helped many teams develop a communication roadmap alongside a product roadmap. This ensures that the storyline develops in sync with the product plans and becomes as essential to the conversations as the technical steps themselves. It becomes a way that technologists talk about projects and how they share the project across an organization. It helps an initiative develop a brand and become a more common theme in meetings and conversations.

Storyline Methodology – Few technologists get training on how to build storylines or how to lead executive conversations. We've developed workshops that do both of these things. Organizing ideas well isn't easy for anyone, but technologists especially need a methodology that transforms their details into a higher-level conversation. They can also learn to use stories to make data memorable and repeatable to any audience.

And ultimately, you have to develop a personal presence in each individual.

Personal Presence & Delivery – A compelling storyline will help your technologists get their point across, but their ability to influence people always comes down to their confidence and conviction with any group. And sometimes, it's more difficult because the technology groups are global and there can be language barriers and dialects that hinder clear communication.

Presence matters, and it matters sooner than you may realize. As we work on leadership programs across companies, we see fewer technologists in the programs and we're often told that this group has a different career path. They don't want to be people managers or leaders, so they aren't put on the same development path. And, that's where some of the personal brand discussions and communication skills are developed. But, I would argue that they will all have to be communicators because they are driving the innovation and new direction in most companies.

These skills can't wait. And, they shouldn't have to.

Your reluctant communicators can become strong communicators, and that's when the roadblocks seem to melt away. Insights can drive outcomes, and once that happens in a company, communication can be the greatest enabler in the organization.

Call us when you need us!



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