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Is Your Executive Ready for Center Stage?

Partnering with Communications Teams

If you get up every day and read through industry media, news media, and social media, then you have a pretty good idea of how busy it is within the corporate communications group. While they can't control it all, they try to monitor it all. The role of a communications team has shifted from a steady stream of messaging to an ocean of information that's unruly to manage and can shift like the tides on any given day.



In response, communications teams manage industry conferences, analyst calls, media interviews, and town hall keynotes. These teams write the scripts, create the visual concepts, and oversee all the supporting details.

But, it could all fall flat if the executive isn't ready to deliver the message and take center stage.

The skills of the executive make all the difference in the success or failure of a communication event. It's the most critical factor for the communications team, but most would rather do everything listed above before telling the emperor that he or she has no clothes. Every communications team has days where they wager the music, videos, and atmosphere will mask lack of preparation and conviction from a leader. But, it's a risky bet.

Whether you're leading the communications effort of a large corporation, building the voice of a start-up or trying to keep pace with the visibility of a fast-growing company, we can help you get a reluctant leader ready.

NO ONE TELLS THEM

Why wouldn't a leader be ready to take center stage before now? It's a little surprising to discover that a leader has a blind spot in this area.

Through the years, I've seen more leaders who weren't ready for the limelight than those who were. I believe it's a matter of misunderstanding the magnitude of the expectations. When someone is elevated to a leadership role in a company, there are many priorities pushed at them. They have to assess the strengths and challenges in front of them and prioritize the best way forward. And, they have to do it quickly. Every key audience wants to hear from them within 90 days.

This doesn't really resonate until the communications person comes to see them with a calendar and a list of scheduled events. More often than not, leaders don't respond well to the expected frequency and time commitment and that's the point at which we are asked to partner with the communications team to get a leader up to speed. Some new leaders are still resisting the commitment when I meet them. They begin our relationship with comments like,

“I’m looking forward to working with you, but I don’t think I’ll have time to focus on this for six months.”
“I don’t plan to do a lot of public speaking. I’ve never really enjoyed it or been good at it.”
“I prefer small group settings as a way to talk to employees. I don’t think I’ll do many town halls. “

Uh-oh. Those are new leaders who haven’t accepted communication events as a fundamental part of their role. At that point, we talk about the needs of every listener and map out the groups they have to reach. Communication is no longer a good thing to do; it’s now front and center as one of the most important roles they will play. I share the idea that while they have used communication as a way to inform groups in the past, now they have to think about communication as the only way they have to touch people. It’s a higher ask, it’s a tougher demand, and it’s one that they will have to master.

Even if they don’t initially welcome the time commitment it takes to master it, all leaders admit that being able to touch every listener carries much more weight than it ever has before.

SETTING THE STAGE

In confidential conversations, many communications teams share their concerns of getting that message across to leaders. Over time, the communications team will be the best internal coach a leader can have. But, the relationship isn’t built overnight and there’s a lot at stake for an internal communications person. We can help accelerate the relationship and open the door for coaching. If you’re worried about how to broach the topic, the best way to get a leader’s attention is through feedback.

Assessment: Prior to coaching, we capture impressions from key listeners through a verbal assessment. This helps us understand how the leader shows up today and how others experience strengths and gaps that shape impressions.

Evaluations: We also write evaluations of leaders by observing live or videotaped events. This can help a communications team position an expert’s opinion on a leader’s style and areas that can be strengthened.

Event Surveys: If you hope to avoid the initial conversation altogether, use surveys after events to capture impressions. Employees and customers will tell you how a leader comes across.

OWNING THE SPOTLIGHT

No one shows up for a high profile job ready to go. It’s too much change, and it’s high demand. Ultimately, all leaders need a little coaching to reset the expectations of communication and to help them leverage steps to get there. It takes us four to six months to help a leader step onto center stage and feel confident and consistent in their ability to drive memorable and repeatable messages. We use one of two approaches.

Coaching for Overall Change: New leaders are more willing to evaluate all situations and raise their skills overall. It’s good timing to assess their skill set and approach things differently for better outcomes.

Coaching for Specific Events: Leaders who’ve been in place for a while respond better to coaching for a specific event. This associates coaching with a new audience or a change in format or settings. It’s an easier way to consider new choices and often expands from one event to multiple events once trust and impact is established.

Either way, it’s hard work for a very busy person. But, once we fall into a cadence, we can help the leader and the communications team partner well in high visibility moments. And, that’s a better wager and a safer bet! Call us when you need us!

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