

Let's Get Practical

Interview with Joel Zlotnik, Strategic Communications Manager, OCTA

Episode 19

As a leader, talk is cheap. Action is what counts and practice makes a difference. Below are practical steps to improve performance.

- **Create a plan if you want more strategic business communications.** You'd think it goes without saying, but without a plan our actions are just whatever we come up with in the moment. That's not often the best course of action when the situation calls for a more thoughtful approach. Start by creating a communication plan to be executed in the event of a crisis, then practice it. Think about major issues or events that could happen to your business and determine in advance how you will respond to everyone who might need to hear from you in those instances.
 - **As a CEO or senior leader, you can't be great at everything. Identify your own communications IQ and what areas you need to work on to improve.** You're a leader, so others look to you for clarity and direction during normal business operations and in times of crisis. What can you do to improve presence, better communicate, and increase your ability to be clear, concise, persuasive, thoughtful, open, calm, informative and other qualities of great communicators?
 - **Don't be afraid to ask for help to improve your communication.** Just like any other area of your business where you've hired good people to execute your vision, consider hiring or adding a consultant who can help you improve strategic communication. Ask for their feedback and be humble enough to listen to the advice you receive! Be willing to have difficult conversations and accept criticism with a growth mindset; you'll be better for it in the long run.
 - **Make sure there are social media policies in place for your organization.** At the very least, you should determine what are the things you're going to respond to and who in the organization will be the one to respond. Consider even creating preset messages you can use to respond when the need arises.
 - **Recognize you have a diverse set of audiences with different preferences for how they want to be communicated with.** Don't make the mistake of assuming everyone consumes your information the same way. It takes more effort by you to determine your various stakeholder groups – customers, employees, board members, vendors, your community, the media, etc. – and how each group likes to receive information, but tailoring to the needs of each group increases the likelihood your messages are received and understood, ultimately improving your relationship with each group.
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- **Prepare, Prepare, Prepare!** There's nothing more important than preparation if you want to actively manage and grow your brand image. Whether you're doing an external interview, speaking to a community organization, or speaking internally to employees, you can build your and the company's brand image and trust through your communications when you're prepared.
 - **The most effective communication is frequent, clear, and consistent.** With the amount of information bombarding us 24/7, you can't expect people to remember something you communicate once, nor can you always use the same cadence for every communication. If you want to ensure your messages are heard, be prepared to repeat them multiple times via multiple channels, always double-checking for clarity and consistency in the message. Be willing to switch up the frequency and timing to match what's called for by each unique situation.
 - **Core Values should always guide your messaging.** Stop us if you've heard this before, but you've got Core Values for a reason. Let them guide the creation and delivery of all corporate communication to ensure consistency with what's most important to you. Any communication that doesn't align to your Core Values should be revised before it ever sees the light of day.
 - **Don't underestimate the importance of communication.** Every frustration of the CEO is caused by unmet expectations, and most unmet expectations are rooted in miscommunication. Improve your organizational communication and you'll sleep better at night.
 - **It's important to be authentic in your communications.** When the words or delivery of your messages are incongruent with who you are, you'll likely be frustrated whenever you have to communicate. Be your authentic self in how you communicate and resist changing who you are for your audience.
 - **Try to reach people according to the way they best receive information.** Understanding the various communication platforms available today and the demographics of users who use each platform is important so you can tailor your messages to each for better reception and consumption.
 - **Listening is a critical element of communication.** By listening, we learn more about our audiences, what they're hearing, how they wish to be seen and communicated with, and how, ultimately, we can adjust our approach to connect with others. Listen to understand,
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not to respond. And if empathy is just not your strength and you're unable to develop that muscle, don't go it alone! Surround yourself with others – HR Leader, a Deputy CEO, etc. - from your team who are strong at communicating empathy, then allow them to support you and, perhaps, even speak for you when warranted.

- **Practice “The ART of Communication”.** In episode 19, Joel Zlotnik, Strategic Communications Manager with Orange County Transportation Authority refers to the ART of communication and recommends every CEO and organization make their messages *Accessible, Responsive, and Transparent*. How would you say you're doing in these areas and what can you do to improve?
- **It's okay to communicate that you don't have the answer!** As a senior leader, you often find yourself in the crosshairs of those looking to you for a response. Employees, board members, customers, media, government agencies and countless others come to you for answers you may not have at your fingertips. Know that it's far better to say “I don't know but I'll find out and get back to you” than it is to shoot from the hip and put out misinformation. You'll have far fewer apologies to make and backtracking to do if you give yourself permission to not know.
- **Consider adding a Strategic Communications Manager role to your team if you haven't already.** Communication is happening at the speed of light today more than ever, and social media creates potential pitfalls all around you. If you're not careful, significant damage can be done to your company brand and professional image that may take years to recover from. Having someone on staff who can help you navigate these waters may be the best investment you never knew you needed to make.

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