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## Get your motor running: how to do communications at the speed of change

*Like Thelma and Louise, Tracy and Stacy decided to kill the chaos and set out on a road of their own. Here's how the corporate communicator and the consultant transformed a reactive department into one that helps manage corporate change in an orderly way.*

After completing a year-long spin off of the telecommunications arm of the company last April and then driving full speed ahead into a merger in May, the Corporate Communications team at Williams, an energy company based in Tulsa, Okla., vowed to proactively develop a change communications plan.

No more destination unknown. We were ready for a roadmap. But not just a fold-up map to stash away in the glove compartment. We needed a plan with some serious get-up-and-go.

As the senior communications specialist for Williams, I participated on a cross-functional team within Williams' Corporate Communications department that began discussing the best route for developing the plan. But the project kept taking a back seat as one crisis after another drove the team members' time away from it. We needed help.

I was attending IABC's District 5 Conference in Houston when I realized help was available through a fellow member. Stacy Wilson, ABC, president of Eloquor Consulting, Inc., in Denver, had just the experience Williams needed.

A few phone calls later, the project was in gear. Stacy joined our project team.

### **How to get there – by Stacy**

When Tracy brought me into the project, I quickly found that Williams has great tools, experience and processes already in place. But, the communicators wanted to return to a strategic position. So, we approached the project steps in this order:

- Understand the past
- Define goals and develop the plan
- Revise existing tools and develop new tools
- Develop an internal education and marketing tool

Understanding the past not only meant reviewing old tools and change experiences, but also listening to employees who recently experienced change. We developed two surveys; one for employees recently acquired by Williams, and the other for Williams employees who experienced the divestiture of the communications division. Surveys were conducted via telephone interview, and results tabulated and incorporated into the planning process.

We handled definition of goals and plan development in a team setting. The cross-functional team, made up of individuals from internal communications, media relations, design services and branding worked in one session to lay out the key considerations for the plan. The team discussed tools likely to support the defined strategy. Each team member plays a role in the process of change communication. It was important to engage them and integrate their contributions into the planning process. They also would serve as important ambassadors when the plan is put into use.



Once the plan was drafted, tools that would be necessary to support the plan were identified. Williams already had versions of some that we could simply modify to meet broader needs. Others were developed from scratch. The final element developed was a printed piece the communication team would use to market their skills internally. The piece would educate internal audiences about the team's capabilities and the process of change communications.

Many of the resulting sections of the plan were included as a result of discussion at the planning session. Here's a look at the plan sections and why they were included:

- *Plan Purpose and Use* – Defines the why and explains how best to use the different plan elements.
- *History and Situation Analysis* – Explains how the corporate history and culture influences change communication. Williams' Core Values & Beliefs serve as a road sign pointing the way.
- *Research Summary* – Summarizes surveys conducted and implications for change communication.
- *Communications' role in change* – Uses various resources to demonstrate the appropriate role of communications in change and the implications Williams must consider.
- *Change and Consequences* – A brief explanation of the different types of results Williams experiences from different changes. This section also references an appendix that demonstrates potentially harmful outcomes if change is not implemented well.
- *Audience Analysis* – A more lengthy section that explains the behaviors Williams seeks from its employees during change efforts and their implications. It also segments audiences for use in developing change communications messages and tactics.
- *Change Identity Guidance* – Because Williams has struggled in the past on the issue of when to separately brand a change and when not, this section offers specific guidance on the issue. It also includes key questions the planning group should ask when creating a separate change identity.
- *Communication Linkages* – This section identifies all the different players involved in change communication, either internal or external. It defines their individual roles and capabilities so those in other areas might better understand how they all work together on a change. Most importantly, this section helps the communicators better understand who they need to engage in the process.
- *Strategy* – Defines Williams' strategies for use of communication channels, change communication topics and approval processes. It also gives very specific direction on use of individual communication channels, such as intranet, face-to-face, events and e-mail.
- *Measurement* – Defines recommended approaches to measuring the success of a change communications effort. Also offers internal contacts for those with expertise implementing measurement tactics.

If the plan is the roadmap, the tools are the street signs. There is no getting there without using both elements. While the plan could be read and set aside, it serves as a terrific trigger for each change. It's a short read and chock full of stuff that will help you begin crafting the approach you'll take for the change that just turned up. The tools are what you need to stay in the correct lane. Once you've reviewed the plan, select the tools that will work best for the change at hand.

We broke the tools into two separate sets. The appendices are static tools that offer guidance on team contact information, the consequences of change and which channels to use for which audience. The other tools are interactive, requiring the user to add information to make them truly useful. The tools include:

- *Materials Development Checklist* – A checklist seemed the obvious choice. This one lists most issues to consider before developing your materials. A must use, especially if you choose not to review the plan before jumping in.



- *Change Data Collection Form* – Allows those in other functions to contribute what they know about how the change may affect the company. Use this when a change involves many other functions.
- *Change Response Directory* – Williams commits to getting answers to employee questions within 48 hours. To do this, they have to know who can answer what. An important document for complex changes that will affect employees personally (for example, their benefits).
- *Timeline Template* – A comprehensive timeline of when communications activities occur. This one is probably a good bet every time.
- *Identity & Style Guide* – Allows identity and style issues specific to the change to be integrated with those used everyday. While the company style guide may suffice unchanged for some simpler changes, this may help you to reinforce terms used in previous change efforts.
- *Leader Exchange Template* – A talking point template used for managers and other leaders to communicate key messages. Most changes require a face-to-face communication element, often led by managers.
- *Fact Sheet Template* – A template for developing facts for key audiences who are customer facing, like those who answer the 1-800-Williams line. Most companies have staff members who are in constant contact with customers and who will be barraged with questions.
- *Change Champions Form* – Used with those who serve as ambassadors to provide them with specific direction about a particular change. Every change can benefit from ambassadors, so grab every opportunity to recruit, equip and support them.

We don't expect that every tool will be used for every change. The intent was to have a whole kit of tools that meet different needs, eliminating the need to create tools in the heat of a change effort. Now, communicators can focus on the messages, behaviors and impacts.

The appendices also offer important insights. The contact list is something that will likely be shared beyond the project team. The audience/channel matrix may be something you'll use for all your communication. Tracy test-drove the new plan and tools earlier this year.

### **Taking it for a spin – by Tracy**

Before the plan even received final approvals, we took it for a test drive. In an effort to reach a goal to reduce \$50 million from the company's cost structure on a run-rate basis in 2002, we announced an early-retirement offering in January.

Multiple tools from the plan were put to use. A couple of them had been used in the past, but several of the tools were being used for the first time or reintroduced in a new format. With the new plan in hand, there was a new sense of direction for the communicators and all the internal clients involved in the change.

The plan was tested again in March, but in reverse. This time Williams announced it was selling a large asset to Mid American Energy Holdings Company, a Berkshire Hathaway company. This was definitely a shift in direction for Williams's communicators, as Williams is usually the acquiring company. But, with less than a week's notice, Williams' Corporate Communications team worked closely with Mid American's communicators to put the change plan into full gear.

Although both transitions are still happening, feedback from stakeholders is confirming the plan is a welcome addition to the communication process at Williams.

And to make it as easy as pushing a button on the dashboard, Williams' Corporate Communications department is adding the new change roadmap to its intranet site. In addition to all the tools, sample plans will be available for the company's communicators to put into gear at a moment's notice.