

CHANGECOMMS



Internal Communications Pocket Guide

A practical guide for practising
communicators looking for an edge

Oscar Hillerstrom
ChangeComms

Clarity for complex change

CHANGECOMMS

Internal Communications Pocket Guide

A practical guide for practising communicators
looking for an edge

Oscar Hillerstrom

ChangeComms

First edition, 2026. Written and designed by Oscar Hillerstrom.

Set in Newsreader and Geist.

This is communication guidance. It is not legal, industrial, privacy, safety, cyber-security, clinical or financial advice.

changecomms.cc · oscar@changecomms.cc

Contents

BEFORE YOU WRITE

How to use this guide	4
The transfer test	7
What current internal communication practice confirms	9

THE TWELVE PRINCIPLES

01	Start with the problem, not the message	11
02	Build the evidence base	17
03	Understand the employee's real question	22
04	Decide what communication must achieve	28
05	Create one governing idea	34
06	Write for trust and action	40
07	Match the channel to the job	46
08	Equip leaders and managers	52
09	Communicate change as a sequence	58
10	Handle sensitive communication	64
11	Listen, measure and adapt	70
12	Govern the system	76

REFERENCE

Pocket tools	83
Expert notes and evidence base	89
Selected sources	91
Final doctrine	94
About this guide	95

How to use this guide

I wrote this for the moments when the facts are untidy, the request is urgent, and somebody wants a message before the organisation has finished thinking. If you have had that week, this is for you.

Internal communication is unusual because it operates inside an employment relationship. People can ignore a message, but they often cannot opt out of the consequences. That changes the ethical test.

External disciplines have spent decades learning how to earn attention and move people to act. A lot transfers. None of it transfers unchanged.

So the experts here come from marketing, behavioural science, design, crisis research and AI practice. None of them are here as decoration. Each earns a place only where a distinctive idea improves judgement inside a real organisation.

BORROWED FROM	WHAT IT DOES INSIDE INTERNAL COMMUNICATION
Conversion copywriting: first line, one action, above the fold	A newsletter people finish, and act on.
Information architecture: descriptive headings, information scent, one authoritative source	An intranet people can use instead of asking three colleagues where the policy lives.
Behavioural science: capability, opportunity and motivation	A diagnosis of whether people cannot, will not, or are blocked from acting.
Crisis communication: known, unknown, action, next update	A first message that reduces harm without inventing certainty.
Human-centred design: do not blame the user for a bad system	Fewer campaigns trying to persuade people through broken workflows.

Who it is for

Internal communicators, change and corporate affairs practitioners, and HR partners who already know the job and want an edge. Use it as a desk reference, a briefing aid, or a way to challenge the first answer in the room.

The core doctrine

Diagnose before publishing. Tell people what is true, what it means for them, what happens next, and where uncertainty sits. Then listen for whether the organisation has actually reduced confusion, improved trust, enabled action or learned something it needs to change.

If you only use one page of this, use the [Monday-morning triage](#), page 83. Seven questions to ask before you write anything.

The operating sequence

1. **See clearly.** Establish the facts and what has actually been decided.
2. **Understand.** Identify who is affected and what they will ask.
3. **Decide.** Name the outcome, the owner and the trade-offs.
4. **Plan.** Sequence leaders, managers, channels and support.
5. **Communicate.** Make the answer, consequence and action clear.
6. **Listen.** Capture questions, friction and unintended effects.
7. **Adapt.** Change the message, the channel or the decision.
8. **Learn.** Record what worked so the next team does not start over.

Use the full sequence for consequential work.
For routine communication, move through it
quickly rather than skipping it.

The transfer test

Models travel badly when they are treated as universal. A good model gives you a lens. A bad application gives you false confidence.

Before bringing an external idea into internal communication, test it.

TEST	ASK
Problem fit	What problem does this idea help explain?
Evidence	What is the strongest evidence behind it?
Transfer	What usefully carries into the organisation?
Employment power	What changes because employees are not customers or voters?
Boundary	Where does the model break down?
Ethics	What would make its use manipulative, misleading or unfair?
Operating reality	What process, system, manager, legal or industrial constraint changes the answer?
Learning	How will we know whether applying it helped?

A borrowed idea earns its place only when it improves a practitioner’s judgement. If it merely gives familiar work a clever label, cut it.

Strategy before activity

A channel plan becomes strategy only when it connects to organisational priorities, makes choices, names trade-offs, assigns dependencies and measures the result.

Use this lens:

**Business problem -> evidence -> communication problem -> choices
-> interventions -> organisational dependencies -> outcome ->
measurement -> learning.**

That is the difference between a publishing queue and a communication strategy.

What current internal communication practice confirms

The strongest recent internal communication work points in the same direction as this guide.

The ICRH Europe work on valuing internal communication connects communication to organisational value through performance, alignment, culture, engagement and change. A communication plan should not end at a post, an event or an open rate. It should name the organisational condition it is trying to improve.

Rachel Miller keeps pulling practitioners back to relevance. Relevance is not “what is in it for me”. It is the ability to connect enterprise direction to local meaning and individual work. A message that is clear in corporate terms can still fail if employees cannot see where they stand.

Jenni Field’s writing on the profession’s identity crisis makes the same point from the other side. The value of the work is shifting away from production volume and towards diagnosis, leadership advice, manager capability, measurement and trust. AI accelerates that shift because it makes content cheap. When content is cheap, judgement is what is scarce.

The numbers back it up. The IoIC IC Index 2026, based on 5,000 UK employees, found only half now trust their CEO or senior leaders, down nine points in a year, and fewer than half agree the reasons behind organisational change are clearly explained. Gallagher’s 2026

Employee Communications Report found 73 per cent of internal communication teams want to work strategically and 18 per cent believe they do. Gallagher calls the difference the readiness gap: the distance between what the organisation needs from communication and what the team is structured to deliver.

That is why this guide treats internal communication as an organisational capability, not a writing service.

01

Start with the problem, not the message

PRINCIPLE

A request for an email, town hall, article or campaign is a proposed solution. Your first job is to work out what is actually happening.

Internal communication teams are handed formats instead of problems. Send an email. Prepare a town hall. Make a campaign. The pressure behind the request is usually real. The diagnosis often is not.

Before you draft, reopen the question. What changed in the work? Who is affected? What has to happen next? What is stopping it? A clear message can support a workable system. It cannot make an unworkable system work.

The first professional act is finding out what the writing is meant to fix.

Karl Weick: how people make workable sense

Karl Weick studied how people act when reality is incomplete, fast-moving or contradictory. His central idea, sensemaking, is less about receiving information than building a workable account of what is going on.

Three parts matter for communicators. Sensemaking is enacted: people partly create the environment they then interpret, through the actions they take. It is retrospective: they often understand an event by looking back at it. And it favours plausibility, because under pressure people need a credible story they can use before they have every fact.

This shows up in change, crisis and ordinary organisational ambiguity. Employees collect cues from decisions, manager behaviour, timing, systems and corridor conversation. The official message is one cue among many. If it says nothing changes while budgets, roles and meeting invitations are all changing, the lived evidence wins.

The limit matters. Plausibility is no licence to speculate, conceal or treat a coherent story as the truth. In employment, safety, legal and financial matters, the authorised facts still set the boundary.

Donald Norman: do not blame the user for a bad system

Donald Norman's design work shows how poor systems make ordinary people look careless. Doors, controls and digital systems fail when they hide what can be done, give weak feedback, or demand knowledge the user has no way of having.

The implication for internal communication is blunt. Repeated confusion may be evidence of system friction rather than inattentive employees. Check the workflow, authority, access, timing and incentives before you commission another reminder.

WHERE IT WORKS

- Early diagnosis of change, adoption, policy and compliance problems.
 - Situations where employees are receiving contradictory cues.
 - Technology, process or channel failures being described as resistance.
-

WHERE IT BREAKS

- Urgent incidents where diagnosis and communication have to run in parallel.
 - Problems with a clear legal or safety instruction that still needs immediate action.
 - Cases where the system works and accountability is missing.
-

WHAT TO DO

Ask five questions:

1. What is happening in operational terms?
2. What has been decided, and what is still open?
3. Who is affected, how and when?
4. What must people understand, decide or do?
5. What non-communication barrier could stop that happening?

Separate the communication problem from the operating problem.

You have a communication problem when people cannot find, understand, believe or act on necessary information. You have an operating problem when people understand the requirement and lack the time, authority, tools, skill, capacity or workable process to meet it.

Most consequential problems contain both. Name each one.

SIGNAL	LIKELY RESPONSE
People do not know the requirement.	Clarify the decision, action, owner and deadline.
People know but cannot complete it.	Repair access, workflow, capacity, authority or support.
Managers give different answers.	Set decision boundaries, brief managers, create one authoritative source for the decision.
Reminders increase and behaviour does not move.	Stop publishing and go and watch the work.

Communication load

Every extra message competes with work, attention and messages already sent. When an organisation answers failure by sending more, it manufactures the confusion it is trying to remove.

Reduce the number of decisions the reader has to make, not just the word count.

the timesheet campaign

A senior leader asks for a campaign because weekly timesheet completion has fallen. The working assumption is that employees are careless.

Ten minutes with supervisors says otherwise. The system rejects common shift patterns, approvals vary by location, and employees cannot see whether a submission was accepted. More persuasive copy would raise irritation without moving completion.

WEAK DIAGNOSIS	STRONGER DIAGNOSIS
“We need a campaign to improve compliance.”	“The workflow fails for common shifts, supervisors apply different rules, and confirmation is invisible. Fix the workflow, publish one process and give supervisors a common decision rule.”

A clearer message will not repair a system people cannot use.

MONDAY-MORNING CHECK

- ☐ Can I state the problem without naming a channel?
- ☐ Have I spoken to people who do the work?
- ☐ Is the required behaviour observable?
- ☐ Have I tested process, skill, access, incentive, capacity and leadership causes?
- ☐ What evidence would prove communication is not the main intervention?
- ☐ What is the smallest responsible next step?

SOURCES Weick (1995); Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (2005); Norman (2013).

02

Build the evidence base

PRINCIPLE

Trustworthy communication separates fact, interpretation, assumption, forecast and commitment before any of them become polished prose.

Most internal messages get drafted from fragments: a meeting note, a leader's recollection, a project slide, a deadline. The danger is not only factual error. It is that an early interpretation hardens into organisational fact because it has been repeated inside an approved document.

Build a minimum fact pack before you build a message. Not to produce an audit. To know which claims can carry weight, which need qualification, and which should not be made yet.

Sort what you know from what you hope before either one reaches a draft.

Daniel Kahneman: judgement is fast before it is careful

Daniel Kahneman's work with Amos Tversky changed how economists and managers think about judgement. It showed that people use mental shortcuts, especially under pressure, and that those shortcuts produce predictable errors.

The fast/slow shorthand is useful for communicators because employees do not stop work to analyse an organisational message line by line. They scan the sender, headline, first sentence, visible consequence and whatever they remember from last time. They react before they reflect.

None of which is an argument for writing down to people. Put the answer early. Use stable labels. Separate status from aspiration. Make numbers comparable. Do not ask readers to remember three previous announcements to understand this one.

System 1 and System 2 are a teaching device, not two switches in the brain. Use the idea to check communication load, not to explain every employee response.

Trust is an accumulated judgement

Organisational trust research often separates ability, benevolence and integrity. In plain terms: can this source do what it says, does it take affected people into account, and does its conduct match its claims?

One accurate message helps. Repeated conduct matters more. Trust grows when facts survive scrutiny, uncertainty is acknowledged and commitments are met. It shrinks when messages are technically defensible and materially misleading.

WHERE IT WORKS

- Executive briefs, restructures, incidents, policy change and contested data.
- Messages carrying numbers, dates, forecasts or commitments.
- Situations where an earlier promise is shaping present credibility.

WHERE IT BREAKS

- Analysis becomes delay when a safety or service instruction is needed now.
- More evidence will not settle a value conflict or an undecided trade-off.
- A perfectly sourced message cannot rescue a decision people experience as unfair.

WHAT TO DO

Build the minimum fact pack:

- Verified chronology and decision record.
- What is changing and what is not.
- Affected groups, locations and dates.
- Numbers, definitions, sources and denominators.
- Legal, industrial, privacy, safety and operational constraints.
- Previous promises and public statements.
- Likely contradictions and unresolved questions.
- Actions taken, and named owners for what happens next.

Use an evidence ladder. Weakest to strongest: assertion, explanation, specific example, data, named accountable source, independently verifiable evidence, demonstrated behaviour.

CLAIM	WHAT IT IS
"We listen."	Assertion.
"We changed the roster process after feedback from 214 employees."	Evidence linked to action.
"All roles are secure."	A material commitment needing authority and a defined time boundary.
"We expect no role changes in this phase."	A forecast with scope and uncertainty visible.

On high-risk work, mark each briefing claim as confirmed, probable, disputed or unknown. These are working controls rather than published language. They stop confidence being added by repetition.

Keep fact, judgement and commitment in separate sentences. Legal review gets easier and accidental overclaiming gets harder.

Decision fatigue

Employees are usually interpreting several changes at once. Every exception, acronym and hidden action eats decision capacity. A good message does not only contain the facts. It orders them so the reader can make the next necessary decision with the least avoidable effort.

no change to jobs

A project team wants to reassure employees during an early operating-model review. No role decisions have been made, and leaders cannot guarantee the final outcome.

“There will be no job losses” is calming and may be untrue. “No role decisions have been made. This phase is reviewing process and structure. Any proposal affecting roles would follow the required consultation process” is less soothing and more trustworthy.

Trust is the reader’s judgement that your claims survive contact with reality.

MONDAY-MORNING CHECK

- ☐ Can every material claim be traced to a source or accountable owner?
- ☐ Have fact, interpretation, assumption, forecast and commitment been separated?
- ☐ Are dates, numbers, definitions and comparison periods clear?
- ☐ Have previous promises been checked?
- ☐ What is disputed or still unknown?
- ☐ Would the reader feel misled once they learn more?

SOURCES Kahneman (2011); Tversky and Kahneman (1974); Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995).

03

Understand the employee's real question

PRINCIPLE

The organisation wants to explain itself. Employees want to orient themselves. Those are different tasks.

Leaders often open with project history, strategic rationale or their own enthusiasm. Employees open somewhere else. Am I affected? What do I have to do? Can I trust this? What happens next?

Good internal communication starts with the reader's question rather than the sender's preferred opening. That is respect for the consequence people are facing.

Find out what people need to know, then decide what the organisation says.

Andy Crestodina: answer the question people came with

Andy Crestodina's content strategy work treats content as an answer to an audience question rather than a container for organisational messages. His work on descriptive headings, information scent and content audits transfers well to intranets and employee content.

Information scent is the reader's sense that a heading, link or page is leading towards the answer. "Transformation update" has weak scent. "What the new expense process changes from 1 October" tells the reader what they will find.

Organise content around employee tasks and questions rather than the org chart or project workflow. The limit is that not every internal message is a search task. Ceremonial, relational and culture communication can be worth doing when no transaction follows. Its purpose should still be clear to the person reading it.

Ann Handley: useful, human, clear, specific

Useful writing starts with empathy for the reader and improves through disciplined editing. Human does not mean chatty. It means sounding like an accountable person who understands the reader's situation.

Specificity is the bridge between warmth and usefulness. "Support is available" is pleasant and thin. "Employees can book a confidential 45-minute appointment with the career service from Monday" gives the reader something to use.

Warmth cannot compensate for missing facts or an unfair process. A humane tone matters most when it carries precise information, least when it softens a weak decision.

Voice of employee, used ethically

Audience-language methods from Joanna Wiebe's copywriting practice adapt well internally. Survey comments, manager questions, helpdesk themes, intranet searches and direct conversation all reveal the words employees use and the objections they actually hold.

The ethical boundary is sharper inside an employment relationship. Use employee language to improve recognition, clarity and support. Leave confidential distress out of it, and never use it to disguise power.

Relevance test: enterprise, local, me

Relevance is not the same as personalisation. It is the ability to connect enterprise direction to actual work.

Ask:

1. **Enterprise.** What does the organisation need people to understand?
2. **Local.** What changes here - by team, site, shift, customer group or process?
3. **Me.** What changes for this person in their actual work?

If the communication only answers the enterprise question, it will usually feel strategic to the sender and unfinished to the reader.

WHERE IT WORKS

- Intranet content, FAQs, leader messages, manager packs and change updates.
- Messages where different groups face different consequences.
- Audiences who are sceptical because earlier questions went unanswered.

WHERE IT BREAKS

- The loudest question is not always the most important or representative.
- Search data shows what people typed, not what they feared.
- Audience-first writing must not hide lawful constraints or material organisational needs.

WHAT TO DO

Use four layers of questions:

LAYER	TYPICAL QUESTION
Factual	What is changing? When? Who decided?
Practical	What do I need to do? Where do I go? Will my workload change?
Emotional	Is my job, status, safety or identity affected?
Credibility	Why should I believe this? Is consultation genuine? What happened last time?

Run the first-question test. Ask a representative reader: what is the first question this creates for you? Do it before the copy is polished, while the structure can still change.

Then look at the first screen or first page. The opening should answer the most consequential question it can responsibly answer. Context can follow.

Write headings that carry meaning. Replace “Background” with the fact the background explains. Replace “Next steps” with the action, owner and date. Replace project language with the words employees use to find the task. Use “who this applies to” when impact differs by role, site, employment type, work pattern, device access or consequence.

Narrative coherence

People compare today’s message with yesterday’s message, with leader behaviour and with their own experience. Coherence does not require pretending everything has been consistent. It requires explaining what changed, why the position changed and what remains true.

IN PRACTICE

the transformation opening

WEAK

“We are excited to announce the next phase of our transformation journey.”

STRONGER

“From October, Finance Operations moves to one national structure. No roles end today. This update explains which teams are affected, what is decided, and what remains subject to consultation.”

The stronger opening does not answer every question. It answers the first ones and shows where the rest of the answers will come from.

People read an organisational message to work out where they stand.

MONDAY-MORNING CHECK

- ☐ Whose question is the opening answering?
- ☐ Have factual, practical, emotional and credibility questions been considered?
- ☐ Can readers tell whether the message applies to them?
- ☐ Have enterprise, local and individual relevance been tested?
- ☐ Do headings describe the answer, task or consequence?
- ☐ Have real employee words and search terms been checked?
- ☐ Is any emotional language being used to push rather than inform?

SOURCES Crestodina (2022); Handley (2022); Wiebe, voice-of-customer practice; Australian Government Style Manual; Miller (2026).

04

Decide what communication must achieve

PRINCIPLE

Engagement is not an outcome. Define the understanding, decision, action or behaviour the communication has to support, in terms you can observe.

Vague objectives produce vague content and vanity measurement. “Build awareness”, “drive engagement” and “bring people on the journey” describe almost any activity and prove almost nothing.

A useful objective names what a person should be able to understand, decide or do in a real environment. It also names the conditions communication cannot create on its own.

A communication strategy connects organisational priorities, choices, interventions, dependencies and observable outcomes.

COM-B: behaviour needs capability, opportunity and motivation

Susan Michie, Maartje van Stralen and Robert West developed COM-B as part of the Behaviour Change Wheel. Behaviour depends on capability, opportunity and motivation. As a diagnostic that earns its keep.

Ask whether people can do the thing, have the opportunity to do it, and have a credible reason to do it. Then extend the test for organisational life: authority, timing, technology, workload, incentives and feedback can all block behaviour even when the message is clear.

Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein: make the better action easier

Choice architecture shows how small changes to the environment can influence behaviour without removing choice. A nudge might change the default, order choices more clearly, provide feedback at the right moment, or make the desired action easier to finish.

Inside an organisation, a well-placed prompt in the workflow will often beat a persuasive campaign sent three days earlier. The question worth asking is what friction exists at the moment of action.

The limits are ethical as well as practical. Choice architecture becomes manipulation when the organisation hides its intent, exploits power, or makes refusal unreasonably difficult. No nudge fixes capability, workload, unfair incentives or bad policy.

Donald Norman: feedback belongs in the system

People need to see what actions are possible, what happened after they acted, and how to recover from an error. Communication should not sit outside the system explaining around missing feedback. It should help the organisation design the task so the right action is visible and recoverable.

John Kotter: momentum needs more than an announcement

Kotter's change model stays influential because it reminds leaders that change needs urgency, a credible coalition, usable direction and repeated reinforcement. Use it sparingly. The eight steps can be treated mechanically, assume a leader-led programme, and underplay iteration, local agency and politics. The useful parts are simple: explain why now, align people with authority, make direction usable and keep momentum visible through decisions and evidence.

WHERE IT WORKS

- Compliance, service adoption, technology use, learning and recurring employee tasks.
- Change programmes where communication works alongside training, process and leadership.
- Situations where reminders keep going out and nobody has examined the friction.

WHERE IT BREAKS

- No choice design makes an unfair requirement feel fair.
- A behavioural target can be inappropriate when consultation is genuinely open.
- A nudge should never conceal a material employment, privacy or safety consequence.

WHAT TO DO

Choose an observable outcome:

- Understand a decision and its rationale.
- Know whether you are affected.
- Complete a required action.
- Hold a manager conversation.
- Find support or an authoritative answer.
- Learn and practise a process.
- Adopt a behaviour in the flow of work.
- Contribute usable feedback.
- Trust that uncertainty and trade-offs were acknowledged honestly.

Ask what must be true. For the action to happen, what has to be true about motivation, capability, opportunity, authority, timing, technology, workload and feedback? Mark which conditions communication can influence and which need an operational owner.

REQUIRED CONDITION	POSSIBLE INTERVENTION
People do not understand why the change exists.	Evidence, leader explanation, examples, questions.
People cannot perform the new task.	Training, practice, job aids, system repair, local support.
The action is hard to find.	Change the default, put the prompt in the workflow, simplify the path.
Managers cannot answer local questions.	Briefing, boundaries, rehearsal, escalation routes.
People believe the process is unfair.	Review the process, explain the criteria, provide meaningful voice or review.

Signal versus noise

Label everything important and the organisation learns to ignore importance labels. Reserve urgency, executive senders and repeated alerts for work that needs them. A quieter system gives critical messages more signal.

IN PRACTICE

mandatory security training

The brief says: create an engaging campaign to improve completion. The real outcome is that every employee finishes a 20-minute module before system access changes on Friday.

Better copy is a small part of it. Put the deadline and consequence in the first line. Give managers a completion list they can act on. Put the training link inside the system people already use. Preserve progress when the module closes. Provide a help route for access failures.

Communication supports the behaviour; design makes it possible.

Persuasion cannot carry friction the organisation has chosen to keep.

MONDAY-MORNING CHECK

- ☐ Is the outcome observable rather than aspirational?
- ☐ What decision or behaviour has to occur, by whom, by when?
- ☐ What must be true for that to happen?
- ☐ Which barriers are informational and which are operational?
- ☐ Can the action be made easier at the moment it matters?
- ☐ How will we know the intervention worked, beyond opens and attendance?

SOURCES Michie, van Stralen and West (2011); Thaler and Sunstein (2008, 2021); Norman (2013); Kotter (1996).

05

Create one governing idea

PRINCIPLE

A strong message architecture gives the organisation one coherent account, then makes differences in impact, action and uncertainty explicit.

Message architecture earns its keep when several leaders, channels and audiences have to stay aligned. It turns harmful when it reduces a complicated decision to a slogan and forces every question back into three approved phrases.

The governing idea is the clearest responsible answer to the reader's main question. It has to survive being quoted alone. Everything else supports it, qualifies it or applies it.

A message architecture is where the decisions are recorded.

Barbara Minto: answer first, then show the logic

Minto's Pyramid Principle starts with the answer or recommendation, then groups the reasons supporting it. It helps when a message contains too much history, competing themes or a buried decision. State what changed, then explain why, consequence and action in a logical order.

Neat structure can also conceal human consequence, uncertainty and real disagreement. Not every organisational reality forms a tidy pyramid. Do not remove an important exception because it disturbs the symmetry.

Chip and Dan Heath: why some ideas are remembered

The Heath brothers' SUCCEs framework is useful when explained carefully. Simple means finding the core, not shortening the text. Unexpected means creating attention through a useful gap rather than a gimmick. Concrete means people, actions, places and examples instead of abstractions. Credible means giving the reader a reason to believe. Emotional means connecting to something people care about. Stories show cause, choice and consequence in motion.

These ideas help strategy, safety, culture and change messages travel. They break down the moment sticky outranks true, fair or complete. An unforgettable slogan attached to an incoherent decision speeds up cynicism.

Information hierarchy

Attention is limited, so hierarchy matters. The headline, first sentence, visible action and first example carry more weight than later qualifications. Put the material truth where the reader will meet it, not in a final paragraph or linked document.

WHERE IT WORKS

- Executive recommendations, strategy, multi-channel change and manager packs.
- Messages that have to stay coherent while local detail changes.
- Complex material that can be layered without hiding consequence.

WHERE IT BREAKS

- A message house cannot align leaders who have not aligned the decision.
- Three supporting points are not a law of nature.
- Memorability must not outrank truth, dignity or necessary qualification.

WHAT TO DO

Use a simple message structure:

ELEMENT	QUESTION IT ANSWERS
Governing answer	What is the one sentence people must understand?
Supports	Which few reasons or facts make it credible?
Human consequence	What changes for affected people?
Action	What happens now, and what must people do?
Boundary	What is not changing, not decided, or not yet known?

Write the one sentence first. Every consequential communication needs one sentence that can stand alone without becoming misleading. Write it before the subject line, speech or deck.

Then test it on a sceptical reader. What would they reasonably infer that the sentence does not actually support? Add the boundary that fixes it, without turning the sentence into legal fog.

Use progressive disclosure:

1. **Alert.** Minimum fact needed to notice or act.
2. **Summary.** Decision, consequence and action.
3. **Explanation.** Rationale, evidence, timing and exceptions.
4. **Source.** Policy, technical detail, record or formal document.
5. **Support.** Private or specialist help where needed.

Communication debt

Every duplicate page, inconsistent FAQ and unowned message creates future work. The next team reconciles versions, employees decide which source to trust, and managers become the repair layer. Good architecture reduces today's confusion without building tomorrow's maintenance burden.

IN PRACTICE

a hybrid-work policy change

A draft opens with workplace philosophy, market trends and six principles. The material decision appears on page two.

The governing answer is: "From 4 November, employees assigned to Sydney and Melbourne offices will work from their designated office at least three days each week, unless an approved arrangement applies."

Rationale, affected groups, approval process and support follow from there. The message is ordered.

**Simple means the reader can see the core
without losing the truth around it.**

MONDAY-MORNING CHECK

- ☐ Can the governing answer stand alone without misleading anyone?
- ☐ Are the supporting points logically distinct?
- ☐ Is the human consequence visible before the corporate rationale expands?
- ☐ Are action, owner and date together?
- ☐ Have unknowns and boundaries been stated?
- ☐ Can detail be layered without hiding the consequential fact?

SOURCES Minto (2009); Heath and Heath (2007); Kahneman (2011).

06

Write for trust and action

PRINCIPLE

Internal copy is not marketing copy sent to employees. Employment power, human consequence and organisational memory change the ethical rules.

The best internal writing is usually quieter than campaign writing. It says what happened, what it means, what the reader has to do, and what the organisation will do next. It does not have to sound dull. It has to sound accountable.

Optimise for accuracy and usefulness ahead of tone and elegance. A polished sentence that hides the consequence is worse than an ordinary sentence that tells the truth.

Get the facts right, then worry about the sentence.

Ann Handley: edit towards usefulness

Handley's contribution is her insistence that good business writing is made in revision. Start with the reader's need, use concrete language, cut the throat-clearing, and write in a voice an actual person could own.

Human writing acknowledges consequence specifically. It does not claim to know how everybody feels, cast the organisation as the victim, or use warmth as a bridge back to corporate abstraction.

This holds across everyday messages and difficult change. It falls over when human becomes casual, over-familiar or emotionally performative. Let the sender sound like themselves, at the distance they have actually earned.

Robert Cialdini: persuasion works, which is why it needs restraint

Cialdini studied recurring patterns of influence: authority, social proof, reciprocity, consistency, liking, scarcity and unity. They explain why credible messengers, visible peer behaviour and clear commitments help people act.

Inside an organisation the power relationship changes the ethical test. An executive's invitation may feel compulsory. Social proof may shame a minority. Scarcity may create pressure rather than informed choice. Use influence to make truthful information easier to notice and legitimate action easier to take, never to conceal consequence or simulate consent.

The simplest boundary is transparency. Would you be comfortable explaining the technique to the people affected? If not, stop.

Procedural fairness: people judge how, not only what

Organisational justice research separates fairness of outcomes, process, interpersonal treatment and information. Communications cannot make every outcome favourable. They can make sure the process is described accurately, the criteria are visible, people are treated with dignity, and the explanation is adequate.

Fairness is not a tone choice. If consultation cannot influence the decision, do not imply that it can. If criteria exist, explain them. If a review route exists, make it usable.

WHERE IT WORKS

- Everyday employee writing, calls to action, leader notes and difficult change.
- Messages where trust depends on precise acknowledgement of impact.
- Persuasive communication where the desired action is legitimate and feasible.

WHERE IT BREAKS

- No writing technique makes a materially deceptive message ethical.
- Warmth cannot replace lawful process or individual communication.
- Persuasion becomes coercion when real choice is absent or hidden.

WHAT TO DO

Optimise in this order:

- 1. Accuracy.
- 2. Human consequence.
- 3. Relevance.
- 4. Clarity.
- 5. Procedural fairness.
- 6. Usefulness.
- 7. Credibility.
- 8. Action.
- 9. Tone.
- 10. Elegance.

Use the seven-pass edit:

PASS	QUESTION
Truth	Is every material claim verified and appropriately bounded?
Relevance	Does the opening answer the reader’s first question?
Structure	Is the governing answer early and the logic visible?
Specificity	Can vague nouns and verbs be replaced with people, actions, dates or evidence?
Humanity	Are consequences recognised without performance?
Friction	Can the reader actually complete the action?
Voice	Does this sound like the accountable sender?

Use action language that can be completed. Put the action, owner, deadline, location and exceptions together. “Please familiarise yourself” usually means the writer has not decided what the reader must do. “Submit the form by 5 pm Friday” is clear only if the form works, the audience has access, and exceptions are visible.

Trust check

Read the message as somebody who is affected, sceptical and likely to quote one sentence out of context. Which line looks evasive, inflated or callous? Repair that line before you debate polish.

IN PRACTICE

support during consultation

WEAK

“We remain committed to putting our people first.”

STRONGER

“Employees whose roles are affected will receive five paid days for interviews and career appointments during consultation.”

The stronger sentence claims no virtue. It shows a specific organisational action the reader can assess.

Show what the organisation decided to do because people matter.

MONDAY-MORNING CHECK

- ☐ Does the opening contain the answer or the news?
- ☐ Is every material claim supportable?
- ☐ Is the impact acknowledged plainly?
- ☐ Are action, owner, deadline and exceptions together?
- ☐ Does the process described match the process people will experience?
- ☐ Would I explain the persuasive technique openly to the audience?
- ☐ Could any sentence look misleading or callous quoted alone?

SOURCES Handley (2022); Cialdini (2021); Colquitt et al. (2001).

07

Match the channel to the job

PRINCIPLE

Choose channels by access, task, sensitivity, complexity, urgency, dialogue and record. Not by habit, and not by reach alone.

A channel is not neutral. It changes what people can notice, question, remember, retrieve and do. Video can show a leader taking responsibility and is hopeless for a procedure somebody has to look up in March. Email reaches widely and makes a poor room for an emotionally difficult conversation.

Start with the job the audience has to complete. Then choose the lightest channel, or combination, that can carry the meaning and the action.

Pick the channel by the job it has to do.

Richard Daft and Robert Lengel: match richness to ambiguity

Media richness theory explains why different media handle uncertainty and ambiguity differently. Rich media give rapid feedback, multiple cues and a more personal focus. Lean media suit straightforward information and durable reference.

The working insight holds up. When the issue is emotionally charged, locally variable or open to interpretation, people need dialogue as well as information. When it is stable and procedural, concise written content will often do.

Richness is not fixed. A skilled manager makes a ten-minute team meeting useful. A badly run town hall creates less understanding than a clear page. Access, disability, work pattern, language, culture, trust and scale all move the answer. Treat the theory as a starting hypothesis and test it with users.

Norman and Crestodina: retrieval is part of communication

The announcement is easy to send and the answer is hard to find later. That is a channel failure.

A channel system needs one authoritative source for each material decision or policy, with controlled local interpretation where needed. The source needs clear ownership, stable links, version control and a review date. Search cannot compensate indefinitely for duplicate, stale or department-shaped content.

Channel architecture, not channel accumulation

Channel architecture gives each channel a distinct job and shows how they work together. The alert gets attention. The source page holds the current answer. The manager conversation interprets local impact. The help route resolves exceptions. The feedback route reports friction.

Without that, the same message is copied everywhere, versions drift, and employees learn to ask a person instead of trusting the system.

WHERE IT WORKS

- Change, crisis, frontline communication, intranets and manager cascades.
- Messages needing both visible accountability and durable detail.
- Organisations with duplicate channels or unclear source truth.

WHERE IT BREAKS

- The richest channel may exclude shift workers, remote staff or people with access needs.
- No channel creates trust in a sender whose conduct contradicts the message.
- Channel choice cannot repair an unresolved decision.

WHAT TO DO

Use a practical channel rule:

CHANNEL	PRIMARY JOB
Email	Concise notice, decision summary, action, link to detail.
Intranet	Durable source of truth, layered explanation, FAQs, updates.
Manager conversation	Local meaning, judgement, questions, emotional consequence.
Town hall or briefing	Visible accountability, explanation, live challenge.
Teams, Viva or community channel	Ongoing questions, peer exchange, progress.
SMS, signage, toolbox talk	Urgent or frontline access where desktop channels fail.
One-to-one contact	Individual employment, health, conduct or highly sensitive impact.

Design the sequence. Tell directly affected people before the wider workforce wherever you can. Brief managers early enough to prepare and not so early that you create unnecessary leak risk. Do not use managers as a shield for decisions leaders should be explaining.

Align internal and external timing so employees do not learn material news from customers, social media or the press. In urgent events, publish the knowns, unknowns, action and next update while investigation continues.

Make one source authoritative:

- Give the source page a task-based title.
- Put the current answer and update time at the top.
- Link alerts and manager packs back to it.
- Name the owner and review date.
- Retire or redirect duplicate pages.
- Keep a visible correction and version process.

Frontline and accessibility check

Do not assume desktop access, quiet reading time, English-first comprehension, stable shifts or private devices. Test language, literacy, disability, device, location, roster, supervision and safety constraints before choosing the channel.

IN PRACTICE

a payroll-system outage

A long all-staff email is drafted explaining the technical cause. Employees need something else first: whether pay is affected, what they have to do, and when the next update arrives.

Use an immediate alert for material status and action. Keep one update page for verified detail. Give managers a short conversation note for affected teams. Provide a private help route for individual pay questions. The mix follows the job, not the project team's preference.

The right channel is the one that lets people finish the job.

MONDAY-MORNING CHECK

- ☐ What must the audience be able to do: notice, understand, question, practise, decide or retrieve?
- ☐ Does the channel reach people in their real work environment?
- ☐ Is dialogue needed because ambiguity or emotion is high?
- ☐ Is durable written detail available?
- ☐ Is one source clearly authoritative?
- ☐ Have accessibility, language, shift and device constraints been tested?
- ☐ What channel could create a leak, exclusion or version problem?

SOURCES Daft and Lengel (1986); Norman (2013); Nielsen Norman Group; Crestodina (2022); Australian Government Style Manual.

08

Equip leaders and managers

PRINCIPLE

Leaders create meaning through decisions and behaviour.
Managers translate enterprise decisions into local reality.
Neither job gets done by forwarding a pack.

Employees hear a major announcement and immediately ask what it means for their team. Their manager may have no better information than they do. What the manager has is local context, an existing relationship and the standing to discuss consequences.

Managers are not a distribution channel. They are interpreters with operational consequences. Prepare them for the real conversation, including what they can answer, what is still open and where the hard questions go.

A manager does not become ready because a slide deck arrived.

Amy Edmondson: speaking up is a condition for learning

Psychological safety matters because organisations cannot correct what people are afraid or too tired to say. Employees need to ask questions, admit confusion, report weak signals and challenge flawed assumptions. Managers shape that experience by how they respond in the moment.

The limit is often neglected. Psychological safety without accountability becomes comfort. A learning culture needs candour and standards together: people can speak openly, and the work still has deadlines, consequences and performance expectations. Safety is not freedom from disagreement or responsibility.

Edgar Schein: culture is what repeated behaviour teaches

Schein distinguished visible artefacts, stated values and deeper assumptions. Posters, rituals and speeches are artefacts. The stronger layer is what the organisation repeatedly rewards, ignores and treats as normal.

Leader behaviour is a message. Ask for challenge and then punish the first person who disagrees, and the meeting teaches the culture more effectively than the values statement ever will. Tell managers people come first while measuring them only on output, and the incentive system becomes the credible story.

Silence is data, not agreement

Silence can mean acceptance. It can also mean fear, fatigue, low relevance, no opportunity, or learned futility. Treat it as an uncertain signal. Ask specific questions through more than one route, and compare what changes when the power dynamics change.

WHERE IT WORKS

- Manager-led change, culture, safety, integration and difficult conversations.
- Teams where bad news is filtered as it moves upward.
- Situations where leaders want challenge and their behaviour discourages it.

WHERE IT BREAKS

- Anonymous channels cannot compensate indefinitely for unsafe leadership.
- Managers cannot answer decisions leaders have not made.
- Communication support is no substitute for formal action on bullying, discrimination or safety risk.

WHAT TO DO

Prepare the leader:

- What happened or was decided.
- Why this course was chosen.
- Trade-offs and rejected options.
- Who is affected and how.
- What the leader owns.
- What is uncertain.
- What happens next.
- Which questions need a decision, not a talking point.

Prepare the manager:

- A 60-second summary in natural language.
- What changes and what stays for this team.
- Questions managers can answer.
- Questions that must be escalated.
- A conversation guide, not a script.
- Links, contacts and private support.
- A route for reporting new questions and friction.
- The next update time, even with no answer yet.

Co-design before cascade

For significant work, involve representative managers before the message architecture is locked. They will expose local consequences, missing exceptions, awkward timing and questions the project team has not heard.

Give managers permission to translate enterprise language into credible local examples within clear factual boundaries. That is not message drift. That is communication doing its job.

Capability, not just a pack

Manager enablement means enough context, authority, time, tools and support to handle the conversation. A pack is one component. If the manager cannot change the local roster, approve an exception or reach a specialist, the communication system has handed them responsibility without control.

Build manager communication capability over time: ambiguity, challenge, emotional intelligence, difficult conversations, listening, escalation and accountability.

Rehearse the three hardest questions. Rehearse past the opening. Put managers in the position they will actually be in. Let them say “I do not know” and practise the escalation route.

IN PRACTICE

the restructure announcement

The CEO announces a proposed restructure. Employees immediately ask how it affects them. They turn to their manager, not because the manager has a secret briefing, but because the manager is trusted to connect the enterprise decision to local work.

If that manager received the announcement at the same moment as everybody else, the organisation has created avoidable silence. Brief them on status, boundaries, local impact, support and escalation. Do not ask them to speculate or defend a decision they cannot explain.

People learn what matters by watching how leaders respond.

MONDAY-MORNING CHECK

- ☐ Have leaders explained the decision, trade-offs and what they own?
- ☐ Were representative managers involved early enough to test local reality?
- ☐ Were managers briefed early enough to prepare?
- ☐ Can managers explain what changes for their team?
- ☐ Do they know what is open, unknown or outside their authority?
- ☐ Have the three hardest questions been rehearsed?
- ☐ Is there a live escalation and feedback route?
- ☐ What behaviour will employees use to test whether the message is true?

SOURCES Edmondson (1999); Schein and Schein (2016); Tourish and Robson (2006); Field (2026); IABC (2026).

09

Communicate change as a sequence

PRINCIPLE

A launch message creates awareness. On its own it cannot create desire, skill, ability, reinforcement or a workable change.

Change communication tends to peak on launch day, right as employees start needing practical help. The organisation invests in the reveal, then leaves managers, help teams and employees to make the new reality work.

Treat change as a sequence of needs. People need a credible reason, a clear account of impact, a chance to question, knowledge and ability to act, support through transition, and evidence that the new way is becoming real.

Change gets attempted and corrected long after the announcement went out.

Jeff Hiatt and Prosci: ADKAR as a diagnostic

ADKAR describes five outcomes: Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability and Reinforcement. Its value is diagnostic. It helps a change team find where adoption is breaking down.

Awareness asks whether people understand why the change is necessary. Desire asks why they would participate and what the real implications are. Knowledge covers what to do. Ability tests whether the person can perform the behaviour in their actual environment. Reinforcement asks whether the change is supported, rewarded and becoming normal.

The model matters because communication teams get held responsible for stages they cannot deliver. A clear message supports awareness and some desire. Training provides knowledge. Ability depends on practice, tools, authority, workflow and support. Reinforcement depends on leaders, measures, incentives and continued attention.

ADKAR is a commercial practice model, not a universal law, and not proof that resistance is irrational. People may oppose a change because it is harmful, under-resourced or operationally incoherent. Treat resistance as evidence to examine rather than a defect to overcome.

Kotter: urgency, coalition, direction, momentum

Kotter's enduring contribution is the reminder that change needs more than communication activity. People look for a credible reason to act now, alignment among leaders with authority, a direction they can translate into choices, and visible progress that holds attention.

The limits stay the same. The model feels linear, top-down and programme-shaped. Real organisations loop, stall, adapt and run several changes at once. Use the questions, not the steps as ceremony.

Chip and Dan Heath: shape the path

In *Switch*, the useful part for communicators is shape the path. Make the new behaviour easier, remove the old defaults, provide examples and show early evidence. Do not rely on enthusiasm to push people through preventable friction.

WHERE IT WORKS

- Technology adoption, operating-model change, policy change and capability programmes.
- Changes with distinct stages and role-based impacts.
- Situations where launch activity is being mistaken for adoption.

WHERE IT BREAKS

- No model makes a badly designed change good.
- Desire is not fully controllable and should not be engineered through deception.
- Linear plans miss local adaptation, competing changes and feedback.

WHAT TO DO

Use ADKAR as a communication diagnostic:

STAGE	QUESTION
Awareness	Why is the change necessary?
Desire	Why should I participate, and what are the real implications?
Knowledge	What do I need to know?
Ability	Can I perform the new behaviour in my actual environment?
Reinforcement	Is it working, being supported and becoming normal?

Plan the practical sequence:

1. Explain the problem with evidence and lived examples.
2. State the decision, intended benefit and trade-offs.
3. Map impact by role, site and time.
4. Prepare leaders, managers and support channels.
5. Train and allow practice before go-live.
6. Provide launch support in the flow of work.
7. Publish adoption evidence, failures, fixes and next decisions.
8. Remove old systems, habits and content once the new way is ready.

Credible inspiration

Inspiration is useful only when it is grounded in honesty. Ask what would help people believe the new reality is possible: evidence, agency, visible progress, credible peers, leader behaviour, or a better path through the work.

Do not inspire by pretending the cost is not real.

Map change load

Employees experience the combined load of every change, not the neat boundaries of each project. Map overlapping deadlines, training, policy changes, leadership messages and operational peaks. Sequence one project beautifully and you can still overwhelm the workforce if nobody looks at the portfolio.

Communication debt in change

Unclosed FAQs, temporary workarounds, duplicate training pages and promises without owners all become change debt. They make the next phase harder because employees have to work out which instructions are still valid. Retire old content and close old commitments as part of adoption.

IN PRACTICE

an intranet migration

The project plans a launch video, a countdown and broad feature training. Employees mainly want to know whether their critical tasks will still work on Monday.

Observe the real tasks in the current system. Fix permissions and ownership. Pilot search and mobile access. Train by role rather than feature list. Staff the help route after go-live. Measure task success, errors and workarounds instead of logins. The communication follows the service transition.

People respond to what a change asks of them, and what it takes away.

MONDAY-MORNING CHECK

- ☐ Which ADKAR stage is actually weak?
- ☐ Is the reason for change credible and specific?
- ☐ Have role, site and timing impacts been mapped?
- ☐ Can people practise the new behaviour before go-live?
- ☐ What will help people believe the new reality is possible without hiding the cost?
- ☐ Are tools, authority, access and support ready?
- ☐ What old system, content or habit has to be retired?
- ☐ Which operational measure will show adoption rather than attention?

SOURCES Hiatt (2006); Prosci; Kotter (1996); Heath and Heath (2010); Norman (2013); Miller (2026).

10

Handle sensitive communication

PRINCIPLE

In restructures, incidents, misconduct findings and service failures, precision, sequencing and dignity matter more than positivity.

Sensitive communication is where ordinary habits turn dangerous. The urge to reassure creates false certainty. The urge to protect reputation minimises harm. The urge to wait for perfect information leaves people exposed to rumour, or to risk.

Begin with status, human consequence, verified facts, action and the next update. Separate what is known from what is still being investigated. Tell the most affected people directly wherever you can.

Known. Unknown. Action. Next update.

W. Timothy Coombs: match the response to responsibility

Situational Crisis Communication Theory says response strategy should reflect how much responsibility people attribute to the organisation, alongside its history and the seriousness of harm.

Where the organisation is clearly the victim of an external event, aggressive self-blame confuses responsibility. Where preventable organisational action caused harm, a defensive response deepens distrust. The communicator's job is to understand the responsibility people will reasonably perceive, and recommend a response proportionate to it.

The model helps avoid two common errors: over-apologising before facts are established, and under-reacting when the organisation's role is obvious. Its limit is that real crises contain mixed responsibility, evolving evidence, legal constraints and several affected groups at once. It guides judgement. It does not generate a response.

CDC CERC: what people need under pressure

Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication guidance is practical: be first, be right, be credible, express empathy, promote action and show respect.

Be first does not mean publish guesses. It means acknowledge the event and give the earliest verified action. Be right means separating facts from early reports. Credibility comes from honesty about uncertainty and visible correction. Empathy names the real consequence. Actionable information tells people what to do now. Respect means treating people as capable adults rather than obstacles to message control.

CERC is strongest in urgent, high-uncertainty conditions. Local legal, industrial, privacy, safety and operational advice still governs what can be disclosed and how affected people have to be contacted.

Justice and dignity in employment impact

People judge sensitive decisions through outcome, process, treatment and explanation. A restructure message should distinguish proposal, consultation and decision, and should never imply influence where none exists. Direct notification, usable support and clear review routes are part of communication quality, not administrative detail.

WHERE IT WORKS

- Crisis, cyber incidents, safety events, service failure, restructures and misconduct findings.
- Situations with incomplete facts and high public or employee concern.
- Events where perceived organisational responsibility will shape trust.

WHERE IT BREAKS

- Crisis models do not replace incident command, legal advice or specialist care.
- Empathy language should not make claims about feelings the sender cannot know.
- Directly affected people may need individual, private and legally prescribed communication.

WHAT TO DO

Use a sensitive-message structure:

- 1. Status: proposal, consultation, decision or emerging event.
- 2. Human consequence: who is affected and how.
- 3. Reason and evidence.
- 4. What is decided and what remains open.
- 5. Timing and process.
- 6. Action, support and private contact.
- 7. Unknowns and next update.

Practise empathy without performance. Name the consequence specifically. Keep the organisation out of the victim seat. Do not use a ritual expression of concern as a bridge back to corporate language. Empathy should help the reader feel seen and oriented, not managed.

WEAK	STRONGER
“Our thoughts are with everyone affected and safety remains our highest priority.”	“People relied on this service to reach emergency help, and some could not. That failure is unacceptable. We have contacted affected callers, isolated the system, and will publish the next verified update at 3 pm.”

Protect the sequence:

- Confirm incident ownership and the source of verified facts.
- Identify who needs direct or private contact.
- Prepare managers and support teams for the first unavoidable questions.
- Align internal, customer, media, regulator and market timing where relevant.
- Record approvals, versions, corrections and next-update commitments.

The first message has a different job

The first message is not the complete explanation. Its job is to acknowledge the event, establish a credible source, give immediate action, and set the next update. Later messages explain cause, responsibility and repair as the evidence develops.

IN PRACTICE

a cyber incident

Employees notice systems failing before the investigation has established scope. Waiting six hours for a complete narrative creates rumour and unsafe workarounds.

The first message states which systems are affected, what employees must stop or do, what is not yet known, where updates will appear, and when the next verified update is due. It does not speculate about attackers, data loss or restoration time. Speed and accuracy have to coexist.

The first message exists to establish the status and the next update time.

MONDAY-MORNING CHECK

- ☐ Is the status clear: proposal, decision or emerging event?
- ☐ Have the most affected people been told first, and directly?
- ☐ Are fact, early report, forecast and commitment separated?
- ☐ Is the human consequence acknowledged plainly?
- ☐ Is the immediate action possible and easy to find?
- ☐ Are unknowns visible without sounding evasive?
- ☐ Is the next update time clear?
- ☐ Does the response match the organisation's actual responsibility?

SOURCES Coombs (2007); CDC CERC Manual; Colquitt et al. (2001).

11

Listen, measure and adapt

PRINCIPLE

Communication is not finished when the content is published. It is finished when the organisation knows what people understood, what they did, where they got stuck, and what has to change.

Platforms make activity easy to count. Opens, views, attendance and reactions are useful signals and they are not the outcome. A message can post a high open rate while employees misread the decision, fail the task and lose trust.

An open rate is, at best, a rough exposure signal. It does not prove attention, understanding or action. Modern email privacy technology can also make open-rate data technically unreliable because some systems download remote content whether or not a person engaged with the message.

Measure against the job the communication was meant to do. Listening should feed decisions, not produce a thank-you slide and disappear.

An open rate is not the result.

Amy Edmondson: voice matters when speaking has a consequence

Psychological safety supports speaking up. The practical test is what happens next. If employees raise the same problem repeatedly and get no answer, the organisation has taught them that voice is costly and pointless.

Closing the loop does not mean agreeing with every suggestion. It means showing what was heard, what was checked, what changed, what did not change, why, and who owns the next step. That visible consequence is part of the listening system.

Measurement beyond vanity metrics

Good measurement separates activity, reach, comprehension, readiness, behaviour and organisational outcome. It also records data quality and context. A drop in intranet views can be a good result if duplicate pages were removed and employees find the answer faster.

AMEC's integrated evaluation thinking is useful here because it separates outputs, outtakes, outcomes and impact. For internal communication, that means distinguishing what was produced, what people understood or felt ready to do, what changed in behaviour or practice, and what organisational condition improved.

You need a baseline, or improvement becomes a story told by the people who designed the intervention. The baseline can be modest: current task completion, error rate, manager confidence, service demand or trust signals. Name its limitations when you set it.

Contribution, not automatic causation

Communication often contributes to a result. It rarely causes an organisational outcome alone. If safety incidents fall after a campaign, communication may have helped. Training, supervision, system fixes, leadership attention and resourcing may also have mattered. Say contribution unless the evidence supports causation.

Feedback loops: communication as a control system

A control system compares what was intended with what happened, then adjusts. Internal communication needs the same loop. Collect questions and evidence, work out whether the issue is content or operation, change the source of truth or the system, then report what changed.

Measurement can curdle into surveillance or false precision. Do not collect personal data because the platform exposes it. Use the minimum data needed for a legitimate decision, and follow privacy, industrial and ethical requirements.

WHERE IT WORKS

- Change adoption, manager programmes, intranets, campaigns, consultation and service communication.
- Situations where leaders want proof of value.
- Work where recurring questions may reveal a system failure.

WHERE IT BREAKS

- Small samples and platform metrics create false certainty.
- A pulse survey cannot replace a conversation about unfairness.
- Measurement should not delay a repair or breach privacy.

WHAT TO DO

Match the metric to the job:

LEVEL	USEFUL EVIDENCE
Output	Content, briefings, pages, events, tools produced.
Reach	Delivery, views, attendance, frontline exposure.
Attention	Opens where reliable, dwell, video starts, search behaviour.
Understanding	Comprehension checks, question quality, retelling.
Readiness	Manager confidence, training completion, capacity.
Action	Clicks, registrations, submissions, task completion.
Ability	Task success, errors, rework, time, workarounds.
Adoption	Actual system or behaviour use over time.
Trust	Credibility pulse, themes, willingness to raise issues.
Impact	Service, risk, safety or employee-experience change.

Run the listening loop:

1. Collect questions from managers, channels, support teams and affected groups.
2. Cluster them into fact gaps, practical barriers, emotional concerns and credibility issues.
3. Answer what communication can answer.
4. Escalate process, policy, service and leadership failures.
5. Update the source of truth.
6. Tell people what changed, what did not, and why.
7. Come back later with evidence the commitment was delivered.

Establish a small baseline. Choose no more than ten measures tied to priority outcomes. Include at least one operational measure and one qualitative source. Record definitions, segments, data gaps and the next review date before the intervention starts.

Red-team the metric. Ask which metric could improve while the employee experience gets worse. More manager messages could lift reach and lift overload. Faster approvals could cut delay and cut consultation quality. The counter-metric protects your judgement.

IN PRACTICE

the high-open-rate policy update

A policy email records an 82 per cent open rate and is declared a success. The helpdesk takes 430 questions in two days, managers apply three different interpretations, and completion errors rise.

The evidence says the message probably reached people and failed to create a usable common understanding. Update the authoritative page, brief managers on the decision rule, fix the form and measure task success. The open rate is not the result.

Listening without visible response teaches people that speaking changes nothing.

MONDAY-MORNING CHECK

- ☐ What outcome was the communication meant to support?
- ☐ Is there a baseline, even a provisional one?
- ☐ Are output, reach, understanding, ability, behaviour and impact separated?
- ☐ What qualitative evidence explains the numbers?
- ☐ Which metric could improve while the real experience worsens?
- ☐ What did people raise that communication cannot solve?
- ☐ Have we shown what changed and what did not?
- ☐ Who owns verification of the next action?

SOURCES Edmondson (1999); Colquitt et al. (2001); Locke and Latham (2002); AMEC Integrated Evaluation Framework; Ruck (2025); Apple Mail Privacy Protection guidance.

12

Govern the system

PRINCIPLE

Internal communication improves when it is treated as an organisational capability rather than a queue of publishing requests.

A strong function does more than produce content. It builds a reliable path from decision to evidence, message, manager conversation, action, feedback and learning. It protects source truth without approving every sentence in the organisation.

Keep governance proportionate. Routine work should move quickly. Consequential work should get the scrutiny, record and specialist advice its risk requires.

Apply the lightest governance that protects truth, people, action and the organisational record.

Donald Norman: govern the use, not only the tool

Do not issue a standard and assume the user will conform. Design intake, templates, decision rights, source pages and support so the responsible path is the easiest one.

A publishing policy requiring ten approvals gets bypassed. A template with no clear factual owner produces polished uncertainty. Good governance makes ownership and escalation visible before the deadline, not during it.

Ethan Mollick: AI expands thinking, not accountability

Generative AI is a capable, unreliable collaborator. Useful for exploring options, critiquing drafts, clustering information and accelerating routine work. It needs active human supervision throughout.

AI can expand a communicator's thinking. It generates alternative structures, identifies missing questions, compares versions, summarises themes and produces role-based variants. It cannot own truth, confidentiality, employee consequence, legal judgement or final language.

The 2026 shift is bigger than drafting. AI is becoming an analyst, an interface and an agent. It can cluster questions, compare audiences, retrieve policy and, in some systems, take actions. That makes governance more important, not less.

Good communicators supervise it. They set the task, provide safe inputs, test outputs against sources, look for confident invention, and keep the decision record. They do not outsource the thinking, and they do not feed confidential employee information into unapproved systems.

The risk is not only model accuracy. AI increases communication load by making production cheap. Without editorial discipline, the organisation publishes more variants, more noise and more unowned content.

Synthetic voice, video and false internal messages also create trust risk. Employees need to know where authoritative information lives, how to verify material messages, and how corrections are handled.

Communication debt and organisational memory

Communication debt accumulates when decisions go unrecorded, source pages lack owners, duplicate channels persist, temporary content becomes permanent, and feedback commitments are forgotten. The cost turns up later as rework, inconsistency, lost trust and slow incident response.

A decision and issue log is not bureaucracy when it preserves why a choice was made, what evidence supported it, what stayed unknown, and when the position should be reviewed. It lets the next practitioner reconstruct the judgement instead of repeating the argument.

After-action learning

A retrospective becomes learning when a system change is assigned, completed and tested. Review the intended outcome, actual result, weak signals, false assumptions, helpful conditions and communication effects. Review the system. The culprit search is a different meeting, and a worse one.

WHERE IT WORKS

- Functions with fragmented publishing, slow approvals or repeated rework.
- Organisations adopting AI, intranets, employee-facing assistants or decentralised publishing.
- High-risk work needing clear records and escalation.

WHERE IT BREAKS

- Governance becomes control theatre and delays ordinary work.
- Central consistency erases legitimate local judgement.
- AI rules without usable approved tools drive hidden use rather than safe use.

WHAT TO DO

Build the minimum operating system:

- Clear intake and triage.
- Decision, factual and approval rights.
- One authoritative source for each material issue.
- Audience and channel standards.
- Leader and manager protocols.
- Editorial, accessibility and record standards.
- Measurement tied to outcomes.
- Issue, risk, correction and escalation processes.
- Reusable templates, logs and after-action reviews.
- Capacity rules that leave room for urgent work.

Use proportionate risk levels:

RISK	TYPICAL TREATMENT
Routine	Named factual owner, standard template, delegated publishing.
Material	Brief, audience-impact check, manager readiness, approvals, measures.
High consequence	Specialist advice, decision record, direct sequencing, version control, incident-ready updates.

Use AI carefully:

- Use approved systems and safe inputs.
- Ask for options and critique before you ask for finished prose.
- Check every material claim against a source.
- Remove invented examples and unearned certainty.
- Review bias, privacy, accessibility and employee impact.
- Record human ownership of the final decision and final language.
- Do not automate persuasion around employment consequences.
- For agents, define permissions, audit trails and stop conditions.
- Protect provenance for leader messages and sensitive content.

Run a short after-action review:

PROMPT	QUESTION
Expected	What did we intend to happen?
Observed	What happened, and what evidence supports that?
Surprise	Which signal or assumption did we miss?
Conditions	What helped or constrained the outcome?
Change	What changes in process, tool or governance?
Verification	Who owns the change, and when will it be tested?

Trust audit

For any major recommendation, ask what mechanism is operating, which discipline helps explain it, what the strongest evidence is, where the idea fails, and under what organisational conditions it applies.

IN PRACTICE

AI-assisted manager FAQs

A change team uses AI to turn a long project paper into 80 manager questions. The output looks comprehensive. Several answers invent policy detail, and the volume buries the managers.

A supervised process works differently. Humans identify the ten unavoidable questions, verify decision boundaries and give AI approved source material. AI proposes variants and missing questions. A subject-matter owner verifies each answer. The final pack is shorter, sourced and linked to a live update page. AI expands the team’s view; judgement controls the product.

A mature function publishes less and advises earlier.

MONDAY-MORNING CHECK

- ☐ Are decision, factual, approval and publishing owners distinct and clear?
- ☐ Is governance proportionate to risk?
- ☐ Does one authoritative source exist for each material issue?
- ☐ Can routine work move without executive approval?
- ☐ Are corrections, versions and records managed?
- ☐ Is AI use approved, supervised, source-checked and auditable?
- ☐ What communication debt is being created?
- ☐ What system change will the next after-action review verify?

SOURCES Norman (2013); Mollick (2024); Gawande (2009); Weick and Sutcliffe (2007); NIST (2024); IoIC (2026); Field (2026).

Pocket tools

Copy these into working documents, or print the pages you use most.

A. Monday-morning triage

PROMPT	WORKING NOTE
What changed?	
Who is affected first?	
What decision or behaviour is required?	
What is preventing it?	
What evidence do we have?	
Is communication the primary intervention?	
What is the smallest responsible next step?	

B. One-page communication brief

PROMPT

WORKING NOTE

Problem. What is happening, and why is communication being considered?

Outcome. What observable understanding, action or behaviour is required?

Audience. Who is affected, with what access, concerns, barriers and relevance needs?

Decision. What is decided, open, constrained and owned?

Governing answer. What one sentence has to survive?

Evidence. What is the strongest proof, and what is the source?

Human consequence. What does this mean for people?

Interventions. Communication plus what operational support?

Sequence. Who hears what, from whom, and when?

Listening. What questions, signals and measures will be monitored?

Next decision. How will feedback or data change the plan?

C. Sensitive-message trust check

- Is every material claim supportable?
- Are fact, forecast and commitment separated?
- Is the impact acknowledged plainly?
- Is the process described accurately?
- Are unknowns visible?
- Are support and the next update clear?
- Would the recipient feel misled once they learn more?

D. Publish check

- Does the opening contain the news or the answer?
- Can affected people identify themselves?
- Are dates, numbers and status accurate?
- Is it clear what is decided, open, changing and staying?
- Is the human consequence visible?
- Is the action possible and easy to find?
- Does the sender have authority and credibility?
- Have affected people been told first?
- Can managers answer the next question?
- Is there a private route for sensitive questions?
- Could any sentence look misleading or callous quoted alone?
- Is the next update or review point clear?

E. Manager conversation card

- State what is happening in one sentence.
- Explain what it means for this team.
- Say what is known, open and not changing.
- Invite questions before defending the decision.
- Answer within your authority. Do not guess.
- Record what you could not answer.
- Explain action, support and the next update.
- Escalate new harm, contradiction or operational friction.

F. Listening session guide

- State the purpose, and what the input can influence.
- Ask for concrete examples and workarounds.
- Probe impact without leading the answer.
- Separate fact from interpretation.
- Do not promise an answer in the room.
- Summarise what you heard.
- Explain how themes will be analysed and when the loop will close.

G. Measurement ladder

- Did the intended people encounter it?
- Did they notice it?
- Did they understand the material point?
- Could managers and employees act?
- Did the relevant behaviour change?
- Did service, risk, safety or performance improve?
- Was trust strengthened or weakened?
- What does the organisation have to change next?

H. After-action review

PROMPT	WORKING NOTE
What was expected?	
What happened?	
What evidence supports that?	
What surprised us?	
Which assumption failed?	
What helped?	
What changes in process, tool or governance?	
Who owns it, and when will it be verified?	

I. Transfer test card

- What problem does this model help explain?
- What evidence supports it?
- What changes inside an employment relationship?
- Where does it break down?
- What would make using it manipulative or unfair?
- What operational condition changes the answer?
- How will we know whether it helped?

Expert notes and evidence base

This guide uses research, authoritative guidance and well-published practice for different jobs. Peer-reviewed research helps explain recurring mechanisms. Government and professional guidance establishes obligations or a practical floor. Practitioners contribute craft, which has to be adapted ethically to the employment relationship.

No single model explains an organisation. Use the ideas as lenses. Check the evidence, context, power relationship and limits before applying them.

This is communication guidance. It is not legal, industrial, privacy, safety, cyber-security, clinical or financial advice. Consequential work needs current specialist advice and accountable decision-makers.

EXPERT OR SOURCE	WHY IT REMAINS USEFUL
Karl Weick	Sensemaking under ambiguity: people build plausible accounts from cues, identity and action.
Amy Edmondson	Psychological safety: learning depends on people being able to speak about problems without interpersonal punishment.
Edgar Schein	Culture: repeated behaviour, attention and incentives reveal deeper assumptions.
Daniel Kahneman	Fast and effortful judgement: make material meaning easy to notice, and test your assumptions.
Michie, van Stralen and West	COM-B: behaviour depends on capability, opportunity and motivation.

EXPERT OR SOURCE	WHY IT REMAINS USEFUL
Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein	Choice architecture: remove friction and place useful prompts where action happens.
Chip and Dan Heath	Memorable ideas and change: find the core, make it concrete, credible and easier to act on.
Barbara Minto	Answer-first logic: reduce reader effort without hiding consequence.
Donald Norman	Human-centred design: do not blame users for system friction and weak feedback.
Jeff Hiatt and Prosci	ADKAR: diagnose whether awareness, desire, knowledge, ability or reinforcement is weak.
John Kotter	Change momentum: urgency, coalition, direction and repeated evidence matter.
W. Timothy Coombs	Crisis response: match communication to perceived responsibility and evidence.
CDC CERC	Emergency communication: be first, right, credible, empathetic, actionable and respectful.
Robert Cialdini	Influence: persuasion helps action, and internal power can turn it into coercion.
Ann Handley	Writing: useful, human, clear and specific beats corporate performance.
Andy Crestodina	Content strategy: answer the audience's questions and make information findable.
Ethan Mollick	AI at work: a supervised collaborator, not an authority or a substitute for judgement.
ICRH Europe	Internal communication value: performance, alignment, culture, engagement and change.
Rachel Miller	Relevance, strategy and change communication as strategic leadership practice.
IoIC and Gallagher research	Trust, leadership, alignment, AI, psychological safety and employee experience.

Selected sources

- Australian Government Style Manual. (current online edition). *Clear language, accessibility and inclusive content guidance*. Digital Transformation Agency, Australian Government.
- Apple. (2021-current). *Mail Privacy Protection and Privacy*. Apple Privacy documentation.
- Cialdini, R. B. (2021). *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, new and expanded edition. Harper Business.
- Colquitt, J. A. et al. (2001). Justice at the millennium: a meta-analytic review of 25 years of organizational justice research. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86(3), 425-445.
- Coombs, W. T. (2007). Protecting organization reputations during a crisis: the development and application of situational crisis communication theory. *Corporate Reputation Review*, 10(3), 163-176.
- Crestodina, A. (2022). *Content Chemistry: The Illustrated Handbook for Content Marketing*, 6th edition. Orbit Media Studios.
- Daft, R. L. and Lengel, R. H. (1986). Organizational information requirements, media richness and structural design. *Management Science*, 32(5), 554-571.
- Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(2), 350-383.
- Field, J. (2026). *Navigating the internal communication identity crisis in 2026*. Redefining Communications.
- Gawande, A. (2009). *The Checklist Manifesto*. Metropolitan Books.
- Handley, A. (2022). *Everybody Writes*, 2nd edition. Wiley.
- Heath, C. and Heath, D. (2007). *Made to Stick*. Random House.
- Heath, C. and Heath, D. (2010). *Switch*. Broadway Books.
- Hiatt, J. M. (2006). *ADKAR: A Model for Change in Business, Government and our Community*. Prosci.
- Gallagher. (2026). *Employee Communications Report: State of the Sector 2025/26*. Arthur J. Gallagher & Co.

- Institute of Internal Communication. (2026). *IC Index 2026: The Reality Check*. IoIC with Ipsos Karian and Box. Survey of 5,000 UK employees in organisations of 500 or more.
- Internal Communication Research Hub Europe. (2025). *Valuing Internal Communication*. PR Academy. Contributors include Kevin Ruck, Jenni Field, Rachel Miller, Liam FitzPatrick and Mats Heide.
- Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Kotter, J. P. (1996). *Leading Change*. Harvard Business School Press.
- Locke, E. A. and Latham, G. P. (2002). Building a practically useful theory of goal setting and task motivation. *American Psychologist*, 57(9), 705-717.
- Mayer, R. C., Davis, J. H. and Schoorman, F. D. (1995). An integrative model of organizational trust. *Academy of Management Review*, 20(3), 709-734.
- Michie, S., van Stralen, M. M. and West, R. (2011). The behaviour change wheel: a new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions. *Implementation Science*, 6:42.
- Miller, R. (2024). *Internal Communication Strategy: Design, develop and transform your organizational communication*. Kogan Page.
- Miller, R. (2026). *Successful Change Communication: How to inform, involve and inspire employees*. Kogan Page.
- Minto, B. (2009). *The Pyramid Principle*, 3rd edition. Financial Times Prentice Hall.
- Mollick, E. (2024). *Co-Intelligence: Living and Working with AI*. Portfolio.
- Nielsen Norman Group. Intranet, information scent, usability and content research.
- NIST. (2024). *Artificial Intelligence Risk Management Framework: Generative Artificial Intelligence Profile*. National Institute of Standards and Technology.
- Norman, D. A. (2013). *The Design of Everyday Things*, revised and expanded edition. Basic Books.
- Prosci. ADKAR model and change management practice resources.
- Ruck, K. (2025). An integrated evaluation framework for internal communication. PR Academy / AMEC.
- Ruck, K. and Flegg, M. (2026). *Exploring Internal Communication: Towards Dialogue in the Workplace*, 5th edition. Routledge.
- Schein, E. H. and Schein, P. (2016). *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 5th edition. Wiley.

- Thaler, R. H. and Sunstein, C. R. (2008; final edition 2021). *Nudge*. Yale University Press / Penguin.
- Tourish, D. and Robson, P. (2006). Sensemaking and the distortion of critical upward communication in organizations. *Journal of Management Studies*, 43(4), 711-730.
- Tversky, A. and Kahneman, D. (1974). Judgment under uncertainty: heuristics and biases. *Science*, 185(4157), 1124-1131.
- US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2018-current online chapters). *Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication Manual*.
- Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Sage.
- Weick, K. E. and Sutcliffe, K. M. (2007). *Managing the Unexpected*, 2nd edition. Jossey-Bass.
- Weick, K. E., Sutcliffe, K. M. and Obstfeld, D. (2005). Organizing and the process of sensemaking. *Organization Science*, 16(4), 409-421.
- Wiebe, J. Copy Hackers / voice-of-customer research practice.

Final doctrine

Internal communication should help people understand reality and navigate it with dignity.

- Understand the problem before you publish.
- Borrow carefully. Transfer ideas only after testing their limits.
- Name the outcome before you name the channel.
- Put the answer first. Context can follow.
- Reassure with evidence.
- Let leaders explain their own decisions.
- Treat managers as interpreters, not distribution points.
- Make relevance explicit: enterprise, local, me.
- Measure understanding, ability, adoption and impact, not attention alone.
- Treat concern as information.
- Protect reputation with the truth.
- Make uncertainty, consequence, action and ownership clear.
- Listen for what the organisation needs to change next.
- Use AI to expand thinking, not accountability.
- Publish less. Advise earlier. Learn faster.

About this guide

I am Oscar Hillerstrom. I work in internal and change communications across banking, major infrastructure, government and climate technology, and I also work as a live interviewer, which turns out to be the same job on a different night.

ChangeComms is my practice. It helps organisations make complex change clear enough for decisions, trust and action.

If you are in the middle of one of these and want a second opinion on the diagnosis, send it over and I will tell you what I would do.

changecomms.cc

oscar@changecomms.cc

C H A N G E C O M M S