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"If it's not practical,
it doesn't get published."

The first few weeks in a new role are the most important time to set the foundations for success.

Former communication directors Jacqui Hitt and Helen Coley-Smith give their feedback to a guide to the first 90 days on the job by Sony Europe's Jane Sparrow.

The 12-point guide to your first 90 days as a communication director

1. Get to know key stakeholders

Use a variety of techniques such as one-to-one meetings and roundtables to understand more about your stakeholders' needs, views of communication and attitudes. Go cross-level, cross-attitude and talk to people one level below the board. Ask agencies and consultancies that the company has used recently to talk about key stakeholder needs and aspirations.

Coley-Smith: "Don't just have one initial meeting but go back fairly quickly with something concrete to say or ask. If not, you'll get sucked into other things and it'll be six months before you see key stakeholders again, losing you credibility."

Hitt: "Thinking about the structure of your questions is critical. Have a very clear blueprint of what you're going to ask people so you get the information you need to understand their priorities. If you can't meet people face-to-face, use similar dialogue structures whether you talk via e-mail, video-conferencing or conference calls."

2. Understand business goals

Find out as much as possible about the aims, objectives, strategies, key issues and priorities within the organization. Identify where communication has the biggest potential return on investment. Read annual reports, intranet sites, past newsletters and other communication. How effective has communication been in the past? Ask external organizations for their view of the company and its priorities, get their view on quick wins, organization strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

Coley-Smith: "If you don't do this, you're risking your work and company resources on things which aren't contributing to the bottom line. If you're not familiar with business priorities, you may be talking at cross purposes with senior managers."

Hitt: "Be strategic about your priorities. Make a judgement of what is really key and who you really need to speak to – it may be 15 out of 150 people. Getting external views should be lower down the list because although they'll give you an a valuable view, they may have their own agenda. You need to understand how you think the land lies before you start taking on other people's."

3. Identify movers and shakers

Ask yourself who the influencers are? Where do key stakeholders go for council and advice? To whom do they listen? Once you've identified these people, build relationships with them, ask their views and position your work with them.

Coley-Smith: "They may not be the people at the top of the organizational chart. They're very often very capable operational people whose next move will be into a fairly influential job. They're keen to help because their own personal agenda is about demonstrating their own competence. Look out for program and project managers."

Hitt: "Just because someone's got an important title doesn't mean they're pivotal. Check out their track record and how well they're respected."

4. Understand external strategy

Internal and external communication strategies need to be aligned so the

corporate communication director is a key stakeholder to understand. Meet other members of the team, read external communication strategies and plans and ask about their priorities for the future.

Coley-Smith: "My experience is that it's as important to be linked with program and project managers as it is with the senior team and HR."

Hitt: "It really varies by organization how closely dovetailed internal and external communication are. I think they have to be linked to each other and cognisant of what's going on, but not necessarily reflect each other the whole time. By its nature external communication doesn't delve into the organizational depths that you have to internally."

5. Get to know external markets

Understand the markets and external environment in which the company operates. Study brand and customer research, talk to account managers or better still, go and visit a selection of customers and get the outside/in view.

Coley-Smith: "This is especially important if you're in a high pressure environment affected by a competitive market. It creates pressure on margins which in turn influence the internal climate and allocation of resources. Understanding why senior managers make the changes they do in response to the external market is important for your own understanding of why you're being asked to do what you do. It's also important for maintaining credibility."

Hitt: "You can't do your job unless you know where your customers are coming

from. Without that empathy you won't understand the business and the whole chain of activity that supports it, so arguably you wouldn't be supporting the business in delivering what it needs to deliver. In some ways this has an equal importance with understanding key stakeholders."

6. Find out how you will be measured

Ask your boss how he/she will know that you've been successful. Get a clear understanding of how you will be measured so that you can focus your efforts accordingly. Once you understand business priorities and stakeholder needs, show you're proactive and you know your profession by suggesting other measures that you believe will be important.

Coley-Smith: "It's important to watch out for the unspoken way in which you're being measured. Look out for signals such as what your boss and their boss say and do and what they look for in you. Those things may override what's written down in a job description. Being politically aware – which you have to be as a comms director – is as important as everything else here."

Hitt: "I find this point too passive. Comms directors should be more proactive about how they want to be measured. They shouldn't be just asking the organization how they're going to be measured, but advising them and sooner rather than later."

7. Assess communication issues

Executing the other 12 points will give you a good indication of communication issues and opportunities. In addition:

- Ask your team to present the current communication strategy.
- Study data from employee opinion surveys, communication surveys and measurements. Look for issues, opportunities and benchmarks.
- Conduct a "quick" media audit. Find out what channels exist to communicate which messages, at what frequency.
- Ask which are the most valuable channels during other formal and informal conversations with people.

Coley-Smith: "Even if you don't like what's in place, don't presume you can chuck it out and start again. By simply dispensing with it, you might provoke a 'who the hell are you?' reaction."

Hitt: "Formal media audits are red

herrings. You can pinpoint the issues much more quickly in conversations with people."

8. Manage expectations

Managing expectations about what you will and will not deliver immediately helps you build and protect credibility. Your stakeholders will have different views about what you will deliver and what your priorities will be. Manage these from the start by explaining what people can expect to see first and what will come later. If you have stakeholders that disagree with your priorities talk them through your reasons and gain their buy-in. If you can see a key stakeholder has a hot issue, find a way of helping them resolve it, quickly.

Coley-Smith: "You have to be strong weighing up where you think you add value and where you don't. A lot of the time it's down to personal chemistry and personal relationships. You can be the best in your field but if they don't like you, you'll never build up your chemistry."

Hitt: "This is all about organizational politics, the toughest dimension of the lot. It comes back to a careful balancing of priorities and tensions. You can't achieve everything but equally you can't afford to ignore those people who shout the loudest. As a comms director, navigating through that is probably one of the single biggest challenges. Those that do it well have exceptionally good management relationship skills and are able to build rapport and influence while delivering at the same time. Those who are less successful get bogged down in the tactical nature of what they're doing, rather than looking further ahead."

9. Build your virtual team

Whether you have a dedicated team or are practicing alone, your virtual team will help you succeed. Identify people from HR, marketing, sales and new media groups to be part of your virtual team. Build networks across the business that you can engage with to give you input, act as sounding boards and help implement ideas locally. Consider what effective networks exist such as local employee consultation committees and add to these with change or communication champion programs.

Hitt: "Networks are vital and can be hugely powerful in the right context but they have to have a strategy behind them – what's the intention of the network and

how are you going to deliver it. Are they informal sounding boards? Or do people need to do something like deliver an action or champion an initiative? Or are you trying to build a common/shared capability?"

10. Find and achieve quick wins

Quick wins will help you signal immediate change. Pick areas that will have a positive impact on business priorities and the bottom line. Once you have achieved the quick win, make sure all your stakeholders know about it!

Coley-Smith: "You need to build this into your initial meetings with stakeholders. Ask them what would be a quick win and then see if you can deliver it."

Hitt: "It's better to have a longer term vision and plan and deliver against it, than to simply have a series of quick wins."

11. Be visible across the organization

Talk to, and be seen by, as many people as possible. Ask to attend department meetings to introduce yourself and gather views. Talk to people at the coffee machine. Walk around and introduce yourself to others.

Coley-Smith: "Talking to people from top to bottom and side to side is the lifeblood of a comms person. Don't concentrate on senior management and presume you know what everyone else is thinking. You can do an OK job working with your team in the comfort of your office, but if you want to do a fantastic one then do what Sparrow's saying."

Hitt: "Don't be invisible or overexpose yourself. It's about balance – having the conversations and then delivering."

12. Make an effort to be sociable

Find out what after-hours social events, formal events and activities are taking place. Attend as many as possible and listen to the attitudes and issues that are top of people's minds.

Coley-Smith: "I agree with this, but it depends on how much politics you can take. Socializing in moderation is OK too."

Hitt: "This is the icing on the cake if you enjoy socializing. But the other 11 points are much more crucial to your success and that of the business."

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