



# Communication Dashboards

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Dashboards have become a more common tool in communication and engagement, particularly with the rise of measurement.

Also known as scorecards, scoreboards, consols and so on, these instruments are now used by people in a variety of functions to communicate a range of business issues including company culture, employee engagement, communication performance, change readiness and progress, strategy progress and performance, employer branding, internal brand engagement and so on.

Here's a quick overview of dashboards, comprising :

- what is a dashboard ?
- why use a dashboard ?
- which measures to include ?
- deciding the dashboard's components
- features of effective dashboards
- traffic light systems
- setting parameters
- maintenance
- ownership
- applications for use
- how to create a dashboard
- benefits of dashboards
- conclusion.

## **What is a dashboard ?**

A dashboard is essentially a visual device for communicating progress and performance, in a simple and impactful way. The thinking that goes behind dashboards is often complex but their value is in how attractive and simple they are. As a result, they can cut through the noise and information overload so many employees suffer from today.

## Why use a dashboard ?

Imagine always driving a car without the aid of a dashboard. At some point, you'd either run out of petrol, break the speed limit or, worse, continue driving long after it was safe to do so. To prevent this from happening, a car dashboard offers three types of information :

1. Critical information - referred to as you drive (eg the petrol gauge, the speedometer)
2. Primary information - necessary for safe driving but only referred to when operational ranges are exceeded (eg low oil, high engine temperature)
3. Secondary information - data that's good to have (a clock or a temperature gauge).

## Which measures to include ?

When considering a communications dashboard, you should focus on the first two types of information, namely :

- critical data that will be referred to constantly, and
- primary information which monitors specific parameters so that any problems can be flagged immediately.

If our aim were to scale a mountain, our objective would be to reach the top. The strategy for reaching our objective might be 'By using the South East route; to establish a base camp at a certain altitude and to set up two further camps at fixed points'. Whereas our tactical plan for executing the strategy would comprise all the logistics regarding the team, the necessary equipment, the training required, an emergency plan, a clear delineation of duties and such like.

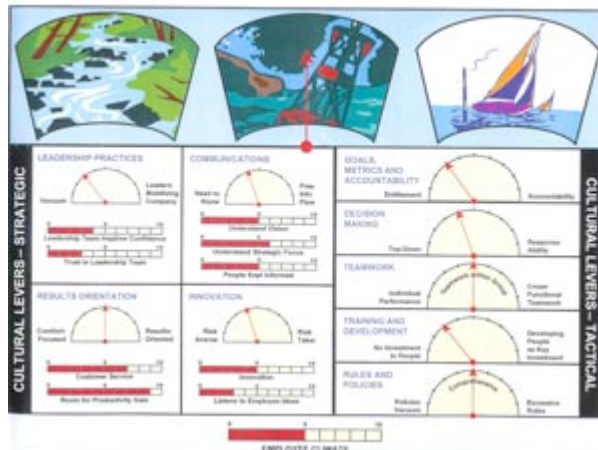
We'd then focus on executing the *tactical* plan rather than on the strategy or objective itself. In other words, providing we were to stick to the plan, we'd execute the strategy and achieve our objective in the process. However, we'd need to check we were still on course, adhering to the tactics and not deviating at any point.

In the same way, communication dashboards don't display our objectives but rather they show whether we are still on track ...

ie that we're keeping to our tactics without breaching any of the set parameters we believe are critical to our success.

As long as our tactics are capable of delivering our strategy, we only need to focus on measuring the efficacy of our communications programme because, if the programme is successful, we'll successfully execute the strategy that will deliver our objectives.

## Deciding the dashboard's components



A car's dashboard needs to display information about all aspects of the car but, as there's only so much room available, displaying everything would get too cluttered so some information needs to be omitted. So it is with communications dashboards. Decisions therefore have to be made about what gets displayed (and what doesn't).

To help make that choice, aim to focus on the following two principles :

1. Only include measurements that are critical to – or aligned with - the organisation's key objectives
2. Develop the dashboard with input from people throughout your organisation so that the end result shows a range of metrics and viewpoints.

Experts recommend having no more than 5-8 gauges on a dashboard. Any more and the dashboard's real estate will become too cluttered.

If your executive team want to measure more than eight metrics, consider maintaining a separate dashboard for them alone, while distributing a simplified version for the majority of your staff.

### Features of effective dashboards

Dashboards are only effective if they're seen by their intended audience but, luckily, they can be hosted in a number of ways; for example, on an intranet, in PowerPoint, on a CD ROM, etc. Given the interactive nature of some of these host media, it means that dashboards can be either static or interactive in nature.

Successful dashboards tend to :

- Be highly designed and branded
- Contain a limited amount of key information
- Demonstrate data clearly and immediately
- Be updated regularly
- Be shared openly across the business
- Be owned by a mixture of senior people and operational teams
- Be integrated to an extent into performance management.

## **Traffic light systems**

To give your dashboard's data real impact, use a simple graphic - such as a traffic light system - to convey basic information at a glance. For example :

- White (no action needed)
- Green (situation normal)
- Amber (be on alert)
- Red (action required).

## **Setting parameters**

However, there is an issue with traffic lights : it is in deciding at what point each status should change (eg from green to amber). If your parameters are over-sensitive, your dashboards will flash red too quickly; if they aren't sensitive enough, you won't receive feedback soon enough to take avoiding action.

The trick is to establish meaningful parameters for each issue you wish to measure.

## **Maintenance**

For your dashboard to be effective, not only must parameters be appropriate but assessments must be made with suitable frequency. Too often and results will lose meaning; too seldom and, again, news may arrive too late to prevent problems arising.

Commonly, dashboards are updated on a quarterly basis - though naturally this depends upon the metrics you are monitoring.

## **Ownership**

It's important that all dashboards are monitored and maintained correctly so assign this responsibility to someone who can decide which measures to include, how often to check results and when to update feedback.

Be warned - dashboards are addictive so, once introduced to an organisation, they'll probably attract widespread support (great) along with multiple requests to add just one more dial (not so good). Hence the need for an dashboard 'editor'.

## **Applications for use**

Communication dashboards can be applied to just about any area of communication; for example, internal communication, corporate communication, public relations and investor relations. Consequently, they have many potential uses. However, dashboards are at their most beneficial when they measure a combination of :

- Output-based metrics (which record the level of programme activity carried out)
- Impact-based metrics (which measure the degree to which the communications programme is affecting attitude or awareness)

- Outcome-based metrics (which assess the degree to which behaviour has changed as a result of attitudinal change).

To give some examples of the versatility of this tool :

- A large utilities company decided to embark on a culture change programme; they used a culture dashboard to show the progress being made on their journey of cultural change.
- The communication team for a well-known retailer had to measure communication and engagement performance, then demonstrate the progress in performance internal communication had effected. They used a dashboard to illustrate the value that internal communication had added to the delivery of the company's strategy and performance.

### **How to create a dashboard**

Here's how to go about developing a dashboard in 10 easy steps:

1. Agree why you want to communicate information in this way
2. Agree what you want to communicate and who your key stakeholders are
3. Agree what kinds of conversations you want to have with stakeholders once you have your dashboard
4. Agree how it will be used in practice (will it for instance be a part of performance management over time?)
5. Agree how it will function in practice (technology used etc.)
6. Agree who will own it and how it will be kept 'alive'
7. Commission design (from an internal team or design agency) and possibly consultancy support
8. Design the framework and test it on stakeholders
9. Ensure that the information links to other key management information where possible – both in what you're communicating and how
10. Populate the dashboard with information (this can be quantitative and/or qualitative) – you may have some existing information and need to carry out/commission new research to do this.

### **Benefits of dashboards**

- They can change the kinds of conversations you have with stakeholders - to more focused, strategic discussion
- They can elevate you to the same status as other, more valued disciplines
- They can cut through language and cultural boundaries
- They're visually more interesting than the written word or data, so more likely to catch attention, intrigue and therefore engage stakeholders
- The process of creating them can help achieve far greater clarity than traditional ways of communicating similar information
- They should be easy to update, rather than having to start all over again
- They blend design creativity with factual information, and so can be fun to put together.

## **Conclusion**

The key message here is that dashboards can be really powerful - having strategic impact, encouraging open communication and changing the conversations you have with your stakeholders - while also being fun to create.

As communication strategy programmes become increasingly complex and multi-faceted, so too must the means used to measure their success. In the past, the techniques used to measure aspects of communication have lagged behind the disciplines themselves but dashboards offer a quick, simple and effective solution to this problem so have huge potential for the future.

## **Contacts**

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