

Employee communicators drive idea sharing and make a difference for their companies

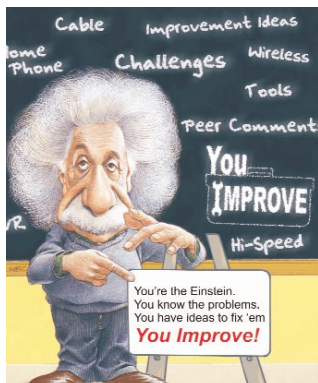
Meet Christa Semko, Ellen Rich, Nicola Hanson and Crystal Chokshi. Four employee communication professionals – two Canadian, two American – who are on the frontlines of performance improvement in their respective companies.

What makes them special? All four communicators have been engaged in facilitating and supporting idea sharing programs in their companies. Idea sharing is one of the principal ways organizations improve and is one of 10 employee communication traits identified by Motiv8 Communications as key drivers of organizational performance excellence.

The story that follows reveals how communicators at a cable communications giant, a computer industry icon and a heavy equipment leader are getting in the game and making a performance difference for their respective companies.

'You Improve' challenges employee ingenuity at Rogers

Nicola Hanson is a communications manager for Rogers Communications, Inc. The largest communications provider in Canada, Rogers provides TV, internet and wireless services. Nicola worked in the TV business before becoming a communications manager for a large Rogers call center operation four years ago. She was part of a team that developed an online suggestion program called "You Improve" that proved to be an instant hit with employees. Today, the web-based program has been expanded to 12,000 customer-facing Rogers employees and Nicola manages it from her Toronto office.



"You Improve has two components to it – a basic idea and suggestion section and a special Challenge section,"

notes Nicola. "The general ideas submission section consists of five categories covering customer, business and employee topics. The Challenge section targets specific employee audiences, calling upon the ingenuity and creativity of employees who have specific competencies to solve challenging problems within a specified timeframe."

Employees rise to 'The Challenge'

One example of how Challenge works: A large call center was receiving a high volume of technical support calls from people using programs like Microsoft Outlook to receive their e-mail. Management wanted more customers using web mail as there are fewer problems. A number of good ideas were offered by employees and several were adopted.

Rogers has experienced definite improvements in customer service and lower cost from You Improve, says Nicola, and she believes that results from a recently concluded employee engagement survey will be improved thanks in part to the impact of You Improve.

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Announcing the COMMUNICATING FOR IMPACT Awards

...Recognizing good ideas in employee communications
See page 5 for details

10 employee communication traits of high performing organizations

Motiv8 Communications has identified 10 employee communication traits that drive improved business performance in high performing organizations.

- Encourage cross-department collaboration
- Create openness and an idea sharing culture
- Listen well and respond to employee needs, concerns
- Lead and emphasize face-to-face communications
- Deal with reality, telling it like it is
- Build employee awareness and involvement in serving customers
- Achieve clarity in strategy, messages and goals
- Strive for simplicity in content; provide context for change
- Connect the dots between the job, goals and customer needs
- Recognize good work and build momentum for winning.

See the full article at:
http://www.motiv8comm.com/docs/Ideas_aug2007.pdf

The "You Improve" program has proven to be a big hit with employees at Rogers Communications

Idea sharing

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Nicola says that "You Improve generates about 1,200 ideas a month and prizes are awarded to employees who see their idea adopted." One of the reasons the program works so well, Nicola says, is that innovation is one of four key core corporate goals, keeping the subject front and center on radar screens. "You Improve provides employees with a great outlet for supporting this key business driver area (innovation) for the company," she points out.

"When I stay in touch with people, and follow up with them, that sends a signal the company cares about employees and their ideas, and keeps them motivated to continue their active participation in the future."

– Nicola Hanson, Rogers

Another reason the program works is Nicola's untiring effort to close the loop with employees who submit ideas. "Listening and feedback are important parts of my job," she says. "When I stay in touch with people, and follow up with them, that sends a signal the company cares about employees and their ideas, and keeps them motivated to continue their active participation in the future."

Recently, Nicola sat in on a major business town hall meeting where an employee asked a question about You Improve and made some favorable comments about it. "It's gratifying to see that You Improve is so visible with our employees," she says. "Throughout a career in communications you wonder if you are reaching people through your efforts, but in managing You Improve I definitely feel I'm making a contribution that matters."



EmployeeStorm proves highly popular at computer maker Dell

EmployeeStorm is the web-based, company-wide employee idea program for Dell Inc., Round Rock, Texas, a company that is one of the world's best known computer makers. True to its name, it has taken Dell by storm and has become well integrated into Dell operations and culture.

"On a typical day about 45% of our workers participate in EmployeeStorm discussions," says Christa Semko, internal communications advisor, who recently took the reins for management of the site from Ellen Rich, HR communications manager. As one of her current job duties, Ellen serves as a liaison between Christa and HR on EmployeeStorm ideas and communication issues.

Over 4,000 ideas so far on EmployeeStorm

The EmployeeStorm web site is an offshoot of IdeaStorm, a brainstorming and discussion platform launched a few years ago by Dell to get customer feedback on Dell products and services. EmployeeStorm gives the Dell workforce of approximately 80,000 the opportunity to post and discuss ideas on topics that range from product upgrades and customer service to company policies and other HR topics.

"Over 4,000 ideas have been submitted to EmployeeStorm so far, and several hundred of them have been adopted," says Ellen. "Employees also value the site because it gives them an outlet for speaking candidly about ideas for improving the business and work environment."

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The screenshot shows the 'You Improve' website interface. At the top left is the 'You IMPROVE' logo. On the right, there is a 'Français' link and the 'ROGERS' logo. Below the logo is a navigation bar with 'Administration' and 'Signed in as Nicola Hanson'. Underneath the navigation bar are links for 'Home', 'Submit Improvement Idea', 'Respond to Challenges', 'Browse Ideas & Challenge Responses', 'My Ideas & Responses', and 'Me'. The main content area features a quote by Albert Einstein: "You can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them." Below the quote is a section titled "Check the PODCAST with information on the new 'YOU IMPROVE' features!" with a link to "View Podcast here!". To the right is a "Quick Links" section with links to "Browse Ideas and Responses from other Employees", "Track MY Ideas and Challenge Responses", "Search Ideas and Challenge Responses", "Innovation Club Page", and "About YOU IMPROVE". At the bottom, there are two main sections: "Improvement Ideas" with a "SUBMIT" button and "Respond to a YOU IMPROVE Challenge" with a "RESPOND" button and a description of the challenge process.

The Challenge section on the Rogers website, an innovation itself, calls upon the ingenuity and creativity of employees who have specific competencies to solve challenging problems within a specified timeframe.

Idea sharing

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Employees can submit ideas in both customer and employee-related categories. "Our employees not only develop and build our products, they are customers of our products, too," says Christa. "Their ability to experience both the manufacture and user sides of Dell products makes employee ideas and insights especially valuable."

"Make sure you have a solid back-end process in place for evaluation of ideas, implementation and response...and make sure you have a well-thought-out user policy for the site which sets the right tone for its use."

– Ellen Rich, Dell Inc.

One idea implemented through EmployeeStorm resulted in release of a laptop with design features specially tailored to users of the popular online game World of Warcraft. Meanwhile, suggestions on the employee side cover subjects that range from cafeteria food enhancements to ideas around health care benefits, career development, employee engagement, and employee policies.

Dell uses EmployeeStorm's "Lightning Rod" feature to get fast inputs from employees on hot problems that need quick resolution. "We also use it as a kind of a spot survey tool to get at employee thinking on different kinds of business, key initiative or employee issues," Ellen says.

Employees vote on ideas

One of the most interesting features of EmployeeStorm is that employees can vote on the perceived value of the ideas that are submitted. "We get some pretty interesting discussions going on some of these ideas," says Christa who, along with Ellen, monitors activity on the site.

Ellen says the site's early success was made easier because social networking was already part of the Dell culture when EmployeeStorm was begun. "We have nine internal blogs in use," she says. "My advice

to communicators out there considering construction and use of a site like this is to start a blog first – so you can get employees used to the idea of freely using their names without fear as they engage in intranet conversations with their co-workers and leadership. A site like EmployeeStorm can easily fail if you haven't laid a sound groundwork for online social interaction and make sure you have a solid back-end process in place for evaluation of ideas, implementation and response."

More advice from Ellen: "Working closely with IT is pretty much a given. But make sure you involve HR in the project upfront and get their support and involvement. That's a vital and important step on the road to success. Also, make sure you have a well-thought-out user policy for the site which sets the right tone for its use."

EmployeeStorm continues to build its credibility in Dell and some employees now view it as a personal development stepping stone. "They'd like to see a process where they and their adopted ideas get ever more visibility with management," says Christa. "They see EmployeeStorm as not only helping the company but also helping their own careers and networks at Dell."

"It really gives me a warm and fuzzy feeling to know I'm truly making a difference through this job – everyday."

– Christa Semko, Dell Inc.

A new form of internal communication

What's the business benefit to Dell from EmployeeStorm? "Social media has become an established way of communicating with employees here that, in some cases, is replacing or reducing some of the traditional communication approaches like publications with more results focused communication that better meets employee needs and interests," says Christa. "In today's fast paced world of business, social media gives us the chance to read and react to change faster, and that translates into competitive advantage."

Christa has spent her whole corporate career in employee communications and her EmployeeStorm role is a departure from the more traditional jobs she has held in the past. "I'm in a unique position as a facilitator for idea sharing for the company," she

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The technology behind idea web sites

For readers curious about the technology supporting the idea sharing web sites, here's the platforms each of the sites use:

- Rogers links their portals software developed by Mind Matters. Says Nicola Hanson of Rogers: "Mind Matters has a very dynamic software that not only allows us to create the kind of innovation environment we wanted for our staff, but it also has an incredible reporting capacity that allows us to qualify and quantify the results from the program. It's really a good system for the innovators as well as the program managers."
- Dell's EmployeeStorm works off a Salesforce.com platform. Dell also uses SharePoint 2007 extensively for its social media needs.
- Finning uses Dot Net Nuke as the platform for its intranet. "While it doesn't offer us a lot of technological features and we have to do many things manually, it's fairly easy to use," says Finning's Crystal Chokshi. "That said, we are in the midst of an intranet revitalization project, and we're working on transitioning to Microsoft SharePoint."

Idea sharing

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comments. "It's so gratifying to see so many ideas come through the system and get adopted and make a performance impact for Dell. It really gives me a warm and fuzzy feeling to know I'm truly making a difference through this job -- everyday."

Finning (Canada)'s Big Ideas program borne out of business necessity

As the economy continued to decline in 2008, Finning (Canada), headquartered in Edmonton, Alberta, had to make some tough decisions regarding cost reduction. Finning's senior management determined it needed to step up communications with its workforce during this critical period and also do a better job of tapping into employee ideas for enhancing business performance.

This strategy fueled creation of Big Ideas, a program in which senior leaders venture to Finning's far-flung operations to meet with random groups of employees and, basically, pick their brains about what's working well and what could be done better.

The program began in September 2008. As an example of how serious and valuable

"We're looking for themes and trends that we can translate into actionable items. Then, my team works with the executive to put together a response. That may be as simple as an intranet update or as complete as a policy change with a communication plan to support it."
— Crystal Chokshi, Finning

management finds the program, 25 meetings have been held across Finning sites (spread throughout two provinces and two territories) since the program began. "The meetings last about two hours; they start with a few questions and then discussion flows from there," says Crystal



Finning Canada sells and provides customer support for Caterpillar equipment and engines throughout much of western Canada.

Chokshi, internal communications advisor. "The president and the vice president of human resources got the ball rolling for the program last fall and now other members of the senior leadership team are out listening to employees." Safety, operational excellence and cost reduction are the prime business topics, but informal discussion covers a broad range of issues.

A local note-taker is present at each meeting and writes down all the feedback – minus the names of employees – and the corporate communication team receives it for review and assessment. "We're looking for themes and trends that we can translate into actionable items," she notes. "Then, my team works with the executive to put together a response. That may be as simple as an intranet update or as complete as a policy change with a communication plan to support it."

A two-way communication culture takes hold

Thanks to the success of Big Ideas, a two-way communication culture is really taking hold across the company. Finning's corporate communications team also developed a website called "Great Solutions" to complement the on-the-ground feedback program. "The website is a place where employees can submit ideas any time of the day, any day of the week, from work or home, and they do," says Crystal.

But there's more. President Dave Parker began his own blog on the Great Solutions

site and he and fellow senior leaders use that forum to discuss some of the ideas, issues and hot topics they're hearing about from employees. "We'll get comments or suggestions at all hours of the day or night from people like mechanics and technicians who may not have been motivated to participate in such an activity in the past. They now see we are very serious about their ideas and adopting them to make the company better."

Dave also makes regular business video updates. And still more – four employee advisory groups are being formed to provide another avenue for two-way communication.

Crystal emphasizes that the Great Solutions website, blog and a video update – in combination with the onsite feedback meetings and advisory groups – work together as an effective and integrated two-way communication package. "The site meetings give us unfiltered input in a face-to-face setting and we supplement that with social media tools on the company intranet," she says. "It's a combination that is working well for our needs and the needs of our employees as we strive to work together to address some tough challenges."

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Communicating for Impact employee communication awards – an opportunity to showcase your good ideas that work and make a difference!

"If you have an apple and I have an apple and we exchange these apples, then you and I will still each have one apple. But if you have an idea and I have an idea, we exchange these ideas, then each of us will have two ideas."

- George Bernard Shaw

You have pride in what you do in employee communications. Your webcasts, key project support, town halls, plans, publications and key messaging provide creative solutions and are filling needs -- helping your organization and its employees become better focused and more effective in a very competitive and demanding world.

Yes, there are awards programs out there you can enter to get some recognition for your ingenuity and labor. But entering them and winning sometimes requires an investment of lots of time and money and often the category doesn't even quite fit what your effort was all about. And even when you see the descriptions of the winners, often they don't represent things you can learn from and apply in your employee communications work.

With the *Communicating for Impact* employee communications awards program, we're shifting the emphasis and showcasing good ideas that work and can be applied almost anywhere. That's because we understand that sharing good ideas – wherever they may come from – is how communicators grow their knowledge and increase their capability to make ever more meaningful impacts that make a performance difference for their organizations.

Deadline for entry: October 1, 2009

Communicators can enter the contest anytime between now and October 1, 2009. Entries must be work on a new or ongoing program that has been completed in 2008 or through August 31, 2009. "Our entry form takes a few minutes to

complete and there are no fees with entry," says Ron Hess, President of Motiv8 Communications, which is sponsoring the awards program. "We're not expecting big, fancy packages of materials designed to impress judges. If we find your entry worthy for award consideration, we'll call you asking for more details. Our goal is not to take up a lot of your time."



How to enter the *Communicating for Impact* awards contest

Visit the Motiv8 website at www.motiv8comm.com where you'll find the directions and simple entry form. If you have questions about entry requirements, simply e-mail us at motiv8comm@aol.com.

Good luck!

The *Communicating for Impact* awards will recognize good work that focuses on helping organizations improve their results. The awards encompass the 10 traits of high performance communication listed on page 1 of this issue of the *Ideas* newsletter. "We'd like to recognize at least four or five entries with special, engraved awards they'll be proud to receive," says Hess, "and we'll tell their story on pages of the *Ideas* newsletter. We'll recognize additional good ideas, too, if they meet the criteria. We know that robust idea sharing is a key to competitive advantage and winning for organizations so we want to spread around as many good ideas as we can."

The entry can be a face-to-face communication training or support program you developed, a customer awareness program that is delivering results, a website or publication that works and fits within the 10 trait framework, a creative approach you applied to key message delivery, or a change management/employee engagement initiative your company is spearheading that required your special communication support. Submit as many entries as you'd like. "Originality, commitment and focus on making a positive

contribution to business goals or results is what will count most in the minds of the judges," says Hess.

"Our goal is to celebrate and share all the good work you are doing to help your organizations," says Hess. "We think this will be fun and we absolutely encourage every employee communicator to enter if they believe they have a winning idea that is worthy of sharing with their peers."

ENTER TODAY!

NEW Communicating for High Performance Toolkit will help employee communicators make a performance difference for their businesses

Not all employee communication activities are the same. Some make a bigger impact than others, and when an employee communication program focuses on the right kinds of “stuff,” it becomes a powerful driver of organizational performance improvement and employee engagement.

The new *Communicating for High Performance Toolkit*, produced by Motiv8 Communications, represents a landmark step forward in efforts to provide communicators with the information, tools and ideas they need to properly focus their work and make a real performance difference for organizations, says Ron Hess, author of the Toolkit, and president of Motiv8 Communications.

A focus on outcomes

“Management has higher expectations for employee communications today,” says Hess. “As a result, it’s not enough for communication professionals to just write and distribute ‘stuff.’ As esteemed Consultant Jim Shaffer put it: ‘It’s not about outputs anymore, it’s about outcomes.’”

Hess said that during his 27 years as a corporate employee communication manager, and now as a consultant, he has seen clear differences between the communication practices at high performing organizations versus those employed at mediocre or lower performing ones.

The communication traits in place at high performing companies – 10 “difference makers” in all – seem to ignite winning and success in organizations, and accelerate the kinds of operational efficiency improvements that culminate in achievement of stronger business results.

“This *Communicating for High Performance Toolkit* will help employee communication and HR professionals build and execute a communication plan that contributes to improved performance by integrating the 10 traits into the fabric of the internal communications systems within the organization,” says Hess.

More than 125 winning ideas

The Toolkit features many behind-the-scenes stories that reinforce some of the principles described in the Toolkit, as well as an array of tips, learning points, and more than 125 practical performance-based ideas that communicators can adopt and apply in their organizations. “We also include worksheets, with detailed examples of how to use them, that communicators can use to help them research, plan, execute and measure their communication programs,” says Hess.

In the Toolkit, Hess provides guidance about the kinds of questions communicators should ask to obtain the research input they need to assess and plan a high performance communication plan. A lengthy chapter is devoted to key message and key initiative development and how to align communication approaches and activities with the goals of the organization.

“The Toolkit is a fantastic value for the price and it incorporates a lot of the ‘things that work’ knowledge I have accumulated over the years working for and with some great companies,” says Hess.

For more information contact us at: motiv8comm@aol.com or call 386-322-9082.

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Communicating for High Performance Toolkit

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- How to create the right mindset to be an effective and persuasive high performance communicator

Produced By:

Motiv8 Communications, Port Orange, FL USA, a full service employee communication firm.

About the Author:

Ron Hess, president of Motiv8 Communications, served 27 years in corporate communications before becoming a consultant. Ron managed corporate employee communication programs at leading companies such as GE, Eaton and Watson Wyatt. Ron is a frequent speaker and writer on employee communication topics.

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