

From a highly respected communication leader

## Advice and insight on how employee communicators can meet the difficult challenges in today's workplace

**Editor's Note:** One of the most respected corporate employee communicators in the modern era, Ann Adams was the vice president of internal communications and marketing at Motorola prior to setting up shop last year with her own firm, Ann Adams Communication Consulting, Scottsdale, AZ. Ann has also been a featured speaker at major communication conferences and a contributor to articles in leading communication journals. In the following interview, Ann looks back at her long career with Motorola and other companies and offers insight and advice on the challenges facing employee communication professionals in the difficult business environment of 2009.



**Q:** Ann, what do you see as the biggest challenges facing employee communicators today, and how should employee communication professionals prioritize their work to make the biggest impact for their organization?

**ANN ADAMS:** With the economic recession and uncertainty, company leaders face an even greater need to talk candidly and frequently with their employees and other target audiences. Unfortunately, this need occurs at the same time that many communication departments are facing budget cuts. So, some of last year's nice-to-haves simply won't make the '09 list.

The communication department's priorities should reflect what's important to senior management and to the company. If the senior managers are also leaders, they recognize the importance of talking with – and listening to – their employees during tough times, even if they don't have all the answers to employee questions. They are looking for sound communication counsel, compelling messages (simple, consistent, understandable, believable), effective media and results.

Another challenge? Understanding and dealing with proliferating social media.

We must determine what's really useful versus what's "cool." At the same time, we must remember that the best media in the world offer little value without compelling content.

**Q:** Based on your observations of our profession, what's the biggest mistake you see employee communicators making?

**ANN ADAMS:** Rather than citing mistakes, let's focus on actions for continuous improvement (as my HR friends would say):

- Hone your communication skills, especially writing (tight, bright, specific).
- Take a big-picture perspective.

Understand what's going on with your company, your employees and the world in general. Read not only this newsletter and IABC's *Communication World* but *The Wall Street Journal* and *Fortune*.

- Employ logical thought processes to "connect the dots" for your audiences about what's happening in your company and industry.
- Measure results whenever you can and demonstrate how the results support the business strategy.
- Build relationships throughout your company and the profession. Seek mentors and mentor others.

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**"The most successful communication leaders think and act like business people first and communicators second."**

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## Meeting difficult challenges in today's workplace

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**Q:** One of the biggest issues for employee communicators is gaining influence with and getting buy-in from management. Any tips you would like to pass along to help them achieve that?

**ANN ADAMS:** The most successful communication leaders think and act like business people first and communicators second. That requires understanding a company or client's business vision and strategy and tailoring a communication strategy that produces measurable results that support the business strategy. For example, if the business strategy includes improving productivity, then the communication leader could adopt the strategy of increasing the speed with which employees

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can perform business functions on the employee portal. Once accomplished, report to management that employees are experiencing, for example, a three-fold boost in the speed with which they can book business trips – increasing their productivity. And post that stat on the portal, too.

You also have to build relationships. Top leaders generally won't give you much face time, yet you need to know their MO – how they operate, how they like to communicate, to whom they listen, what they are reading.

So, search for some people close to the C-suite who seem to value communication. Ask them to advise you and serve as a sounding board for ideas. If you impress those people, they likely will tell others. In

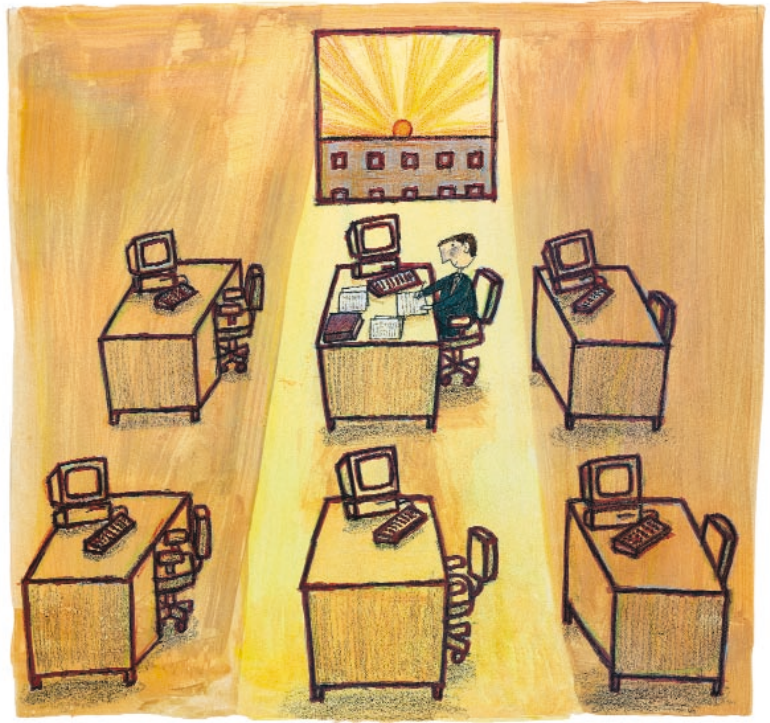
addition, grab opportunities to serve on cross-functional teams where you can contribute, learn and build your network – such as a team handling an acquisition, litigation or corporate responsibility.

C-level leaders want you to show that: you are committed to help them achieve the business strategy, you are expert in your profession, you offer innovative ideas and measurable results, you bring solutions rather than problems, you execute on time and on budget, you make their life a little easier and you are honest, flexible, calm and discrete. Above all, don't waste their time or exceed their short attention span.

**Q:** You've been a successful communication leader for years. As communicators move from individual contributor positions into management roles, what advice would you offer about managing the employee communication function?

**ANN ADAMS:** As you move from individual contributor to manager, you find yourself spending less time on hands-on communication work and more time on coaching and leading your team, setting the strategic direction, serving as quality monitor, ensuring that you're on budget and meeting deadlines, building networks, serving on cross-functional teams, mediating disputes and being chief cheerleader for your organization.

Share as much information as possible with your team – right up to the very edge of confidentiality. As communicators, we can't make good decisions and offer advice to



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clients without the proper information and, just as important, context. This means not only talking with your team about what's happening in the industry and the business but sharing examples and stories that bring issues and leaders to life.

Set clear and high expectations, learn to delegate, celebrate success, learn from mistakes, give credit to those who have earned it, demonstrate high ethical standards and stay calm (at least outwardly). Oh, yes, and keep your perspective and sense of humor.

*"Grab opportunities to serve on cross-functional teams where you can contribute, learn and build your network – such as a team handling an acquisition, litigation or corporate responsibility."*

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# By focusing on the 'right stuff,' you leverage employee communication as a powerful tool for competitive advantage



**By Ron Hess**  
**President, Motiv8 Communications**

As Ann Adams highlights in the lead article for this issue of *Ideas*, it's important that communicators work hard at building their understanding of business strategy and the goals and the priorities that spin from them.

You also need to reach out into the organization to grow your knowledge about the business improvement and cultural transformation processes that drive the rhythm and focus of daily

work. From this knowledge gained comes the ability to properly align and focus your own communications activity as you strive to make a valuable contribution and, ultimately, make a difference in the performance results your organization achieves.

Jim Shaffer, the noted consultant from Maryland, has told communicators: "It's about outcomes today, it's not about outputs." And no truer words have ever been spoken. Especially in these challenging times, you better be adding value if you want some job security and be a significant player on the management team.

**"To be a high performing communicator, you must recognize the kinds of activities in internal communication work that truly make a difference. It really is about focusing on 'the right stuff' versus the 'nice to do' stuff."**

Let's build on Ann's article and add a few more things for you to think about.

To be a high performing communicator, you must recognize the kinds of activities in internal communication work that truly make a difference. It really is about focusing on "the right stuff" versus the "nice to do" stuff.

So, what is the "right stuff" that employee communicators should focus on? The big surveys done on employee engagement, and the success stories out there, all point in the same direction. One important area is customer awareness – building employee understanding of the marketplace environment the organization operates in and what it takes to meet customer needs and marketplace challenges. Related to this is the need to "connect the dots" so employees see the ties between their job responsibilities, organization goals and the marketplace.

But there's one employee communication element that the survey data and experience tells us clearly stands out above all others –

the quality of manager-to-employee communication. However, it really goes beyond the manager and employee relationship to include all the personal connections that occur in an organization – from networking and team-building to cross-department collaboration.

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## The high performance communicator's book shelf...

Here's a list of books that communicators should consider reading over time to broaden their knowledge of employee communications and business topics.

**Simple Solutions: Harness the Power of Passion and Simplicity for Results...**

Tom Schmitt and Arnold Perl

**The Credible Company and Communicating for Change...** Roger D'Aprix

**What Is Six Sigma?...** Pet Pande and Larry Holpp

**Winning...** Jack Welch

**Good to Great ...** Jim Collins

**FYI for Your Improvement: A Guide for Development and Coaching...**

Michael Lombardo and Robert Eichinger

**Whale Done! The Power of Positive Relationships...**

Ken Blanchard

**The Fast Forward MBA in Business ...** Virginia O'Brien

**What Got You Here Won't Get You There ...**

Marshall Goldsmith

**8 Habits of Highly Effective People...** Stephen Covey

**The Storytelling Coach ...** Doug Lipman

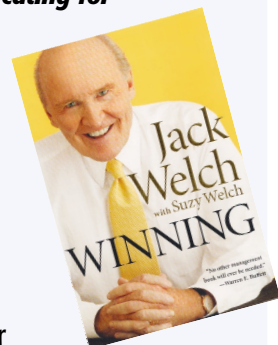
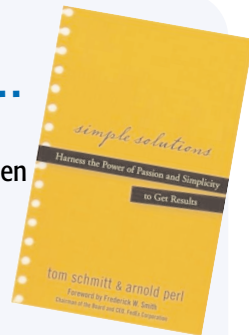
**1001 Ways to Energize Employees...** Bob Nelson

**Territorial Games: Understanding/Ending Turf Wars at Work...** Annette Simmons

**It's Your Ship: Management Techniques from the Best Damn Ship in the Navy ...** Michael Abrashoff

**The Art of War...** Sun Tzu

Plus, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Fortune*, *Fast Company*.



## Right Stuff

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Most communicators know the craft of writing and editing – the "technical" aspects of the trade. They also know how to build a communication plan and have sensitivity to the "strategic" aspects of communications.

But beyond the technical and strategic skills, there's a "social communication" skills focus requirement for high performance impact success. When I say "social," I don't mean just social media, which is the buzzword for our technical age. What I am referring to is the general role of the professional employee communicator in fostering effective people-to-people communication in an organization. This role takes many forms, including advisor, coach, facilitator, and educator. Furthermore, this role often tends to get lost in all the effort and fervor surrounding electronic communication. But it should be a key priority area of focus in your work.

The intranets you support and the articles you write are important. But winning over hearts and minds to support change doesn't occur through electronic messages. It occurs through personal connections – between real people!

Get yourself educated about the power of face-to-face communication and those "social" things it relates to – collaboration, idea sharing, listening and feedback and recognition. These "right stuff" things make a big difference and communicators who have focused on these areas have emerged as heroes

**"Learn the business, focus your work on the real added value activities that drive business results, and you will make a difference!"**

because business results improve thanks, in part, to their efforts.

In the sidebar article on page 3, we've included a list of books you may want to read that will grow your knowledge in social communications and in business processes.

Learn the business, focus your work on the real added value activities that drive business results, and you will make a difference!

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

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### 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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