

# CREATING AN IT STRATEGY COMMUNICATIONS PLAN: 5 KEYS TO SUCCESS



This article is written from the perspective of an IT Strategy in higher education. However, many of the concepts can be applied to any strategy communications plan. Keep in mind however that the IT Strategic plan has an organization-wide impact. Because of this, the approach to communicating the IT strategy should be treated just like an organizational strategic plan.

Perhaps the largest barrier to the adoption of any strategic plan is belief in the plan. I'm a firm believer of "You can't assign a strategic plan. People have to believe in it to achieve success."

My favorite example of a successful strategy that employees believed in is Ford Motor Company's 1982 "Quality is Job One" campaign. In 1982 the public believed that other auto manufacturers were building much better cars than Ford. To address this, Ford started a campaign/strategy to change that image. What most people don't realize is that "Job 1" inside of Ford refers to the first car of a new model that is produced. By stating "Quality is Job One", Ford made it very clear to its employees that the first car off of the line (and implying every car thereafter) should be of high quality. This simple easy to understand strategy to improve quality resonated internally with employees and externally with customers.

Now not all of us are going to achieve the level of success in our IT strategy that Ford did. However, what we can do is ensure that we craft the message of our IT strategy so that it resonates with, and is easy to understand at all levels of the organization. Having a robust communications plan is vital to that effort.

# Know Your Audiences and Stakeholders

Knowing your audience and making sure they get the right message is the most important and perhaps the most overlooked component of any communications plan. What's important and what resonates to a Dean or VP, is very different than what's important to a systems administrator. Your IT Strategy communications plan needs to include a message for both of these audiences (and many others).

Once you understand who your audience is, you need to know what to ask them for. A dynamic leader and good storyteller can get some initial interest in the plan. However, the first question that always gets asked is "what does this mean for me" Consider creating a table like the one below to help you understand how to answer that question.

| <b>Audience</b>   | <b>General Message</b>  |
|-------------------|---|
| Deans             | I need your support in making this a priority for your area.                              |
| Unit IT Directors | We are trying to gain efficiencies and stop duplication of effort.                        |
| CFO's             | Our work may require a redirection of funds.  |
| Technical Staff   | We need your help in building the tools and solutions that will make the vision possible. |
| Non-IT Leadership | The IT Strategic plan helps obtain business goals by...                                   |

# Understand Your Communication Culture

After you understand your message, you need to consider how to communicate that message. Different audiences likely communicate via different methods. The next thing to identify is what are the successful methods of communication in your organization for each of the audiences. Take inventory of what tools/ media exist. Identify things like:

- Is there an organizational intranet? If so, which audience uses it the most.
- Do people actually read the organization-wide emails? If so, who do they come from?
- What physical communication tools exist (bulletin boards, break room postings, digital signage, etc.)
- Who prefers face to face conversations?
- What meetings should the plan be presented at?
- How do you get a message to your senior leaders?

Most importantly, have your elevator pitch memorized and available at all times for each of your audiences. Oftentimes you'll find yourself in a lunch line, on public transportation (or actual elevator) with a VP or key decision maker. Have a pitch, or an ask ready to leverage when the opportunity presents itself. Even simple questions can go a long way. Here's one example:

"Good afternoon Mrs. VP, I'm having trouble reaching the other VP's to talk about our IT strategy. Do you have any suggestions on how I could reach them?"

You will likely get responses such as: "I've heard about that strategy, what's the short version" or "Sure, reach out to my assistant and He'll get you on our next VP meeting agenda."

Most senior leaders are willing to help; however, they are extremely busy. Having a message ready for the right moment can really go a long way.

## Identify Your Key Influencers

Every organization has the official reporting structure and has the informal one. There are people in every organization who seem to be better at getting things processed, and whose ideas get listened to. Know who these people are and understand their sphere of influence. Especially in higher education. Almost every academic department I've ever worked with has that one faculty member who is highly respected and seems to be able to go around organizational boundaries. Take inventory of these folks and seek to obtain their support for your IT Strategy. Sometimes you can even ask them to send out a strategy communication for you. People throughout your organization are much more likely to adopt your strategy if they see that their peers support it as well.

## Obtain a Broad Range of Input

This is often the hardest one to do. An IT Strategy that gets adopted needs to have the support at all levels of the organization. The most effective way to ensure that people feel a part of the strategic plan is to let them help contribute to it. At the same time, however, you can't have 200 people write a strategic plan. To gain input, establish your method of obtaining that input ahead of time. Consider how you can leverage things like:

- Town Hall meetings
- Organizational committees
- Individual Meetings
- Senior Staff Meetings
- Lunch and Learn sessions
- Surveys
- How you can recognize individuals for their contributions

As the final versions of your plan are rolled out, be sure to mention everyone that contributed. Not only will this give more weight to your plan, but it will create a broader sense of ownership. If you take a look at my previous article (5 Great Strategic Plans and Why you should read them) you'll see most of these recognize all of the contributors.

## Document Who is Communicating What, and When

The last thing to consider as part of your communications plan is who will communicate, what message via which communications media. Earlier we talked about our audiences and what message we need to get to them. I also discussed learning how they like to be communicated with. Consider building a communications plan chart like the one below:

| Communicator Audience |              | What Message                  | Frequency | Media                                  |
|-----------------------|--------------|-------------------------------|-----------|--|
| Sally                 | Deans / VP's | I need your support           | Once      | Face to Face senior leadership meeting |
| Tom                   | All Staff    | Summary of the Strategic Plan | Once      | Email                                  |
| Bob                   | All Staff    | Plan updates and next steps   | Monthly   | Email and updated digital signage.     |

Sue

|                 |                                       |            |  |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------|------------|--|
| Technical Staff | What projects align with the strategy | Bi-Monthly | Lunch and learn session with follow-up email |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------|------------|--|