

the Ragan Report

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By Mike Klein and Jeppe Vilstrup Hansgaard

Social networks without digital social machinery

Do we need the Internet and digital platforms like SharePoint to build powerful internal social networks? These communicators say, “No!”

One of the most dramatic developments in organizational communications has been the enterprise social network. These networks promise more connected, collaborative workforces, but spotty implementation and continued stiff resistance from senior managers in risk-averse industries have put enterprise social networks out of reach for many internal communication pros.

The failure or delay in launching Jive, Yammer and NewsGator does not mean that one is stuck in a communicator’s hell of line management cascades, one-way intranets and ultra-sanitized messages. One can go social without an enterprise social network platform.

To understand how this is possible, one must understand that social communication and informal social networks in organizations and communities are not new. They date back to the beginning of organizations and communities, and the principles of how to tap into and mobilize these networks remain unchanged.

Back to 1840

None other than Abraham Lincoln showed his understanding of social communication on the Illinois State Senate floor in 1840, well before his epochal presidency. He articulated rules for running successful political campaigns which, with minor adaptations, serve to implement social communication in any organization or community:

- **Prepare a PERFECT LIST of all the “voters.”**

Identifying all relevant—and only the relevant—individuals in the population does two things: it creates a boundary (making communications “internal” to the relevant participants), and it provides a convenient, streamlined list for facilitating and keeping track of communication.

- **DETERMINE WITH CERTAINTY whom each voter will support.**

Identifying whether an individual is actively positive, actively negative, mildly supportive or passive about an issue allows sharper focus for communication, along with an ability to target interactions to an individual’s level of interest and support, rather than assuming that all are equally enthusiastic.

- **To persuade the undecided, send in SOMEONE THEY TRUST.**

The element that makes this approach truly “social” is that trust creates the links between individuals in a community that form it into a real network. Trust levels rarely if ever map to the boxes and lines of an organizational chart, and identifying trusted individuals invariably requires a communicator to ask about whom an individual prefers to discuss organizational topics with.

- **TURN OUT THE GOOD WHIGS on Election Day.**

Finally, having built a “perfect list,” determined with “certainty” the level of enthusiasm of the participants,

and identified the trusted peers who can be persuasive, it becomes much easier to mobilize the committed without antagonizing the uncommitted.

A real shift for communication

Before going into how the lists and connections yielded by a conscientious application of the Lincoln Rules can be produced and managed, it is important to recognize the shift in communication philosophy and methods.

Philosophically, this road represents a rejection of the traditional model of internal communication, “Top-Down-One-Size-Fits-All” or TDOS-FA. It recognizes that while all people in the organization may have been created equal, their influence, connectedness and propensity to share information vary wildly. The differentiated communication this method requires runs counter to much of the traditional philosophy behind organizational behavior even as corporate leaders begin to consider more “social” thinking.

Identifying the people who have the greatest credibility and the highest propensity to share knowledge requires the communicator (or manager) to provide those people with insider’s content and deeper context. As for those less central to the organizational conversation, it may be mutually beneficial to managers and line workers to reduce the number of official messages and the intensity with which they are conveyed. A prime example would be communicating the CEO’s strategy in technical depth to every staff member in a retail company.

HOW TO DO IT

There are ways to collect and analyze the data that present a true social picture of the organization, and still more ways to act on that information.

The most rigorous, effective method involves a detailed social mapping, often called social network analysis. It uncovers influence networks across all formal and geographical boundaries in the organization, and the hidden leaders who “persuade the undecided.”

In one recent example an oil company faced a desperately needed organizational transformation to survive intense competition. It decided to embark on a new way of running its change initiatives. Instead of going to the “usual suspects” and publishing intranet newsletters, they identified the informal company leaders.

They asked employees whom they were most influenced by, professionally and socially.

The responses revealed a social map of the organization not drawn by organizational structure or geographical barrier. The map showed the oil company that by engaging a small group of key influencers, they could influence the entire organization more efficiently than through the traditional top-down way.

In most organizations this research has unearthed a network comprising 3% of employees with the ability to reach 90% of the workforce.

Moreover, this 3% almost always includes informal leaders not prominent in the organizational hierarchy. The oil company data revealed leaders

unknown to management, whereas substantial numbers of those normally selected to lead change initiatives—“the usual suspects”—were invisible.

But even without a budget, an enterprise social platform, or a formal social network analysis, social communication can still happen with a conscientious commitment to list-making, attitude-tracking and relationship-mapping with basic tools like an Excel and a telephone. A simple research ploy, the Snowball method—building a list of respondents, and asking those respondents for additional names—can reveal the real social network.

Even when the “perfect list” is imperfect and the maps are incomplete, the exercise of identifying, connecting and mobilizing informal leaders can transform an organization. The potential to reduce communication noise, increase the effect of fewer messages, and leverage personal credibility instead of constantly spending organizational credibility is there. And that is every bit as social as Yammer or Jive. ■

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