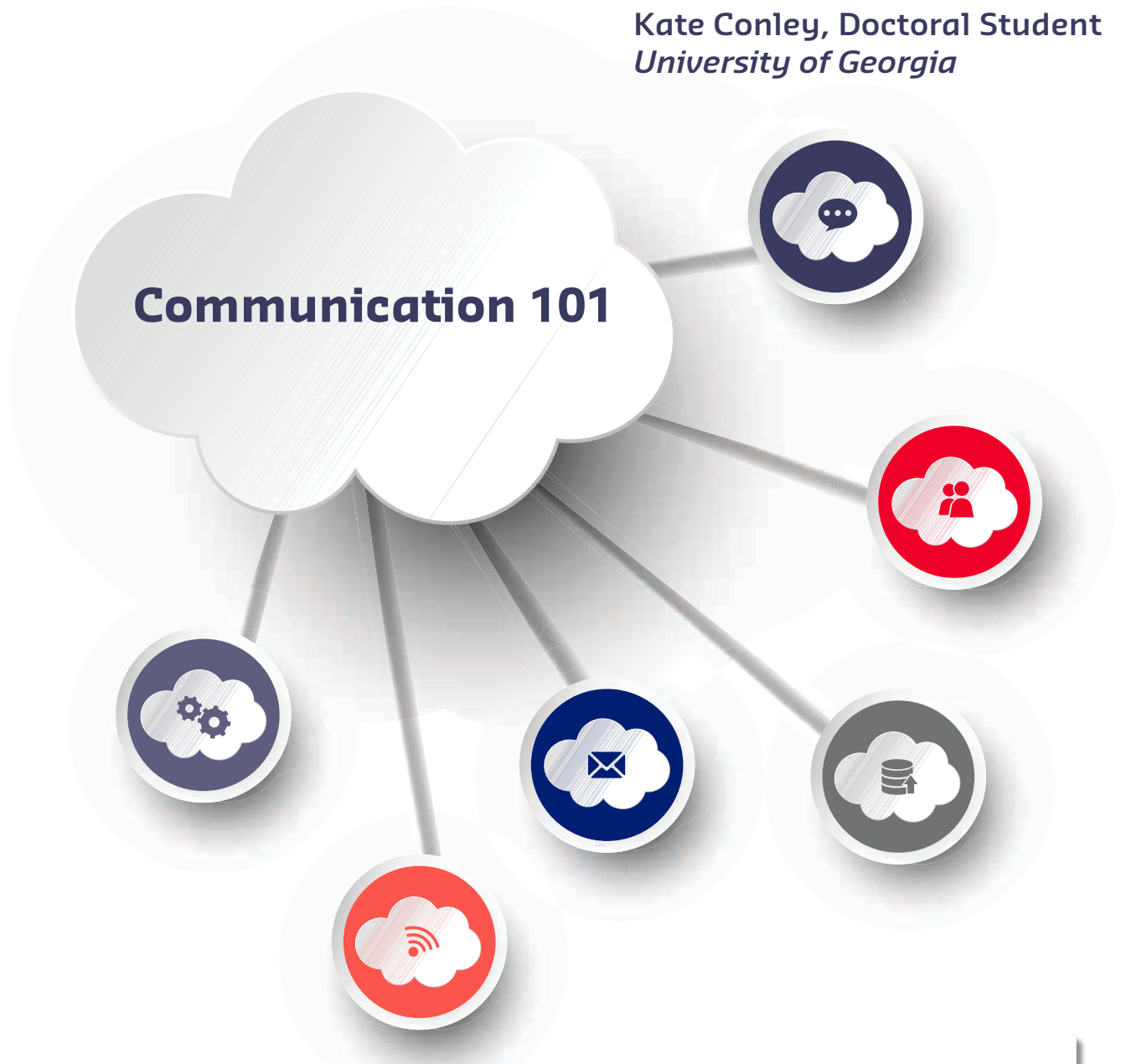


Communication 101:

A Crash Course in the Fundamental Elements of Employee Recognition

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A successful recognition program can go a long way to boost employee engagement and positive organizational culture. But, before rolling out the red carpet with a high-tech platform and exciting rewards, you must first focus on setting the foundation for success with a clear communication strategy. According to the latest trends in employee recognition, 89% of organizations surveyed have recognition programs in place. Although almost all of these organizations reported having a formal communication plan associated with their program, only 12% had formal training for managers¹. Since, managers account for 70% of variance in employee engagement², there is a need to instruct managers on the effective delivery of rewards and recognition to ensure that the program is communicated consistently across the company.

Effective communication is a necessary component of any organizational change initiative and the implementation of employee programs is no different. At the foundational level, recognition program communications should serve three purposes: awareness, instruction, and engagement.

Awareness

Recognition programs are the most successful when they are embraced company-wide. To encourage participation from the entire workforce, employees must first be aware of the program and its value-add to their work lives. Spreading awareness of the new program involves recurring communication materials with attention-grabbing attributes. Plant salient context cues so that news of the program quickly permeates through all levels of the organization. Incorporate the program into existing communication efforts such as a quick link on the intranet, a program logo on everyone's email signature, and most importantly, symbols of recognition in the physical work environment such as a hand written note. These are all current components of employee culture that can be adapted to include subtle reminders of the importance of employee appreciation.

Instruction

Efforts to increase program awareness are only fruitful when accompanied by clear and direct instructions on how to participate quickly and easily. While launching the program, ensure that all modes of instruction include either an electronic link to the recognition platform or short and simple steps that can be completed in little time. Keeping the entire process simple, allows for effectively timed recognition so that the intrinsic rewards of giving and receiving recognition can be realized almost immediately. A delay between the achievement and the recognition can weaken the impact of the reward so encourage on the spot recognition. Even a simple hyperlink within the phrase, "Make your coworker's day!"; can increase the likelihood of employees taking time out of their schedule to recognize a peer.

Engagement

Engaging employees to participate in voluntary employee programs can be difficult especially once the program is in place and no longer a novelty to the organization. Acquiring lasting employee buy-in requires active participation on the part of the manager. When implementing new technology platforms, management support is positively related to instilling a climate for change that is necessarily in success of the new initiative³. Provide management with fun and simple ways to show appreciation at the individual and team level. Some reasons calling for recognition go unnoticed or are easily forgotten during busy times. Remind supervisors to pay attention to employee milestones, small successes and contributions, and positive behaviors that align with the organizational values.

The impact of managers on employee participation is substantial, yet only 12% of organizations offer formal recognition training for managers.

YOUR COMMUNICATION PLAN

As with all the aspects of recognition and rewards, communication plans are not one-size-fits all. Organization-specific communication plans have distinct employee segments, using diverse communication channels, and an appropriate rate of communication frequency. Address these three primary components when building your communication plan and consider the following best practices:

01 Employee Segments

Understanding your audience is the first step in planning meaningful communication. As a best practice, segment employees and tailor messages to each employee group. Segments can be defined by executives, management and staff; desked and non-desked, and workforce demographics such as generational..

Targeted communication also allows for ease and cost savings in logistics. Different channels of communication are utilized for reaching different employees, ensuring that printed flyers aren't thrown in the trash by the tech-savvy millennials. Many organizations utilize multiple media channels to communicate their recognition programs, with the most commonly used channels: e-mail, intranet/Internet, employee orientation and the company newsletter.¹ Encourage spread of information along informal channels as well, such as through word of mouth and peer-to-peer conversations.

02 Communication Channels

03 Frequency of Communication

Frequent communication is important for continued program engagement and recognition of others; not only at launch, but as a natural element of the job. Repeated messages are more likely to be embedded in the organizational culture. Unfortunately, as with any employee program or initiative, participation burnout can occur. The right amount of e-mail for digital employees is a balancing act, so try to balance e-mail notifications with newsletters and intranet postings.

WHAT ABOUT EMPLOYEES WITHOUT ACCESS TO E-MAIL?

According to WorldatWork,¹ 70% of organizations report using e-mail for program communications. For some organizations, the majority of employees are non-desked, on-the-go staff without connection to e-mail or technology platforms. As such, the standard e-mail plan is insufficient in communicating the organization's recognition initiatives. Successful recognition programs are creative in using a variety of channels to reach employees from the C-suite to the frontline. The first step is to understand the employees working on the frontline and their preferred method of communication, including hard-copy newsletters, staff meetings, or company allocated mobile devices.

Check out the white paper on *Frontline Employee Engagement* here.



YOUR COMMUNICATION TOOLKIT

Strong and proactive communication plans are equipped with the following tools, to ensure continued employee enthusiasm beyond the initial launch period.

Inspiration vocabulary. Plain and simple, motivating language is a powerful tool for employee engagement⁴. The wording and phrasing used in recognition communications helps to define a culture of positivity and engagement. Create an inventory of different ways to say the ubiquitous, “good job” and “thank you,” to spice up your recognition program and make recognizing others more fun. Creating terminology that is unique to your organization develops unified cohesiveness and helps integrate recognition into the distinctive company-wide culture.

Tailored messages. Employees are more likely to read and remember tailored messages as opposed to standard communications⁵. Craft customized messages geared toward your employee segments. Relatable phrasing included in participation invitations and reminders will feel less generic and more personable to each group of employees.

Formatted templates. As with a variety of communication channels, be creative in utilizing different formats in order to continue to direct employee attention to the program. Employees who receive e-mails that look the same every week often assume they are repeats and may be deleted without being read. Be proactive and develop templates to be used for multiple purposes throughout the program.

Recognition champions. Garner the power of enthusiastic employees by inviting them to become Champions of Recognition. Informal communication can have just as much influence on behavior as formal efforts, so help enthusiastic employees spread the word to their colleagues and highlight these individuals, to show the benefit of participating in the program.

Face-to-face Time. Importance is still placed on the transparent and trust-building nature of face-to-face communication in organizations⁶. Supplementing online platforms and digital communications with face-to-face communication efforts by managers and executives can accelerate employee buy-in. In-person conversations about the recognition program provide evidence for genuine interest in the success of the program, through the transparency that can be masked by robotic e-mail messages.



HOW NORTHWESTERN MUTUAL USED EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION TO ENSURE A ROI FROM THEIR RECOGNITION PROGRAM

In 2014, Ragan Communications, Inc. recognized Northwestern Mutual with the “Grand Prize for Employee Communications Campaign of the Year” award for the launch of their employee recognition program, BRAVO⁷. BRAVO was launched in September of 2014 with the objective to increase employee engagement and make recognition a companywide phenomenon. During a weeklong program launch, Northwestern Mutual exceeded your average communications campaign with a spectrum of communication tools including posters as well as videos, program swag like logowear and cube decorations, and red carpet celebrity treatment. The campaign also included special events, meetings, and a flash mob. With these efforts, Northwestern Mutual’s 5,000+ employees⁸ couldn’t help but take notice. Outstanding participation in the recognition program indicated the program launch communications were worth the time and investment. Ragan reported that well over half of all Northwestern Mutual employees logged onto the recognition platform during the first week with over 2,400 recognitions sent out⁷.

As such, the communications campaign was awarded for its pervasiveness and ability to connect employees throughout the company to the recognition program and thus, effectively embedding it within the organization’s culture. Ragan also commended the organization for not only spreading program awareness, but also establishing program ambassadors to ensure ongoing participation⁶.

Sound familiar? Launching a new employee program and gaining buy-in is not easy, but Northwestern Mutual successfully incorporated the effective elements of communication, including a variety of communication forms and recognition champions, while considering the three purposes of program communications; awareness, instruction and engagement. BRAVO!



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