

RETHINKING STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

Strategy development is a core task for communications leaders, but our volatile, high-demanding world requires a new approach to planning. A new communication strategy framework offers a more agile method.

BY FRANK KÖRVER AND BETTEKE VAN RULER

Over the last decade, the context in which communication professionals are operating has changed dramatically. Communication professionals must excel in a world in which multi-interactive, multi-stakeholder and 24/7 communication is the norm. Stakeholders have high expectations, and organisations not meeting those expectations face severe reputational risk. Combining these developments with increasing C-Suite expectations, plus the fact that organisations are under permanent construction - leads to an enormous challenge for communication professionals: how can we maximise our added value in a highly volatile, highly demanding setting?

Strategy development is about making choices

Strategy development has never been as important as it is today. It is an integral part of the modern communication professional's toolbox, and making strategic decisions is vital to helping realise organisational goals, manage complex issues, drive change, position corporate leaders, engage stakeholders and so on.

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Developing effective strategies can put you on the path to becoming a trusted advisor and a valued member of the organisation, but the process itself is complex and labour-intensive. However, this does not excuse anyone who has mapped out a strategy from the obligation to be able to explain it clearly. If you cannot de-

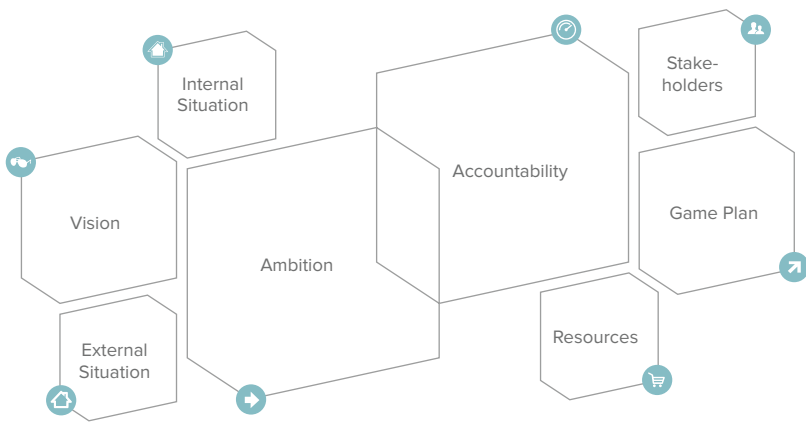
scribe in three minutes what you want to do, why you want to do it, how you will do it, and who/what you need to get it done, then it is not a solid strategy. Clearly articulating these aspects is in itself a big challenge,

Furthermore, strategy development is about making choices. However, the context in which we need to perform is changing so rapidly, the need to make choices is pretty much a permanent state of affairs. Changing contexts do not allow us to wait for the outcome of month-long strategy development programmes. We need to act swiftly, thoroughly, interactively. So say goodbye to linear strategic communication plans.

Towards a more agile strategic development

Linear plans are detailed descriptions of steps to be taken, and are often aimed at controlling the communication processes by defining smart goals in advance. The problem with these linear plans is two-fold. Rather than showing which choices you have made and why you made them, their main function is to outline intended actions and what those actions will accomplish. They give an illusion of control and are of poor practical use, because, as we have seen, the context is changing con-

Figure 1: The Communication Strategy Framework



“What exactly does the agile concept mean for strategy development?”

tinuously. However, linear communication plans remain widely used by communication practitioners.

In recent years, we have researched and experimented with different approaches to strategy development. This leads us to conclude that many communication professionals need to rethink the way they develop strategy, and instead look at strategy development from an agile point of view (see Box 1). From this point of view, (unexpected) change is a natural fact of organisational life and communicators have to adapt continuously to new markets, environments and challenges in order to have impact. It is our experience that this mind-set will help you to become a better strategic partner in the C-Suite.

However, what exactly does the agile concept mean for strategy development? We have identified four starting points:

- People over processes: forming a group of skilled and motivated people is vital. In fact, we strongly believe that people trump process.
- Respond to change rather than follow a plan: it is a waste of time to put effort into every tiny detail. Vision and ambition are vital, but more operational choices need to be repeatedly challenged. Plans should never be too detailed and only oriented at the most important decisions made.
- Cross-functional collaboration rather than

silo behaviour: the majority of communication and reputational challenges facing us today require intensive collaboration. Developing strategies in splendid isolation is a no-go. Strategy development requires cross-functional collaboration.

- A one-pager over a bulky report: no one wants to read bulky plans, and no professional should be given the thankless task of writing these documents. Management will simply not read it; they only care for the vital information, “What are the communications objectives? How are we going to realise these objectives? And what is it going to cost?”

These starting points helped us develop a new, more practical approach to strategy development.

A communication strategy framework

Innovation is not only about creating things that are new, but also about exploring new ways of doing things.

The Communication Strategy Framework (see figure one) as introduced in our book *The Communication Strategy Handbook* (Peter Lang Publishing, June 2019) is an agile method that enables professionals to continually adapt to changing circumstances while

SEVEN STEPS TO STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT

Based on discussions with students and practitioners, we have constructed seven requirements for a good strategy development model for communication and reputation management:

1. Clear vision on communications and its added value to the mission of the organisation
2. Focus on internal and external context as building blocks for constructing ambitions
3. No smart objectives but inspiring ambitions based on clear choices
4. Explicit accountability that suits the ambition
5. Clear choices in every building block, as hypotheses for the future
6. Compact to fit on one page
7. Adjustable at any time to respond to situational dynamics

staying in command. It has helped communication professional to explore a new way of strategy development.

We designed this framework to help professionals make targeted choices. However, rather than prescribe a specific course of action or the best strategy (which is always context-dependent) the framework guides professionals to ask the right questions (see box 2)

EIGHT BUILDING BLOCKS OF THE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY FRAMEWORK

1. **Vision:** a) What developments are occurring in the communication field and which ones are relevant to us? b) What tangible contribution can communication make to achieve the organisation's objectives, and what is the communication professional's role in that contribution?
2. **Internal situation:** a) What is happening inside our organisation? b) What is our organisation's characteristic communication style?
3. **External situation:** a) What are relevant societal trends and developments? b) What are relevant issues, and what is the public mood about them?
4. **Ambition:** a) What are our core tasks or what do we want to accomplish in the time ahead or in this situation? b) What are the core values driving our efforts?
5. **Accountability:** a) Who is responsible for what, and how should they be responsible? b) What are our KPIs and what method will we use to make them transparent?
6. **Stakeholders:** a) The enablers: who are the individuals or groups whose commitment is crucial for your strategy to succeed? b) The partners: who are the individuals or groups you have to work with and that have to actively contribute for you to achieve your communication strategy ambitions?
7. **Resources:** a) which people with what competences do you need to achieve your ambitions? b) What size and what type of a budget do you need?
8. **Game plan:** A) Your operational strategy: Who do you want to do what, or with whom do you want to build relationships, and how will you do so? B) Overall planning schedule and priorities: What will you do first, and what can wait until later?

and to evaluate what your organisation, client or project really needs. It compels you to think about how communication can contribute to achieving the goals of your own project, your organisation or your client.

Our Communication Strategy Framework invites communication professionals to explore an alternative method of strategy development: by explicitly considering external alongside internal contexts, by looking at these based on your specific communication vision, and by gauging their relative importance; by intensifying your collaboration with key players, both internal and external; by making choices that may be more drastic than usual, aided by the incisive questions this book forces you to ask (and answer); by taking your organisation's objectives as your starting point, though without letting them define you; by taking an iterative approach and continually reflecting on whether your choices remain congruent. And all the while asking a fundamental question: how can communication genuinely make a difference?

Where classic communication plans can extend to dozens if not hundreds of pages, our preferred method of strategy development employs sticky notes and a large sheet of paper tacked on the wall. Using this approach, our Communication Strategy Framework instantly shows you whether your choices line up; whether the choices you have made in the Framework's various building blocks are actually congruent with each other. It compels individuals to think about how communication can contribute to achieving the organisation or client's goals. As a result, it provides a clear picture of your communication strategy on one page, by putting superfluous details aside and concentrating on the essentials. It facilitates the communication professional to forcefully and efficiently make the right choices and it provides a clear picture of the communication strategy in one page. The Framework does not prescribe what one should do or which strategy is best. It just sets up and enables practitioners to select the best choices for the best strategy.

Our agile Communication Strategy Framework is a balancing act of a realistic but limited set of questions and challenging answers that, when executed conscientiously, delivers a comprehensive but clear strat-

egy at a glance (a one-pager). By putting superfluous details aside and concentrating on the essentials, the model has proven to be an instant eye-opener for stakeholders

This Communication Strategy Framework is a systematic guide to creating strategic communications that will help communicators of all types, from leaders in communications to students and teachers. A guide that will help you answer that very important question: how can we maximise our added value in a very volatile, high-demanding setting? ●

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