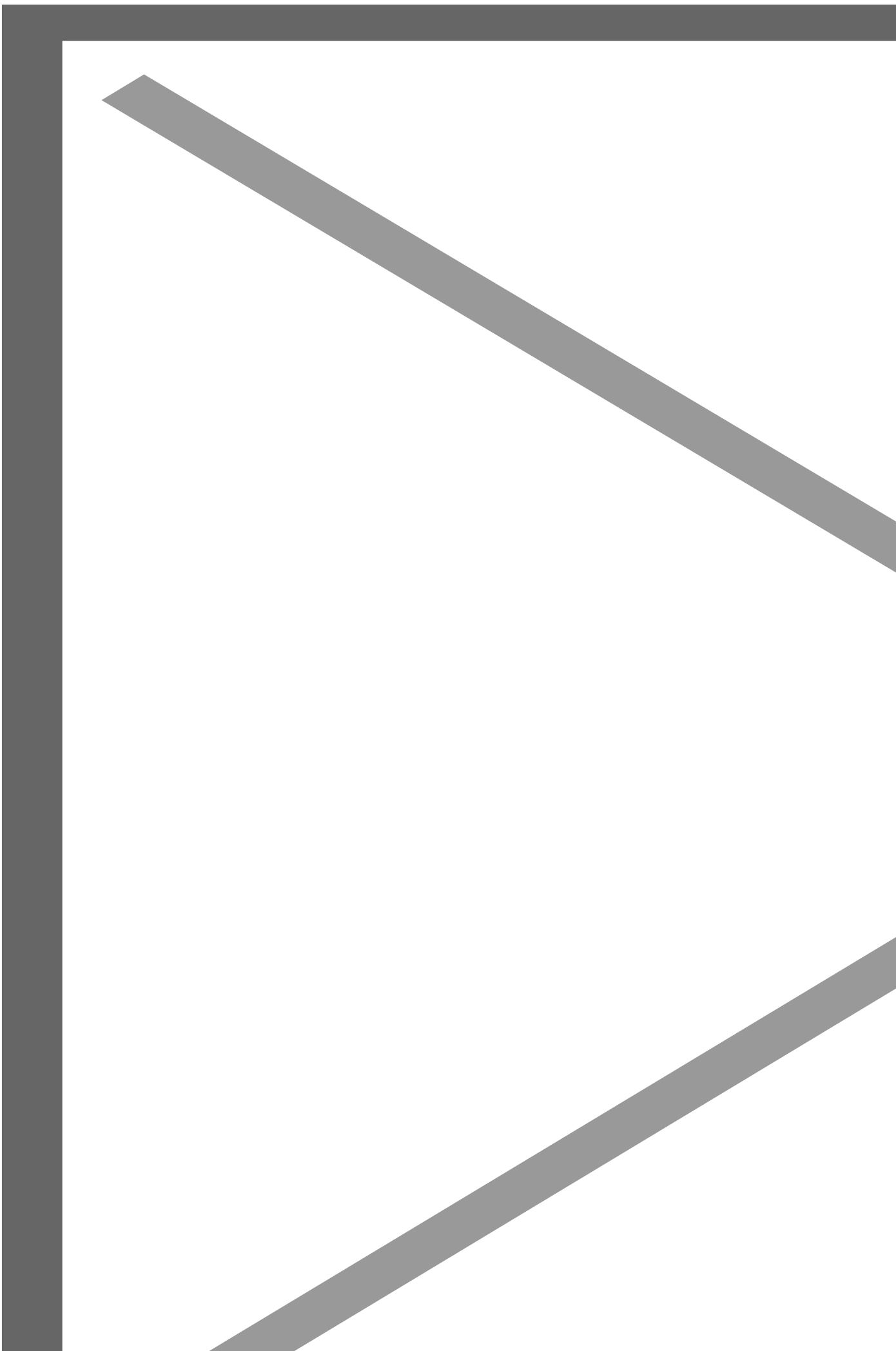


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The Global Impact of Internal Communications [1]

“The last thing we want is for the workforce to learn about the news from the media.” That’s something an old colleague told me years ago, as we were rolling out a new policy. That adage has always stuck with me. Tell the workforce before breaking the news to the media.

In my many years of working in the public affairs field and designing global communications strategies, I have always looked for the most creative, sensible ways of maximizing my reach. How can I develop tactics that are transferable across platforms, craft talking points that make sense to people of all backgrounds, and tap the right “messengers” that are agile and effective?

Needless to say, in the rapid speed at which the public affairs field transforms, you could fill a few football stadiums with articles about how the world is changing its way of communicating. Socials, web, print, radio, or strategy papers that are filled with endless channels to which we need to adapt our message in order to make policy more accessible to our audiences. We invest so much in graphics, videos, translations, and in recent years, our direct engagement with influencers, to fulfill the same mission: tell our story.

As effective as all the communication methods may be, they consume a lot of resources, attention, meticulous screening, and effort. And rightly so. We not only want to be in the right spots, but we want our message to strike the right balance and ensure our audience sees us for who and what we are.

But there is another channel we sometimes overlook: our own workforce. We look for external influencers and opinion makers, but we forget our own homegrown influencers, those who know the ins and outs of our art. Those who reach entire communities in a more accessible way. Those who are a crucial part of the mission, trust and believe in their institution, and have a built-in audience that trusts them.

They don’t need to learn a culture because they are part of it. They don’t need to learn a new language; they are native to it. The investment is low; the return is high. That is why we must include them in the strategy from the get-go. For example, in diplomatic missions of any country, local staff sometimes outnumber the diplomatic staff. They have strong ties to their own communities that transcend a press statement, and a followership that touches many circles: their families, neighborhoods, cities, regions, people they attended school with, and members of one political party or another. Each one may have hundreds or even thousands in their broader circles.

"The workforce should be a defined audience in your communications strategy and not just an afterthought."

Let me give you an example from a different time in my life. About 20 years ago, I worked for a local restaurant in my hometown, and I was hired directly into a managerial position. I had to go through a month-long training and orientation, experiencing every role in the restaurant, starting as a host, continuing as a waiter, shadowing the cooks on the cold line and the hot line, serving as a checker, and doing all other jobs a manager oversees. I spent time with the bakers, the bussers, and I learned everything I needed to know about the dishwasher. One thing that stood out about that experience was the responsibility I had as the manager to instill the restaurant's mission, theme, and spirit in every employee. The immediate result was that every person who walked through the door felt embraced by the employees of the restaurant, who in turn felt connected to the theme and experience that the owners wanted to provide. The experience at this particular restaurant was indeed special, and it became the talk of the town. Employees of the restaurant turned into local celebrities, and they carried the spirit of the restaurant on or off shift. It was a special feeling to be part of that team.

The same thing could be said about workforce of any public institution with global presence. Anywhere we happen to be, we represent our institutions intentionally or unintentionally. When you give your business card to someone or introduce yourself, the person in front of you not only sees you, but also your institution. That prompts discussions about policy large and small.

But when do we involve our workforce?

My rule of thumb is not to have individual instances of communicating to the workforce, but a continuum of engagement. Workforce communications should have dedicated tactics during a policy's inception, before the launch, and even after. There should be a feedback mechanism, not as a ticking-the-box exercise, but as part of a real communications strategy. And for that to be successful, the creation and empowerment of an internal communications team is essential.

When done right, colleagues and staff will show an increased sense of belonging and ownership and thus participate in sharing the policy through their own social media channels, community gatherings, and other encounters with friends and families. In my experience, messaging that comes straight from leadership and not from the media also builds respect and trust, which is indispensable in every workspace. Moreover, workforce communication is a means of testing your messaging, giving strategists a way to adjust and improve it before launching it with the public.

My theory is that the balance between external and internal communications should be about 80 percent external and 20 percent internal. The workforce should be a defined audience in your communications strategy and not just an afterthought. The return on investment will manifest itself not only on clicks and comments, but mainly in change of opinion that would be more direct.

You have an untapped well of influencers in-house. Use them!

This blog post is written in my personal capacity and does not represent the opinion of the Department of State or the Government of the United States of America.
