Work done for the National Health Service (NHS) in the UK

This overview describes research undertaken for the UK National Health Service (NHS), the fourth largest organisation in the world, to discover best practice in the role ascribed to the communication function.

The work recognises the work (among others) of DeSanto and Moss (2004) and Moss, Newman and DeSanto (2005) who identified five elements to the manager role: monitor and evaluator; key policy and strategy advisor; trouble shooter/problem solver: issues management exert and technician. Van Ruler et al's (2004) European study articulating four roles for the function: reflective, managerial, operational and educational. Finally, Steyn's (2007) study of South African companies maping the contribution of communication at various levels of business operation: enterprise, corporate, business unit, functional and operational.

The NHS research concludes that the communication function should make a contribution at four strategic levels: societal, corporate, value-chain and functional, and conceptualises four roles for the communication function, which acts as orienter, navigator, guardian and implementer.

Communication at the Societal level

There were a number of salient features about the role of the communication function at the societal level:

- it supports the NHS to maintain its legitimacy (or licence to operate), place, standing and reputation in society, through the clear communication of values and purpose and demonstrating consistency of performance against them
- it plays a role in clarifying the NHSs' ongoing mission, goals and objectives, and in determining whether these will be societally acceptable
- the overall reputation that an organisation has in society is an indicator of performance (Murray and White, 2004, 2005) and a pointer to where it needs to improve. Reputation management is a core role for the communication function
- a good communication function contributes to the building and maintenance of overall brand identity and reputation, by alerting managers to issues that might damage that brand.
- a good communication function provides the organisational antennae by enacting the boundary-spanning role, constantly monitoring the external environment and the relationships with key stakeholders to bring essential intelligence back into the organisation.

Communication at Corporate level

At this level, the focus is largely on financial and business goals: resource allocation and the precise nature of the business are considered. The role of the communication function here is to:

- support management in making enlightened business decisions by ensuring multiple stakeholder perspectives are embraced when resource decisions are made. It is often here that organisational values are tested. The interests of all stakeholders must be properly balanced within the declared values-base

- provide a perspective on potential business alliances or business threats and opportunities, given its knowledge of the business context and stakeholder views emanating from its boundary-spanning role
- coach senior managers in communicating the organisation's goals and planning decisions and ensuring they are alert to the reputational opportunities and threats inherent in doing so
- ensure the cognitive and behavioural assets of the organisation are in place to ensure success (Laurati, 2008). Organisations usually consider whether their traditional functional assets are aligned for success, but the communication function can provide intelligence on whether the culture and identity of the organisation is compatible with strategic plans, whether the relational capital exists to support it and whether the reputational capital is compatible with what the organisation wishes to achieve.

Communication at value-chain level

At this level the focus will be on those stakeholders directly involved in the service: service-users, delivery partners, suppliers, regulators and employees. It is at this point that societal and corporate intentions are made real. The communication function plays a role in developing, delivering and evaluating success by:

- identifying service-user needs to provide appropriate services and support using the technique of Insight. Insight will also indicate the means by which behavioural change may be achieved
- determining the shape of local services with commissioners and providers using market intelligence and Insight. The communication function can also facilitate complex negotiations with a variety of stakeholders who may have conflicting or competing demands
- ensuring that NHS values are promoted internally and externally. Also identifying relational and reputational impacts as services are designed and delivered. Here the commitment of staff to living the brand is critical (de Chernatony, 2001) and the role of internal communication in helping to shape organisational culture is recognised
- enacting broader stakeholder engagement which is the NHSs' ambition, involving a range of stakeholders in decision-making. Specific expertise in stakeholder identification, segmentation, engagement and management can be offered by the communication function.

Communication at Functional Level

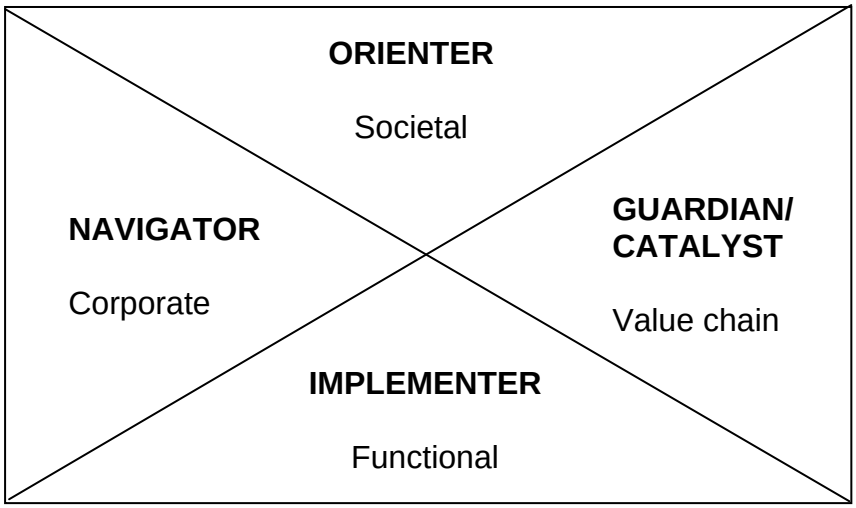
At this level the communication function's role is to implement and evaluate programmes of activity to pre-defined objectives which support societal, corporate and value-chain ambitions. These programmes will need to be:

- of different types depending on the needs of the stakeholder groups involved, for example, social marketing programmes for behaviour change; mass media campaigns for information dissemination; lobbying in the public affairs arena
- strategically formulated using recognised planning disciplines
- employing an appropriate variety of channels and techniques depending on the programme's purpose
- focussed at and with specific stakeholder groups

The communication function will also fulfil a capacity-building role ensuring managers are equipped to create a communicatively competitive organisation.

To encapsulate the findings of this work, the diagram below conceptualises the role of the communication function in the NHS, the bold headings providing an overall descriptor. There was considerable debate in the research team and with the collaborative groups about the descriptors, especially Guardian. A strong alternative was Catalyst because it is clear that many senior communicators as individuals and teams galvanised their organisations into action when they discovered the realties they encountered. Guardian appeared to some to be somewhat passive. However, after considerable discussion, the majority view prevailed – Guardian can be seen as proactive as well as defensive.

A conceptualisation of the four roles of the communication function in the NHS



Orienter – Societal
The communicator acting as a compass in the NHS, ensuring that the licence to operate and its societal mandate are maintained by keeping the system orientated in the direction that maintains stakeholder support. Communication has an essential role to play by informing, involving and engaging with external and internal stakeholders to maintain the legitimacy of the brand.

Navigator – Corporate
Ensuring that stakeholder perspectives are brought into resource decision-making, ensuring that relational and reputational capital is factored in as a key resource, and navigating a way through conflicting stakeholder demands is the key role.

Guardian/Catalyst –Value chain
Embedding a stakeholder and service-user perspective in the design, creation and delivery of services requires the communication function to provide

vision-critical intelligence, engagement capability and evaluation to ensure the delivery of world-class services. The role is also to change the realities on the ground do not match reputational or relational ambition or pose a threat to existing reputation or relationships Here the function is as guardian/catalyst of NHS values in ways of working and stakeholder partnerships.

Implementer – functional
In this technical role the communication function designs and delivers (or commissions) appropriate communication activities and programmes which will deliver societal, corporate, stakeholder and service-user objectives.
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