

Unlocking the Value of Trust: Trust as a Strategic Communications Tool at the Department of Veterans Affairs

Strategic communications planning and change management is a widely accepted necessity for program success and business transformation. This umbrella term describes the way an organization should identify communication channels, and plan and track messaging between both internal and external stakeholders, especially during periods of organizational change.

Despite what many believe, **strategic communication is built on trust and is not just the dissemination of information.** Program managers can create a sound strategy and identify appropriate mediums for dispersing information, but if an employee does not trust his/her leadership, the messaging and expectations for change in behavior may be lost.

What is trust?

At its most basic level, trust is a belief built up over time through repeated positive interactions. After a series of events in which the outcome is good, we begin to *trust* that the outcome of such interactions will continue to be positive.

Trust is more easily gained through personal interaction and is rooted in personal experience. Since large Federal organizations such as the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) are diffused and complex, leadership must build trust virtually or from afar, for employees to see programmatic success and accept the communications being conveyed to them.

Why is trust important to the VA?

Building trust gives Federal agencies the advantage of telling a story with a clear narrative in times of crisis by turning stakeholders, including employees, into advocates. Among people who trust a company a great deal, more than half (59%) say they would “definitely” give that company the benefit of the doubt in a crisis (Ipsos, 2019). Among people who feel neutral toward a company, that percentage shrinks to just 10% (Ipsos, 2019). Wouldn't you rather an employee share information with their frontline leader instead of a local news agency during a time of crisis?

Trust also is needed to break the siloed and outdated infrastructure that only prioritizes top-down communication. Employees must trust that leadership is transparent with them and in turn, leadership must trust and listen to employees whom they want to enact change. This cyclical dialogue between leadership and the field can only lead to improved customer care for veterans.

Where does the VA go from here?

The VA has committed to improving trust with the veterans and families it serves, as well as its employees. Examples of this commitment include customer and patient experience initiatives such as the “Red Coat Ambassador” program, implemented to assist veterans with wayfinding at VA hospitals. Additionally, the “Own the Moment” training moves the needle for cultural change, empowering employees to positively contribute to the veterans' VA experience. These types of initiatives have helped increase veteran trust in VA hospitals and community clinics, as well as employee trust.

However, for future internal change management and strategic communications to work, leadership must continue to build and *keep* the trust of the frontline employee. VA trust scores will continue to increase externally by continuing to focus internally. Trainings and initiatives have staying power when employees believe in the vision of their leadership and the strategic communications they are providing.

Employee engagement and trust will be a critical enabler for absorbing the impact of change resulting from the VA's healthcare transformation across its most valuable asset: its nearly 400,000 employees.

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For more information on trust as a strategic communications tool, please visit ipsos.com or rbmanagementconsultants.com.

Sources

(2019). *Unlocking The Value Of Reputation*. Ipsos. Retrieved from https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/publication/documents/2018-05/unlocking_value_of_reputation-may_2018.pdf