

Turning executives into IC advocates: Strategies for success



Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic caused the world to shut down before scattering the workforce to fulfill their duties remotely or in a hybrid workplace model. This prompted more executives to realize the impact internal communications (IC) can have on organizational outcomes — including improving employee engagement and sentiment, facilitating alignment on shared goals, creating a sense of connectedness and belonging, and improving talent retention.

Internal communications teams certainly have proven their value in informing, inspiring, connecting and engaging the workforce over the past three years — but there's still work to be done to turn executives into IC advocates. To help leadership understand the strong return on investment of effective internal communications, and having them be more involved with IC efforts.

Leadership engagement has a measurable impact on the success of internal communications — and there's a trickle-down effect to other areas of the organization. Research shows that engaged executives have a measurable impact on revenue, employee happiness and retention. [Gallup](#) found that organizations with highly engaged employees see an

average of 21% higher profitability. Companies with high levels of executive engagement have up to 59% more engaged employees. A report by [WTW](#) indicated that companies with leaders who actively communicate and engage with their employees are four times more likely to have high levels of [employee engagement](#). Furthermore, a [study by Weber Shandwick](#) found that in companies where executives maintain a visible presence, employees are 1.6 times more likely to stay committed to the organization and its goals.

Whether answering tough questions at a virtual town hall, providing the “why” behind a change in an email newsletter, celebrating strong performance by teams or individuals in a personalized video message, or sharing a heartfelt comment on the intranet in response to an employee's new baby announcement, authentically engaged leaders can make all the difference.

We recently spoke to four seasoned communications professionals from a variety of organizations — ranging from nonprofits to financial institutions — to better understand how they've overcome obstacles and turned their leadership teams into active participants and evangelists for the internal communications function.



Build a plan to attract leaders



The first step to activate engaged, committed leaders in your internal communications strategy is to guide them into a shared vision of what's required of them – and what's in it for them.

Effective internal communications make employees feel like they're part of a team with a shared vision rather than individuals performing a task. Ultimately, [this can lead](#) to higher profitability, increased customer satisfaction and reduced turnover – all key goals for any executive.

Executives can also personally benefit from open, [transparent communication](#) with employees.

Chelsey Louzeiro, Senior Internal Communications Manager for non-profit [Heifer International](#), has demonstrated this to her leadership team.

She created a communications plan that demonstrated how being involved in internal communications doesn't just help leaders be heard – it also helps them hear vital information from employees.

“We had a thought-out, written internal communication strategy and were able to present it to them in a way that they could see how information from the top goes down, and then also information from the bottom comes up,” Chelsey said. “So it's going both ways; we're bringing information up to them.”

When to present your IC plan

Having invested significant thought into crafting a plan, it's essential to carefully consider when to present it to executive stakeholders. The best time for securing buy-in is before you need it, advises Kevin Berchou, Head of Communications for [M&T Bank](#). He calls it asking “in a time of peace.” He explains that “the time to tell a story is not when you really need something urgently and in a ‘time of war’— It's during a time of peace.” This shows that the internal comms team has taken a strategic rather than reactive approach.

Build a plan to attract leaders (cont.)

How to measure success

The last critical element of your plan is to show how you will measure success. Measuring the effectiveness of internal comms must extend beyond simple metrics such as how many people attended town halls or interacted through the intranet, Chelsey advised. To really get leadership's attention, you need to track metrics that serve the bottom line, such as:

- Did the team understand the information they were exposed to?
- How did it change their perception of the company and leadership?
- Do they feel more engaged?
- Are they more likely to stay with the company?
- Is there a difference in productivity after these initiatives are introduced?

Getting to these numbers can take time and a little bit of creativity. You'll want to look into pulse and employee engagement surveys, knowledge saturation studies, focus groups and other methods for truly understanding your employee audiences. These results can earn your internal communications team additional respect and resources by demonstrating a commitment to real, business-oriented outcomes – a winning strategy with goal-focused executives.

"That's going to get you the buy-in," Chelsey said.

Now that you're familiar with essential components of an internal comms plan that will resonate with executives, let's hear from communications professionals who have followed these steps to success.

Strategies for empowering executives and success stories



Highlight Past Successes

Executives want to lead winning teams. Demonstrating success with one leader can significantly encourage more to join and support the initiative. That's what Giulia Fitzgerald, Internal Communications Specialist at [BenefitMall](#), found with her leader spotlight series.

Her simple idea involved asking executive leaders a series of humanizing questions, such as: What are three things that are always in your refrigerator? What did you study in school? Or, which are your favorite family/pet photos?

"You're trying to connect with as many different people who can relate to the leaders in different ways," Giulia said. And it's working.

"Leaders have come back to me individually and told me how much it has changed their relationship with people that they've worked with for years," Giulia shared. "Because there's never been an entry into some sort of conversation."

The positive outcomes have inspired more leaders to get involved. The entire executive team has now had spotlights, and Giulia is working her way through the next tier of leadership, who already see the benefits in play.

"I've gotten really positive feedback from the leaders themselves for contributing."

Strategies for empowering executives and success stories (cont.)

Sell the power of the leader's unique perspective

Kevin also works to spotlight executives and their contributions, but leaders are sometimes reluctant to take center stage. His solution? Collaborating with them to illustrate why no one can narrate their story better than they can.

Recently, he asked an executive to speak on "Community Live," a bi-weekly all-hands call. She was hesitant, but Kevin knew she was the subject matter expert and the best person to tell the story.

"This is your opportunity to endorse in a really powerful and visible way," he told the leader. "Something that you're really passionate about. I wouldn't want to tell this story without you being there."

That convinced her to take her moment on stage – and it went well.

"You get on this call, and thousands of your colleagues are watching and it's a really warm and powerful story. The feedback loop there is gonna make you feel good," Kevin said.

Tailor comms to reflect the leader's preferences

While the bank executive made an impactful appearance, Carolyn Clark, VP of Employee Experience Strategy of Simpplr, a modern intranet solution provider, suggests giving leaders a choice in how they participate.

"I think it is really important not to have a one-size-fits-all approach when speaking to executives. You need to play into their engagement in the way that is best for them," she said.

For instance, her CEO doesn't love video, so they find opportunities for him to write. Simpplr's CRO, on the other hand, embraces video communication so they lean into that strength. Discovering those nuances comes with time and building trust with executive leaders. Ask them how they most enjoy communicating and what topics excite them – but also observe them. Do they light up on a stage talking about new product features in front of the entire company? Or do they feel more comfortable in a fireside chat-type scenario? Play to their strengths.

"Developing campaigns around their own personalities is the way to make it easy for them," Carolyn said.

Getting financial buy-in



Leadership involvement in internal communications is important — and the right communications software, like a modern intranet or town hall video service, can magnify the impact of their efforts. Such tools require a financial investment, so again, it's about providing a strong return on that investment.

Fortunate IC teams have a CEO or a CFO who understands the financial value of a modern intranet and other cutting-edge internal communications tools, Carolyn said. If you don't, you'll need to invest more work into bringing them along.

Make the connection between software and bottom-line success

It can be difficult to persuade leaders that an investment in an internal communications system will help to boost the bottom line. But an engaged, active workforce who understands company direction and policies, who can collaborate without friction and easily access all the tools and information they need to do their best work, is one of the most powerful revenue builders for any organization. Making that case depends on who you're talking to and how well they understand the connection between internal comms software and employee engagement, productivity and ultimately, the bottom line.

“If they aren't familiar with the tools you're proposing, then you have to build a great story about why it matters. Create a clear narrative around the impact that a new intranet can have,” Carolyn said. “You have to be a sales person. And you have to create parallels with software they are familiar with in other parts of the business. Be the connector for them.”

Getting financial buy-in (cont.)

Bring in reinforcements

Carolyn suggests treating internal communications tools like any other mission-critical software and tying it as strongly as you can to the bottom line. Consider bringing in expertise from IT and other departments to take cues on how they've found success making their case for a new platform.

Speak their language

You have to speak the language of the highest-level person that you have to convince," Carolyn said. "And if they don't understand the language you're using around employee experience or engagement, then you have to find the way that those things connect to the metrics they care about—which ultimately are going to be those highest-level metrics at an organization. Retention, revenue, productivity, efficiency."

Kevin agrees by saying

"As a comms team, associate yourself with business outcomes. You want to be able to develop connections with the businesses that you support by indicating and demonstrating that the work you're doing in the comms space is actually helping these businesses achieve their outcomes. That's really, really powerful," he said.

Conclusion



Most executives are well-intentioned — they just need the right internal communications systems and strategic guidance to understand the value that IC and the right internal comms software bring to the table and to fully participate.

[Getting executives consistently involved in internal communications](#) initiatives can make employees feel supported and understood by a humanized leadership team. This can reduce turnover and improve critical business metrics such as revenue. Helping your executives understand these business imperatives can take internal comms initiatives from warm and fuzzy nice-to-haves to must-haves that will drive the results they care about the most..

By starting with a plan, building a compelling story around the business need for strong internal communications, showing results and walking executives through the process, you can partner to create comms that help your organization, and all the people who bring it to life, thrive.

About Simpplr

Simpplr is the modern intranet that transforms the work experience for all employees – wherever and however they work. Simpplr is the only platform that unifies employee engagement, enablement, and services, leveraging state-of-the-art AI models to deliver a seamless, cohesive, personalized employee experience. Wherever people work, Simpplr enables them to flourish.

Trusted by more than 1,000 leading brands, including Snowflake, Moderna, Eurostar, and AAA, Simpplr's customers are achieving measurable productivity gains, increased employee engagement, and accelerated business performance.

Simpplr is headquartered in Silicon Valley, CA, with offices in the UK, Canada, and India, and is backed by Norwest Venture Partners, Sapphire Ventures, Salesforce Ventures, and Tola Capital. Learn more at simpplr.com.

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