3 Communication Fixes That Always Fail And 3 Things You Should Do Instead

If you follow any road of pain and frustration in an organization, it will inevitably lead to communication. Even if the problem didn't start there, the communication activity is where people feel it and the communication department (or role) is where it ends.

I've worked with hundreds of organizations over the years. All of them experience common symptoms at some point: *Systems start to fail. Silos creep in. Staff morale tumbles. Quality control falters.*

Whatever "it" is, the temptation is to fix communication—and fix it fast.

These fast fixes are the common first step, and they almost never never solve the problem.

1. **Hire It Away**

   It's easy to think that hiring someone with a fancy resume and shiny portfolio will fix the problem that's been plaguing you. But don't be so quick to assume a rock star is the solution.

   It's true that fresh perspective and credentials can make a difference in reversing negative tides, but there are several other factors at play. A single person is not going to fix everything. **You can't drop a rock star into a dysfunctional team and erase the dysfunction—it won't happen.**

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"An executive's performance depends on both her personal competencies and the capabilities of the organization. Top performers who join new companies find that the transitions they must make are tougher than they had anticipated. When a star tries to learn about the procedures, personalities, relationships, and subcultures of the organization, he is handicapped by the attitudes of his new colleagues." - Harvard Business Review

2.   Fire It Away

You've given someone the job, but they aren't getting the job done. They're taking too long and people are complaining. Trust across departments is low, growth is stagnant. The next move for quick relief is easy to predict: "You're fired."

Many times firing someone doesn't eliminate the inherent problem—corporate muscle memory is strong and your next hire will face the same roadblocks.

"Moderate misfits who are charismatic and visionary are a company's best bet for driving top-down change—but the process will be slow and tedious, and these leaders will need to have a great deal of support in order to persist and prevail. The odds of success will be slim, and some leaders may be so disruptive in their intentions that they may harm morale and productivity or end up disrupting themselves." - Harvard Business Review

Firing people can also be expensive when it's the wrong move. **A scapegoat termination often comes at a cost**: time, resources, and negative impact on staff. Instead of moving forward, you might end up irritating the existing issue and sinking deeper into new problems that are created as a result.

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3.   Work It Away

The third approach that never works is to just work harder, darn it. You try to fix the problem with tight-fisted control, restrictive systems, and complicated policies:

- "We need six weeks' lead time for every project."
- "From now on, all requests go through my department. It's mandatory."
- "That's not our policy."

The focus becomes less and less about working together as a team to accomplish a shared goal and more and more about managing the workload. Meanwhile the root issues still exist and maybe even get worse.

Contrary to your first instinct, it's agility that leads people through necessary change, not rigidity.

"Meeting complexity with complexity can create more confusion than it resolves." - Donald Sull

Want to know what works? *Keep reading.*

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Try This Instead

Think Progress, Not Perfection

Untangle the mess one strand at a time. The problem you're trying to solve will require change—but don't try to fix everything at once. Impatient decisions like this can actually reverse the progress you're aiming for with damaging strains and breaks. **Look for small changes you can make immediately. These should be easy wins that help you build momentum.**

Look at Your Culture

Regroup and acknowledge it's going to take a minute to bring the change you want to see. You won't see the *organization* get better until you make things better for the *people inside the organization*. The first step is an inside-out job that requires "two-way branding" to strengthen both sides of the equation. How much of your budget is spent on internal communication versus external communication? If you're not investing in both and linking the two together, problems will arise and persist.

Learn more: *"Employees need to hear the same messages that you send out to the marketplace. At most companies, however, internal and external communications are often mismatched. This can be very confusing, and it threatens employees' perceptions of the company's integrity: They are told one thing by management but observe that a different message is being sent to the public." -Harvard Business Review*

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Look at Your Systems

What have you outgrown? What doesn't work because times have changed and problems have evolved? Identify what can be simplified or retired. Where can you streamline cumbersome, complicated, and disjointed processes for your staff (and you)?

For example: How many different steps and systems does someone have to use to get an event on a shared calendar, request promotions, and line up tech support? Where is the "easy button"—the one point of entry everyone can use to share what needs to be communicated? If it doesn't exist, find a way to make it happen.

Look at Your Structure

Is your staff operating at their full potential and in their greatest strengths? Has the role changed since they first filled it? Does it require the same skill set? Is there another place in the organization where that skill set is needed? Does the role and/or title carry old baggage with dated expectations? Reframe the role (and the expectations around it) with an updated title that invites a new approach and fresh responsibility.

For example: Instead of "copywriter" consider "content curator." Or consider moving the communication team under operations instead of admin or IT.

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Look at the Workload

Have you added more and more responsibility to the same size support team? How many of those projects or events are still solving active problems and meeting unmet needs and how many are nice to have because "they've always been there?" Pulling the plug on a project, saying goodbye to a long-standing event, or moving to a new technology may feel like personal abandonment. It's not. If you're not able to make decisions about work based on an overarching strategy (versus personal preference or comfort zones), you risk staying tied to dated events or projects long past the expiration date. Right size the work to your staff size and make sure the work you're doing is directly tied to a practical, measurable goal (not aspirational vision).

For example: Essential Communications Decision Tree

Establish Accountability

Determine clear, measurable, attainable goals for each staff member with routine check-ins. Create rules for a safe zone where you celebrate wins and drill down into challenges together. If goals are repeatedly blocked, look into the core issue. Remember, the problem didn't start overnight. They won't be able to fix it overnight. But you can check in periodically to provide feedback and keep momentum headed in the right direction.

For example: Professional Development Plan

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Develop Cross-Functional Plans

Encourage collaboration among staff to diffuse turf-guarding. The more synergy you bring around common goals, the more silos will crumble and morale will climb. People from different departments can work in their "individual zone" while contributing to one shared objective.

Start here: Series Outline & Creative Brief

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Kem Meyer *The Author*

Kem is a veteran communications strategist and brand therapist who has spent three decades shaping communication for small business, big business, non-profits, tech, finance, PR, marketing, schools, and churches. Known for her one-of-a-kind approach to making complex things simple and making hard work fun, she's in demand for her ability to produce results for leaders and their organizations.

Fun fact: while Kem spends her time working in all industry sectors, she wrote Less Chaos. Less Noise. for congregations who need a little help communicating more effectively as they work to bring help to others.

KemMeyer.com *The Team*

Kem's handpicked team of professionals are known for being great at what they do. But, what drives them is helping other great people solve problems, put their vision in action, meet meaningful goals, and grow good things. They build systems, design brands, dismantle silos, organize communications, design team-building messaging, and equip leaders with the tools and know-how to bust barriers and amplify results.

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