

# The Communicating Organisation: Executive Summary

Using communication to support the  
development of high-performing  
organisations



*Health*

# Why good communication matters

There is a wide range of evidence to support the significant contribution that effective communication can make to improving organisational effectiveness and performance.

According to a study by Capgemini Ernst & Young in 2003, between 80–85% of the market value of the top 500 US companies was comprised of intangible assets such as reputation. And when looking at the impact of reputation on customer loyalty, a study of the US airline industry by M. Graham and P. Bansdal in 2007 found that for each one-point increase in an airline's reputation, consumers were willing to pay \$18 more for a plane ticket. In short, there is much evidence that reputation is a key contributor to the health and performance of businesses.

The evidence that communication makes a vital contribution to organisations applies to public services as well as to businesses. Over the years, the survey research organisation Ipsos MORI has developed a substantial amount of data related to the overall performance of local public services and their communication effectiveness. Within the NHS, it found that better-performing trusts committed more resources to communication, were more likely to have marketing strategies in place, and had communication teams that were more influential. It also found that staff in trusts rated as 'excellent' were significantly more likely to understand their roles than those in weak-performing ones.

Ipsos MORI also looked at the communication effectiveness of 29 London local authorities, including 7 that were rated as 'excellent' by the Audit Commission for 2003/4. It found that all 7 'excellent' councils were also among the top 11 councils rated by the public as being the best at keeping them informed.

Good communication is also important for engaging with staff. The Cabinet Office carried out a review of the evidence base for employee engagement during 2007, as part of its work on improving engagement with civil servants across all government departments. It showed that engaged staff are 43% more productive, perform up to 20% more effectively and take an average of 3.5 fewer sick days a year than disengaged staff.

So, good communication that engages staff, customers/patients and stakeholders is vital to organisational success. But what does it look like? The following section describes it.

# What good communication looks like

Leeds Metropolitan University was commissioned in 2008 by the Department of Health to summarise the attributes of organisations that are good at communicating and engaging. To start with, it produced a review of literature around effective communication. It tested the conclusions from this work with a range of leading communication academics and practitioners from the UK, USA, Australia and Sweden. The work was further tested with a reference group of NHS communicators and with a selection of chief executives within the NHS.

Based on this work, the university produced a paper that summarised the evidence base – *What Good Looks Like: An evidence base* (2009), Centre for Public Relations Studies, Leeds Business School, Leeds Metropolitan University. This document builds on that work.

*What Good Looks Like* describes the distinguishing features of organisations that communicate effectively. Such organisations have the following **four attributes**:

- An excellent understanding of the brand
- Excellence in planning, managing and evaluating communication
- Leadership support for communication
- Communication as a core competency.

These organisations apply the above four attributes across the following **four perspectives**:

- Societal – how the NHS is perceived as a whole at national and local levels
- Corporate – how communication operates within each organisation at the level of strategy setting
- Service user and stakeholder – an understanding of how patients and the public experience the NHS locally
- Functional – the way in which communication strategies and programmes are put into operation.


## A simple framework

The table over the page provides a simple framework for describing organisations with world-class communication. By mapping the **four attributes** against the **four perspectives**, we can produce a description of excellent communication across 16 boxes. This should not be seen as a rigid framework to be applied in a 'tick-box' manner, but as a set of useful descriptions to support organisations in identifying areas of strength and weakness as they embark upon the journey of developing excellent communication.

Table – a framework for describing communicating organisations

Perspectives Attributes	Societal perspective	Corporate perspective	Service user/ stakeholder perspective	Functional perspective
<b>Excellent understanding of the brand</b>	The purpose, principles and values, set out in the NHS Constitution, are embodied in the NHS, supported by the public and define the national brand. The local brand is aligned to the national brand	The corporate strategy and brand are aligned. The board understands the value of relational and reputational capital	The brand is experienced through services and by engagement with stakeholders	The communications function understands the brand, effectively promotes and defends it and anticipates threats and risks to it
<b>Excellence in planning, managing and evaluating communication</b>	Communication plans and strategies take full account of the brand and follow best practice	Communication priorities and strategies inform, and are aligned to, the corporate strategy	Effective processes are in place to listen to service users and stakeholders, and to engage them in dialogue and action	There is effective implementation of programmes of action which promote services and the organisation, and respond to user and stakeholder needs
<b>Leadership support for communication</b>	Leaders understand the brand and model it in their behaviour	The role of communication is understood and supported by the organisation's leaders in the formulation of corporate strategy and in resource decisions	Leadership action is informed by customer and stakeholder insight	The communications function has direct access to the leadership
<b>Communication as a core competency</b>	The wider organisation understands the brand and models it in its behaviour	The communication perspective is embedded in the way that the management role is undertaken	Appropriate communication skills exist among staff involved in delivering services and stakeholder engagement	The communications function is appropriately located in the organisation with professionally competent staff in post

This document is aimed at senior leaders and professional communicators within the NHS. It is based on evidence from research and examples of best practice in order to help them develop world-class communication within their organisations.



Those organisations that successfully apply the four attributes across the four perspectives will tend to see the following benefits:

- Improved trust, legitimacy and reputation with the local community
- Informed business decisions, better equipped senior managers and good stakeholder networks
- Services that uphold the brand, are informed by the needs of its users and are supported by engaged stakeholders
- A communications department that performs an effective and functional role in a focused and informed organisation.

The rest of this document describes the four attributes and four perspectives in more detail. We also provide a number of case studies to illustrate different aspects of good practice.



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