Build the Plan, Stan

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Are you thinking about *it*? How, when, where, and who will return to the office? Maybe you are building a plan that directs people in various stages over several weeks and/or months. That plan is rooted in action, in movement of people. People need to see a purpose for the change, have a picture for where they are going, to have a plan for how to get there, and have a part they can play.

Consider that your return to office plan is the same as your new software, or reorganization. It is your newest initiative, and one you've never had before. That makes it daunting, and this isn't the first time you have done hard things. As you are developing the timing and flow of your people returning, pause to consider how this current initiative aligns with the communication you have planned. The resulting plan is complex, and ready to activate. Let's start with outlining the change ahead.

There are four primary considerations involved in any initiative:

1. Project: What is our project? In this instance we are outlining the return to shared space.

2. Purpose: What are the benefits of returning to shared space? You might have a long list here – culture, productivity (efficiency and effectiveness), wellbeing, to name a few.

3. Particulars: What has to change? On the surface you might say 'location', which is accurate. There is more – the attitude of your employees toward being in the office again, the relationship of your firm to remote working, training processes and mechanisms. The more specific the better. No regulation on the size of this list.

4. People: what are the behaviors that will have to change? These may vary by team, category of employee, tenure, type of work, direct reports, etc. The key is to consider as many as possible of the cross sections of people in your firm.

Now that we created the list of considerations, let's build the communication that will bring our folks back to shared space with as much interest as we can. We know the desired outcome (return to shared space), and the various factors are identified, now let's create our message matrix (communication plan).

These five components complete our plan:

1. Audience: Luckily, we identified the behaviors of people above with specificity to the cross section of people. Thinking about the desired outcome and overlaying the different audiences that will need to hear your message creates a continuity of your message.

2. Type: There are a number of different types of messages, each with a purpose that builds your message over time. Your first communication may be to **inform**. Telling folks the latest update (you've likely been doing this for some time already) about what is happening in COVID terms for your office. You may have a **reference** document that indicates how to operate in shared space, how to communicate with colleagues, or any number of other 'how to's'. Think about your firm's culture and how people thrived in it before shutdown. You'll want to create a communication that **persuades** with reminders of benefits (and it doesn't have to be culture, it could be productivity, or any of the other purpose items you listed). There are two more types that are necessary in different environments – **empower** and **request**. You want to empower people to be their best selves as they return to work, so that communication may include safety, personal care, work methods and processes. **Requests** can be invitations to participate (pilot groups often are built from requests that tie the purpose and particulars), a specific call to action for a certain audience or behavior.

3. Medium: Last March, when we first shut down, we immediately relied on email as our communication mechanism. We have also migrated to video conferencing, and we have moved away from voice only interactions. Building a communication plan means thinking about what message is delivered in which medium for most effectiveness. Instead of defaulting to email, where is the appropriate place for voice mail and recorded video or audio in addition to video conferencing and phone calls.

4. When: Think about the flow of information for these messages. The timing for each message (audience, type and medium considered), along with how these build into a continuous stream headed toward your purpose.

5. Responsible: Last, and certainly not least, you want to assign accountability to your plan. Make the list of people who are part of this communication plan, and allocate messaging among them, along with the representative time you determined in the step above.

The complexity of our current times doesn't have to be met with an overwhelming assignment to return your firm to the office. These items above will guide you to a workable plan that is applicable to all future initiatives in your firm.

For more information and further reading on Communication, visit our online library.

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Judy understands leadership and teams. And, she knows how to help you maximize the potential of yours. For over two decades, Judy has applied her vast knowledge of team dynamics, emotional intelligence, work/life balance, leadership, and finance to help organizations improve their people, process, performance and, ultimately, profits.

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