

**BUSINESS COMMUNICATION****TARA LANDES***How to execute the company address*

In my work as a consultant to various businesses, I have witnessed what I hope isn't a growing trend but rather a neglected area of business practice: the infrequency with which the presidents of small companies formally communicate with their staff.

From their perspective, this makes sense.

I hear, "They already know what we do and why we do it," or my personal favourite, "I have an open-door policy – I talk to them every day!"

A successful business leader is always providing some degree of insight to his or her employees, but an exceptional one knows that providing a bird's eye view of the forest ensures everyone is moving toward the same Douglas Fir, not just any old evergreen.

Ideally delivered quarterly, the company address allows leaders to broadcast their message with focus and without filter. Regular formal communication about the company improves morale and staff retention while also contributing to overall improvement in performance because everyone is working toward a common purpose.

For some small-business leaders, the thought of standing in front of the entire company brings back teenage dreams of centre-stage fame, and others can paint a vision of the future as beautiful as **Van Gogh's** "Starry Night." But public speaking is not for everyone.

Whether you love to be on stage or prefer to be behind the scenes, consider structuring your company address with the following:

1. Provide an overview of the past quarter. Acknowledge the disappointments or shortfalls, but focus on the accomplishments of the firm. Highlight the company's strengths, particularly where you excel as a team.

Place more emphasis on the effort that was expended in the right direction and less on the results: "Q4 was tough – we lost a couple of great clients, and a couple of nice opportunities slipped through our fingers.

"We also won some contracts, which helped keep us in line with our financial projections. I challenge anyone in the industry to beat our customer service team. The hours spent improving the overall customer experience have been some of the best spent over the past year."

2. Articulate a clear message. What is the one objective you want to pursue? If they remember nothing else, what should they remember? Think of **Bill Clinton** on the 1992 campaign trail – every activity was measured against his one priority "It's the economy, stupid."

3. Have one focus that all departments can rally around and measure their activities against: "Q1 will be all about new business. If there is one message I want you to take away from today it's that new customers are our number 1 priority. From finding them to ensuring they have stellar experiences with us when they decide to give us a try, everyone's priority must be to find and keep new clients."

4. Offer a plan. The theme of the quarter that you set is critical. What will increase people's confidence in achieving it is your ability to outline some of the activities you believe will make the goal a reality: "We'll be starting our goal-setting exercises around these initiatives. I've also retained outside help to identify our strengths and weaknesses so that we can really focus our efforts and build another floor on the foundation we laid last year."

5. Appreciation. Every team has some truly outstanding performers and it is important to acknowledge them publicly. For those who are not measuring up, the company address is not a forum to single someone out for negative feedback.

You can publicly highlight individual people's successes, but never their failures: "I know there is no company out there that is as creative with

their customer solutions. I'd particularly like to acknowledge Judy in accounting for developing the new invoicing system to meet XYZ's needs and Rodney for the new product for company 123. All of you make a great difference to our clients."

6. The positive and realistic conclusion. Be positive about the future. Explain how the quarter's focus will connect to greater success for the company and the individuals that work there.

Avoid overblown promises of success, but do motivate your audience to focus on that which is within its span of control: "Q1 will be interesting, challenging and fun. We will all be focused on finding and retaining new clients and learning from the specialists how we can do it. I am committing to providing the resources necessary for professional development so that everyone can learn and I'm excited for you to provide the effort. It won't be easy, but it's going to be a great quarter. I'm really looking forward to the days ahead."

Delivering a skilled, motivating company address is not a simple task but it can pay significant dividends. Consider that, in the absence of information, people will assume the worst. It's unlikely you are hiding anything they don't already know.

Leadership is a practice, and the more often you deliver a company address, the more comfortable you will become. Make the decision to try this for a year and see if it provides more focus and stronger morale for your team. ■

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