

Make a bigger impact.

A practical framework for internal communicators who want to improve organisational performance.



Seven steps to a bigger impact.

This guide takes you through seven key steps, with practical exercises to help you build your plan.

AB Insights

Drawn from our 60 years' experience helping many of the world's best-known organisations communicate with their people.

Worth a Listen

Recommendations from The Internal Comms Podcast, to give you further insight and inspiration along the way.

1

Make a plan, not a to-do list

Start with the difference between activity and strategy.

2

Gather your intelligence

Build a clear picture of your organisation before you start planning.

3

Find the real problem

Get beyond the symptoms and uncover what really needs solving.

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Begin with the end in mind

Define what success looks like before deciding how to get there.

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Make smart strategic choices

Focus your resources where they can make the greatest difference.

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Define your objectives, audiences and experiences

Turn your strategic priorities into a practical communication approach.

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Make it happen, make it better

Mobilise your network, build your roadmap, measure what matters and adapt as you go.

STEP 1

YOUR SEVEN STEPS

Make a plan, not a to-do list

Start with the difference between activity and strategy.

Let's start with an uncomfortable truth.

Many internal communication plans are not plans at all. They are editorial calendars. To-do lists. Campaign timelines. Well-intentioned promises to 'raise awareness', 'drive engagement' or 'improve communication'. These can be useful, but they do not constitute a strategic internal communication plan.

So, what's the difference between a plan that's tactical and one that's strategic?

A tactical plan

- ✗ lists activities
- ✗ focuses on channels
- ✗ contains vague ambitions
- ✗ tries to please everyone
- ✗ measures outputs
- ✗ avoids difficult choices

A strategic plan

- ✓ solves a business problem
- ✓ makes hard choices
- ✓ creates focus
- ✓ links communication to organisational performance
- ✓ defines success clearly
- ✓ says 'no' as often as it says 'yes'

The goal of your plan is not to describe what your internal communication team will do. The goal is to explain how internal communication will help move your organisation forward.

Before you start planning, ask yourself:

What organisational or business problem(s) are we here to solve?

If we succeed, what will be different?

What might we need to stop doing to make this possible?

AB INSIGHT

Resist the temptation to complete this exercise on your own. Strategy is a team sport!

Bring together colleagues from adjacent functions such as Employee Experience, Human Resources, Learning & Development, Marketing, Media Relations and Change. Turn these questions into a lively workshop.

You'll uncover different perspectives, challenge assumptions and spot opportunities that would otherwise remain hidden.

"The smartest person in the room is the room."

Katie Macaulay, AB's Managing Director

WORTH A LISTEN · EPISODE 108

Seth Godin Rewrites the Rules of Internal Communication

In this fascinating conversation, Seth Godin encourages us to stop thinking like message distributors and start thinking like change-makers. It's the perfect mindset shift before you begin building your strategy.

STEP 2

STEP TWO

Gather your intelligence

Build a clear picture of your organisation before you start planning.

As part of their preparations for take-off, pilots complete a pre-flight checklist. Before military commanders commit troops to battle, they gather intelligence.

You need to do the same.

The best strategic decisions are based on insight, data and evidence. So, before you start writing your strategy, take stock of what you know – and what you don't.

Your pre-flight checklist

How confident are you in your understanding of the following?

Rate each 1–5. Any score below 4 points to a potential gap in your intelligence.

Area	Confidence (1–5)
Business strategy, priorities and culture	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
Leadership expectations	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
Employee needs and insights	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
Audience segmentation	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
Channels and communication experience	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
Resources, constraints and past performance	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Get the lay of the land

Now dig a little deeper. The questions below will help you connect the dots between where the organisation is heading, what leaders and employees need – and want – from communication, and what you realistically have at your disposal.

Don't worry if you can't answer everything yet. Gaps are useful; they tell you where you need to dig deeper before making strategic decisions.

ORGANISATIONAL PRIORITIES

- ☐ What are your organisation's most important priorities over the next 12–24 months?
- ☐ What are the biggest challenges or opportunities standing between the organisation and those ambitions?
- ☐ What major changes, events or initiatives are likely to shape the year ahead?

LEADERSHIP EXPECTATIONS

- ☐ What business problem(s) do senior leaders want internal communication to help solve?
- ☐ What would they like internal communication to do differently or better?
- ☐ How ambitious are they – what does 'great' internal communication look like to them?

EMPLOYEE UNDERSTANDING

- ☐ What do employees need from communication to understand the organisation, perform at their best and feel a sense of belonging?
- ☐ What are their biggest frustrations, barriers and unmet needs when it comes to communication?
- ☐ Which audiences matter most – because they are hardest to reach, most critical to success or have disproportionate influence over others?

CHANNELS, RESOURCES & CONSTRAINTS

- ☐ Which channels and communication experiences work well today – and which don't?
- ☐ What people, skills, budget and technology do you realistically have at your disposal?
- ☐ What constraints or dependencies could limit your ambition or slow you down?

Help! My organisation doesn't have a clear strategy.

Priorities shift. Strategies can be poorly documented. Sometimes leadership teams are still working out where the organisation is heading.

Don't let that stop you planning.

CREATE AN INTERIM STRATEGY BASED ON WHAT YOU DO KNOW:

- ☐ what leaders consistently talk about
- ☐ what employees need right now
- ☐ the challenges the organisation is trying to solve
- ☐ the opportunities communication can influence today.

A good-enough strategy is infinitely better than no strategy at all.

AB INSIGHT

If you don't know, ask.

One of the best ways to gather strategic intelligence is through confidential, one-to-one interviews with senior leaders.

Ask about the organisation's priorities, challenges, opportunities and ambitions. Explore what's helping the business succeed, what's getting in the way and where communication could make a greater contribution.

You may be surprised by how differently leaders describe the same organisation. The patterns, themes and tensions that emerge can provide the foundations for a far stronger internal communication strategy.

Need help? AB's Acid Test combines confidential executive interviews, employee research and expert analysis to uncover the insights that drive smarter internal communication strategies.

WORTH A LISTEN · EPISODE 97

Leaving the Ladder Down – Helping IC Pros Step Up, with Rachel Miller

Spend 45 minutes with Rachel Miller, author of Internal Communication Strategy. Her practical framework, strategic thinking and refreshing honesty make this the perfect companion to this stage of your journey.

STEP 3

STEP THREE

Find the real problem

Get beyond the symptoms and uncover what really needs solving.

One of the most common mistakes in strategy development is solving the wrong problem. Or, more accurately, solving a symptom rather than a cause.

Here are some familiar symptoms – and some equally familiar solutions.

The symptom	The tempting solution	What it won't fix
Employees complain about too many emails	Email-free Fridays!	Poor targeting, message duplication or weak channel governance
Engagement scores are low	A campaign to bring your EVP to life	A poor employee experience
Leaders say people don't understand the strategy	More strategy communication	A confusing strategy or one not written in a clear, compelling and meaningful way
Content isn't being read	Bolder, more engaging content	Poorly targeted content that isn't relevant or useful
Managers aren't communicating effectively	A manager communication toolkit	Lack of time, confidence, context or motivation

But hang on...

Every one of those solutions sounds perfectly reasonable. And every one of them could be completely wrong.

Before you leap to the solution, stop and ask: What's really going on here?

The best strategies are built on insight. An insight is a deeper truth that helps explain why something is happening – and points you towards a smarter solution.

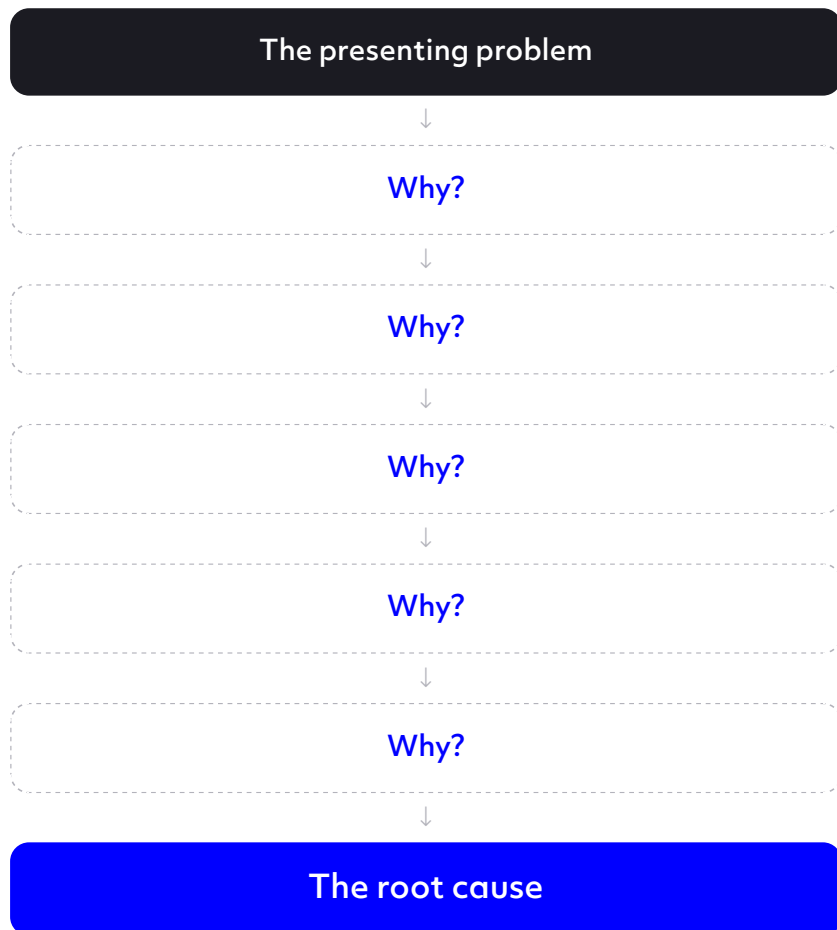
Start with the evidence

What data, research, feedback or observation tells you there is a genuine problem?

What does the evidence tell you – and what are you assuming?

Try the Five Whys

Toyota developed a deceptively simple problem-solving technique. Start with the presenting problem. Ask why? Then ask why again. Keep going until you get beyond the symptoms and closer to the underlying cause.



Find the insight

Now look for the deeper truth in what you've discovered.

What's the most interesting, surprising or useful thing you've learned?

We used to think...

But we've realised...

Define the opportunity

Now you understand the real problem, where could internal communication make the greatest difference?

And remember: communication may be only part of the answer. Sometimes the smartest recommendation an internal communicator can make is that communication alone won't fix this.

AB INSIGHT

Don't just look for problems. Look for pockets of excellence.

Every organisation has teams, functions or locations where communication is working unusually well. The most engaged teams. The most trusted managers. The leaders people genuinely listen to.

Study these bright spots. What's happening there that could be replicated elsewhere? The answer to your challenge may already exist somewhere inside your organisation.

WORTH A LISTEN · EPISODE 88

It's Fixable – How to Tackle Hard Problems, with Anne Morriss

Listen to a master strategist at work. Anne Morriss argues for resisting the urge to leap to solutions and spending time understanding what's really happening – and why curiosity is one of the most powerful tools we have.

STEP 4

STEP FOUR

Begin with the end in mind

Define what success looks like before deciding how to get there.

One of the most influential business books ever written is Stephen Covey's *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Its second habit is deceptively simple – Begin with the end in mind.

We build this step into every new AB project. Before we start any journey with a client, we decide on the destination.

Too many communication teams spend their time responding to requests, managing channels and publishing content without stopping to ask a more important question – What are we ultimately trying to achieve?

This is your opportunity to lift your head up from today's challenges and think bigger. Imagine it is 18 months from now. Your strategy has been a resounding success. What has changed?

Employees

What do employees know, think, feel or do differently as a result of your strategy?

Leaders

What do leaders know, think, feel or do differently?

Teams

What is different about the way teams communicate, collaborate or share knowledge?

The organisation

How has communication helped move the organisation forward?

The cost of standing still

What are the risks of maintaining the status quo?

What opportunities might the organisation miss?

Sometimes it is easier to think about what happens if nothing changes.

Write your future award entry

Imagine your strategy has been shortlisted for an industry award. Why did you win?
What did you do and what changed as a result?

'This is how we...'

AB INSIGHT

This exercise works best as a workshop, not a solo activity.

Bring together a diverse group of colleagues and challenge them to answer one question: 'If communication was working brilliantly here, what would be different?'

Encourage people to think beyond channels and campaigns. Focus on organisational outcomes. The aim is not to create a wish list. It is to uncover a compelling vision of success that people want to help create.

Remember, today's ambition often becomes tomorrow's strategy.

WORTH A LISTEN · EPISODE 17

Black Belt Thinking – with Sue Dewhurst and Liam FitzPatrick

Few people know more about internal communication planning. Drawing on decades of experience, they share practical models, real-world lessons and plenty of straight-talking advice on how to think more strategically.

STEP

5

STEP FIVE

Make smart strategic choices

Focus your resources where they can make the greatest difference.

This is where many plans fall apart. They try to do everything.

Strategy requires choice. If everything is a priority, nothing is. And every time you invest more time, energy or budget in one area, something else inevitably receives less.

This can be uncomfortable – particularly for internal communication teams accustomed to saying ‘yes’ to every request. But making deliberate choices creates focus, protects your resources and gives you a much better chance of making a meaningful impact.

The essence of strategy is choosing what not to do.

Michael Porter

Plot your impact / effort matrix

Look at everything your team currently does – channels, content, campaigns, events, meetings, services and responsibilities – alongside any new activities you’re considering. Plot each against two criteria: how much difference it makes (impact) and how much time, money and resource it requires (effort).



Don't overthink the scoring. The value of this exercise lies in the conversation it creates, not in achieving mathematical precision.

What does your matrix tell you?

Where are you over-investing?

Where could greater focus deliver disproportionate value?

What are you doing simply because you've always done it?

Does where you spend your time today match where you say your priorities lie?

Make your strategic choices

We will do MORE of...

We will do LESS of...

We will STOP...

We will do DIFFERENTLY...

AB INSIGHT

Your calendar reveals your real strategy.

You might say leadership communication, employee listening or manager capability is a strategic priority. But if most of your team's time is still spent producing content and servicing requests, something doesn't add up.

For every significant new activity you add to your plan, identify something you can stop, reduce, automate, delegate or hand back.

Internal communication teams can quickly become victims of their own success. The better you are, the more people ask for your help. Saying 'no' isn't a failure to be helpful. Sometimes, it's the most strategic decision you can make.

WORTH A LISTEN · EPISODE 54

Brain Care – Mastering Your Mind, with Phil Dobson

Busy isn't the same as effective. Phil Dobson explains why a small proportion of what we do creates a disproportionate amount of value – and why every choice to prioritise one thing means deprioritising something else.

STEP 6

STEP SIX

Define your objectives, audiences and experiences

Turn your strategic priorities into a practical communication approach.

Now that you've made some smart strategic choices, it's time to turn those priorities into a communication plan.

The temptation is to jump straight to activity: 'We need a campaign'. 'Let's do a town hall'. 'We should send an email'. Resist it.

Start with the change you are trying to create. Then identify the people who matter most. Only then decide what communication experiences, content and channels will help you get there.

Message before method.

Set objectives that describe change

A good communication objective isn't something you do. It's something you want to change.

Good objective or bad objective?

Bad objectives

- ✗ Improve communication
- ✗ Raise awareness
- ✗ Increase engagement

Good objectives

- ✓ Increase understanding of our strategic priorities
- ✓ Improve adoption of a new system
- ✓ Increase collaboration and knowledge-sharing between teams
- ✓ Improve compliance with new procedures

Where possible, make your objective specific and measurable. Instead of: “Raise awareness of the new strategy”, try: “Increase the proportion of employees who understand the three strategic priorities and can explain how their role contributes to them.”

Use OASIS to pressure-test your thinking

The UK Government Communication Service’s OASIS framework provides a useful discipline for communication planning. You don’t need a lengthy plan for every piece of communication – but these five questions provide an excellent sense-check before significant activity begins.



Objectives

What are you trying to achieve?



Audience and insights

Who needs to think, feel or act differently – and what do you know about them?



Strategy and ideas

What approach gives you the best chance of creating that change?



Implementation

What will you actually do – when, where and how?



Scoring and evaluation

How will you know whether it worked?

Prioritise your audiences

Not every audience is equally important. Ask: Whose behaviour, understanding or support is most critical to achieving our objective? Avoid defaulting to 'all employees'.

Think about meaningful differences in role, location, seniority, access to technology, working environment, attitudes, needs and influence. And don't forget the people who influence your priority audiences – sometimes the most important person to communicate with isn't the person whose behaviour needs to change, but the leader, manager or colleague they trust.

Priority audience	Why they matter	Current state	Desired state

Define the change

People currently... Think / Feel / Do

We want them to... Think / Feel / Do

What's getting in the way?

Communication cannot solve every problem. A lack of skills, resources, time, trust or leadership action may require something more than communication. Spotting that is part of being a strategic adviser.

Design the experience

Only now should you start thinking about execution. Don't begin with 'What will we publish?' Instead, ask: 'What experience do we want to create?' A strong ecosystem gives people different ways to hear, discuss, participate, find, experience and respond.

Hear

Leadership communication, storytelling, events or broadcast content that creates clarity and direction.

Discuss

Team conversations, manager communication, workshops or Q&As that help people make sense of what they've heard.

Participate

Communities, networks, co-creation, peer-to-peer activity or live experiences that give people an active role.

Find

Clear, searchable, self-service content that gives people the information they need, when they need it.

Experience

Physical or digital experiences that make the message tangible, memorable or useful.

Respond

Listening, feedback and dialogue that allow communication to travel back through the organisation.

Most important communication challenges will need more than one.

Choose your channels

Now choose the channels that can deliver those experiences. A healthy channel ecosystem usually needs a balance of three types:

Broadcast

Helping people hear and understand.

Interactive

Enabling conversation, participation and feedback.

Self-serve

Helping people find what they need, when they need it.

FOR EACH CHANNEL, ASK:

- ☐ Purpose – Why does it exist?
- ☐ Audience – Who is it primarily for?
- ☐ Role – What job does it do in the ecosystem?
- ☐ Experience – What should it enable people to see, hear, feel or do?
- ☐ Success – How will we know it's working?

For any one communication challenge, less is usually more. A small number of well-chosen channels working together will usually outperform a scattergun of disconnected activity.

Final sense-check

Can you complete this sentence?

We want [AUDIENCE] to move from [CURRENT STATE] to [DESIRED STATE] by creating [EXPERIENCE], using [CONTENT/CHANNELS], and we'll know it's working when [MEASURE].

AB INSIGHT

Face-to-face is still your premium channel.

After 60 years of conducting internal communication audits, we can say this with confidence; even in our digital world, employees consistently rate face-to-face among the most trusted and effective ways to communicate.

So, when something is important, complex, sensitive or controversial, ask: Do people need a conversation? Face-to-face gives people the chance to ask, challenge, clarify and respond in the moment – and the magic is in the exchange.

If your face-to-face channels aren't among your highest-rated, treat that as a red flag. Find out why.

WORTH A LISTEN · EPISODE 28

The Godfather of IC – with Bill Quirke

When should we inform? When do we need dialogue? And when do we need genuine involvement?

Bill Quirke shares practical models for matching your communication approach to the outcome you're trying to achieve.

STEP 7

STEP SEVEN

Make it happen, make it better

Mobilise your network, build your roadmap, measure what matters and adapt as you go.

A strategy only becomes valuable when something changes as a result. And you won't make that change happen alone.

Time and again on The Internal Comms Podcast, we've heard the same advice from experienced communicators – build great relationships across the business.

You need senior sponsors who will back your ambition. Leaders and managers who will bring it to life. Champions who will create momentum. Colleagues in HR, Marketing, IT, Employee Experience and elsewhere who can contribute their expertise and open doors.

Your network isn't peripheral to your strategy. It's key to making it happen.

WHO NEEDS TO MAKE THIS HAPPEN?

- ☐ Who has the authority to make things happen?
- ☐ Who has influence with the people you're trying to reach?
- ☐ Who has expertise, resources or access you need?
- ☐ Who could become an enthusiastic champion of your plan?
- ☐ Who do you need a stronger relationship with than you have today?

Turn your strategy into a roadmap

First 90 days – what will you do now to build momentum or demonstrate value, and who will own it?

Next 6 months – what are the most important actions or milestones?

6–12 months – what comes next?

Dependencies – what needs to happen elsewhere in the organisation for your strategy to succeed?

Measure what matters

Go back to the objectives you set in Step 6. For each one, decide what evidence will tell you whether communication is making a difference. Think at three levels:

Outputs

Did people receive, attend, watch, read, click, participate or respond?

Outcomes

Did anything change in what people know, think, feel or do?

Organisational impact

Is there evidence that communication contributed to a wider business outcome?

Don't confuse what's easy to measure with what's important to measure. Open rates can be useful. But an email being opened tells you very little about whether anything changed as a result.

Test. Learn. Adapt.

What's working?

What's not working?

What have we learned?

What will we change as a result?

Your strategy isn't set in stone. Wherever possible, pilot new ideas before rolling them out widely. Keep what works and change what doesn't.

AB INSIGHT

Don't wait until the end to measure success.

Measurement isn't the autopsy you conduct after the campaign is over. Use evidence throughout delivery to spot problems, test assumptions and improve your approach while there's still time to make a difference.

And remember to capture your wins along the way. A powerful piece of feedback, a shift in behaviour, a successful pilot or a leader doing something differently can all be evidence that your strategy is gaining traction.

Measure it. Learn from it. And tell the story of the difference you're making.

WORTH A LISTEN · EPISODE 49

Engagement – How It Started, How It’s Going, with Professor William Kahn

One of our all-time favourites. The man whose groundbreaking work first introduced personal engagement and psychological safety at work takes us back to what engagement really means – meaningfulness, safety and human connection.

AND FINALLY...

Make your method a message.

Your strategy is itself a piece of communication. Don't bury it in a 47-page PowerPoint.

Bring it to life. Demonstrate your communication skills. Perhaps your strategy could be a visual roadmap, a short video or an A-to-Z guide.

Demonstrate the very standards of communication you're asking others to embrace. Because if the medium is the message, your strategy should be your first proof point.

WANT A HELPING HAND?

You don't have to do this alone.

For more than 60 years, AB has helped organisations understand what's really going on inside their business – and build internal communication strategies that make a measurable difference.

01

02

Build the strategy

03

Bring it to life

Diagnose the problem

Through our Acid Test communication audit, research and employee listening, we'll help you uncover what's really going on – not just what appears on the surface.

We'll turn organisational priorities and audience insight into a focused, practical internal communication strategy – with clear objectives, choices and measures of success.

We'll transform the thinking into compelling narratives, campaigns, content and communication experiences that get noticed – and make a difference.

Whether you need a fresh pair of eyes, an expert sounding board or a partner for the whole journey, we'd love to help. Arrange a virtual coffee with our Managing Director, Katie Macaulay, and our Client Services Director, Abi Terry.

abi.terry@abcomm.co.uk · +44 78721 49929

Let's make a bigger impact