

August 2009

PHASE ONE FINAL REPORT

I. OVERVIEW

Two years ago, University Relations, under the leadership of Vice President Karen Himle, embraced a charge from President Robert Bruininks to address and improve internal communications at the University of Minnesota.

This need for improved internal communications was underscored by the striking similarities between the recommendations of the Administrative Culture Task Force and the findings from an internal communications audit, both completed in 2006. Highlights of both are below.

ADMINISTRATIVE CULTURE TASK FORCE FINDINGS:

- “Top 3” goal is well understood but not embraced
- Silos and boundaries are counterproductive but deeply entrenched
- The University uses a top-down decision making process
- Communications (internal and external) must create community around a common purpose and build a cohesive sense of identity

INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS AUDIT FINDINGS:

- “Transforming the U” goal is well understood, but “how” and “why” are not
- Too much communication becomes a barrier to effective communication
- Administrative communications are perceived as top-down and one-way
- Face-to-face communication opportunities lead to trust and community

In July 2007, University Relations formed an internal communications department to develop and implement strategies to improve internal communications and issues management, and to provide direct service and consultation to a variety of U departments and initiatives. While a focus on internal communications is common in the private sector, such initiatives are rare in higher education; as such, detailed models are few, and the work of the internal communications group has developed heuristically.

2. PHASE ONE: IDENTIFYING BEST PRACTICES AND CREATING AN INFRASTRUCTURE FOR INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

In March 2008, University Relations established the “Reinventing Internal Communications” (RIC) initiative to further define and advance the role of strategic internal communications at the U. A broad-based, cross-functional steering committee and group of executive sponsors were formed to lead this initiative.

The steering committee developed mission and vision statements and identified four implementation goals. This group also conducted extensive consultations with University working and governance committees to obtain feedback and solicit participation in the implementation process.

In fall 2008, membership in the RIC initiative was expanded and four work teams were formed to develop recommendations to meet the identified implementation goals. These teams, in turn, completed [short-term recommendations](#) by January 2009. Final recommendations and emerging best practices were completed in June 2009 and are summarized below.

BEST PRACTICES

Through research and hands-on learning, the following emerging best practices for internal communications at the University have been identified:

- Provide clear and honest communication. “Successful internal communication” is not always communication that everyone agrees with. It is, however, transparent, timely, accurate, and honest. How a message is communicated has the potential to be more important than what is communicated.
- Engage in internal communications strategies that are audience-focused, appropriately transparent, and coordinated with other internal messages, and that provide opportunities for multi-way communications (including face-to-face).
- Timeliness is essential. The U community should learn about important news first from its leadership, not from the media or other external sources. Share as much information as is known as soon as it is known.
- Communicate with staff and faculty regularly, even daily. Update content accordingly. People will feel less inundated if they trust and rely on the information, and if they are the correct audience to receive it.
- Engage faculty. Faculty can serve as messengers of key information for their colleges and departments.
- Provide many ways to access information, including e-mail, news feeds, blogs, videos, podcasts, faculty/staff Web pages, etc.
- Utilize social networking tools to increase internal audience awareness. Provide high-level information on these sites, with links to content on the U’s Web site.
- Develop blogs using informal, “real” (i.e., not administrative) rhetoric, as suggested by the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education. Target faculty and staff and cover a wide range of topics and conversations about items of interest.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations for internal communications define an infrastructure that comprises people, technology, and measurement. Embracing and utilizing this infrastructure at every level of the organization will serve to better connect faculty, staff, and students to each other and to the mission and aspirations of the University.

The department of internal communications within University Relations will lead the implementation of these recommendations, in coordination and collaboration with communicators and technology professionals from across the University.

- **PEOPLE: Create a formalized, U-wide internal communications network**
 - This network will include representatives from across the University and will oversee and coordinate the implementation of recommendations from the RIC initiative as well as other ongoing efforts. The network will enhance, rather than supplant, existing communications networks and committees.
Deadline: September 2009
- **TECHNOLOGY: Develop a shared toolkit for internal communications**
 - Create a Web-based toolkit for internal communications U-wide. The toolkit will provide communicators and U leaders with online tools, strategies, and resources to coordinate, align, focus, and improve the effectiveness of internal communications at every level of the

organization. An implementation team with representation from a variety of U departments is already developing the toolkit.

Deadline: Toolkit launched by September 2009; fully implemented by July 2010 (Some elements require identifying and securing additional resources.)

■ **MEASUREMENT: Establish benchmarks to measure the effectiveness of best practices**

— Establish benchmarks to measure the progress and success of strategic internal communications. Since strategic internal communications is a relatively new practice in higher education and at the University, establishing benchmarks for best practices will be essential to progress and success. An implementation team will be established this fall to further identify best practices and benchmarks for measuring progress in internal communications.

Deadline: January 2010

Detailed information for each recommendation is [available online](#).

UNDER WAY/EXPANDED CAPACITY

A number of strategies are already established or under way to expand the U's ability to effectively communicate with and among internal audiences:

- A new, [dynamic faculty/staff Web site](#) was launched this year. Its objective is to provide a comprehensive, accessible Web presence for faculty and staff, utilizing best practices in internal communications.
- *Brief*, the U's faculty/staff weekly news digest, will be integrated with the faculty/staff Web site in the coming year, providing more customized ways to deliver content to faculty and staff.
- Improved strategies for coordination and delivery of internal mass e-mail have been established, most notably the change from the outdated, ineffective "Deans, Directors, and Department Heads" (DDD) e-mail Listserv to the dynamic, customizable "Administrative E-mail Lists" (AEL).
- The dedicated internal communications function within University Relations, now two years old, has improved strategic internal communications and issues management for emergent topics, including the U's budget challenges, Novel H1N1 Influenza, and other emergency communications. This has been accomplished through strengthened partnerships, and the strategic use of technology, throughout the University.

3. PHASE TWO: IDENTIFYING THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATIONS IN CULTURE CHANGE

The steering committee for the RIC initiative is undertaking a facilitated exploration of the role of internal communications in impacting positive culture change at the University.

The committee, through guided exercises, literature review, and consultations, will form recommendations to help shape an understanding of how communications can and cannot advance positive culture change in the U's dynamic landscape, which includes new budget realities, changing demographics, and succession planning. These recommendations will be reviewed and approved by the RIC sponsor group and shared with U leadership and the broader University.

This work is under way and will be completed by January 2010. At that time the RIC initiative will sunset; University Relations and its communications partners will continue to manage the implementation of all recommendations.