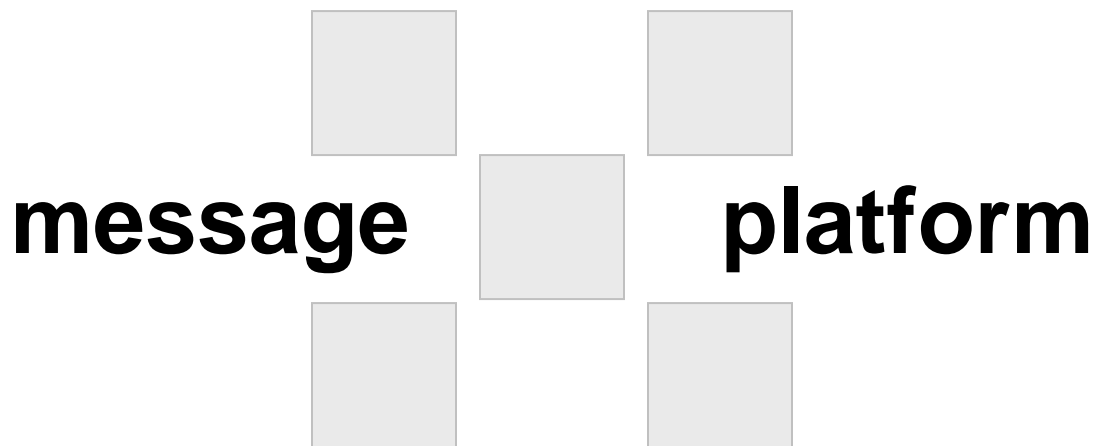


Aligning Corporate Messages to Lead a Company



The message platform is the focus of leadership communications and must be reflected in all communications *and* actions. Management must be aligned around the platform for it to be effective.

Its construction is based on political models of communications and persuasion, as well as research conducted concerning human memory capacity. It is designed to appeal to minds as well as hearts, and is purposeful in the behaviors it strives to create. It is also designed to be easily remembered by sender and receiver alike.

While construction must be flexible to meet specific situations, the platform usually has three components. A central theme, or cause. Building blocks comprised of business strategies and employee motivational concepts, on which (or from which) the cause is created. And proof points, or those company actions, goals, programs and the like that support the building blocks and cause.

We hold the number of information “chunks” to five for a specific reason. According to research, humans are able to hold seven, plus or minus two, items in short-term memory. This number is based on George Miller’s work (1956) on digit span recall tasks. Miller examined how people encode and recall lists of increasingly difficult digit sequences. He found that people were generally only able to recall between five and nine “chunks” of information, and concluded that the human memory system has a capacity of seven plus or minus two chunks.

Miller’s research was done on static information...it wasn’t changing much and they didn’t have a lot of competition for memory space. Moreover, the people typically were *trying* to remember the information, unlike many of the audiences we face. Moreover, the “chunk” concept is broadly defined. They can be very large, like a movie passage, or short, like a piece of advertising or single fact.

Realistically, user’s memory capacity in a dynamic environment is only about two or three chunks. (Yntema & Muser, 1960; Yntema, 1963; Venturino, 1997). This can be expanded if the information in the chunks are inter-related and connected.

While we might be able to train deliverers of information to hold more than five chunks of information because we can get to them in static situations, re-enforce their memories, provide external cues to prompt memory and the like, that’s not as easily accomplished with receivers of information. Therefore, it’s important that messaging be held to no more than five chunks (fewer is even better), and that we support the messaging with a process to deliver enough frequency and environmental cues so as to make remembering and internalizing the messages more probable.

The message platform consists of *concepts* that leaders, and subsequently employees, will put into their own words. It’s not a collection of phrases, tag lines, slogans or other sets of words that are memorized and automatically repeated.

The message platform provides management, from the CEO to the front-line supervisor, with a means to talk to employees so they will listen. It organizes messages so they are concise, simple to remember, and easy to deliver. It relates words with actions so they are connected and mutually supporting.

The platform is most effective when used in conjunction with an overall campaign approach. This involves identifying existing or creating new situations that leaders can leverage to deliver the concepts.

The Cause

We're going to be the best
in our industry...for
customers, shareholders
and ourselves...by
dreaming what's possible
and then making it happen.

The cause is the focal point of the message platform...the key concept leadership must advance. It translates the often bland intention of business into a reason for employees to become engaged in their work and provide support to management.

The cause is the intersection of management's business proposition and the emotional interests of employees. It must be emotional at its foundation, connecting what employees want out of their work with what the company wants out of employees. The cause is either built on or drawn from a combination of management objectives and emotional building blocks.

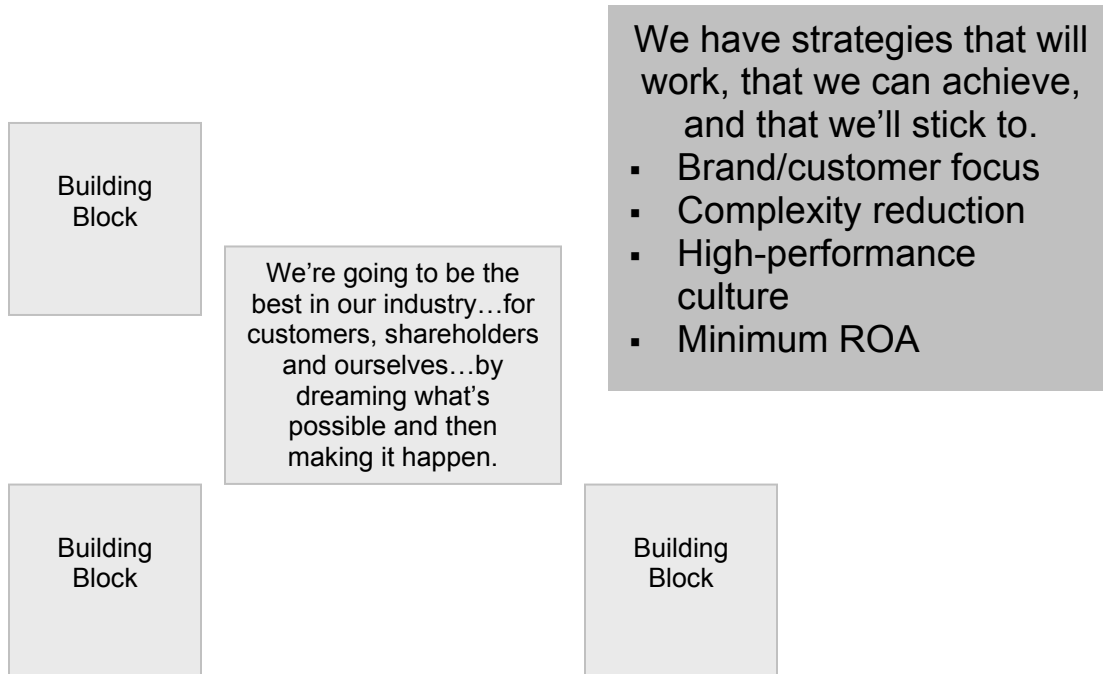
In this example, the cause established industry leadership goals for the organization in three areas (customer satisfaction, shareholder returns, employee satisfaction). This appealed to employee emotional issues around pride. In addition, by challenging the organization to "dream and achieve," the cause appealed to employee motives around contribution. The business proposition is also apparent: the organization had new goals to reach, needed to change from the status quo to do it, and was holding people and itself accountable.

Some examples of causes, large and small:

- We're going to show the world that we can make cars as well as anybody in the world;
- We're earning a long-term place in our company's future;
- Our first responsibility is to the doctors, nurses, hospitals, mothers and all others who use our products...this company exists to alleviate pain and disease;
- We exist to provide value to our customers...to make their lives better via lower prices and greater selection...all else is secondary; and

- We strive to experience the joy that comes from the advancement, application and innovation of technology that benefits the general public.

Building Blocks



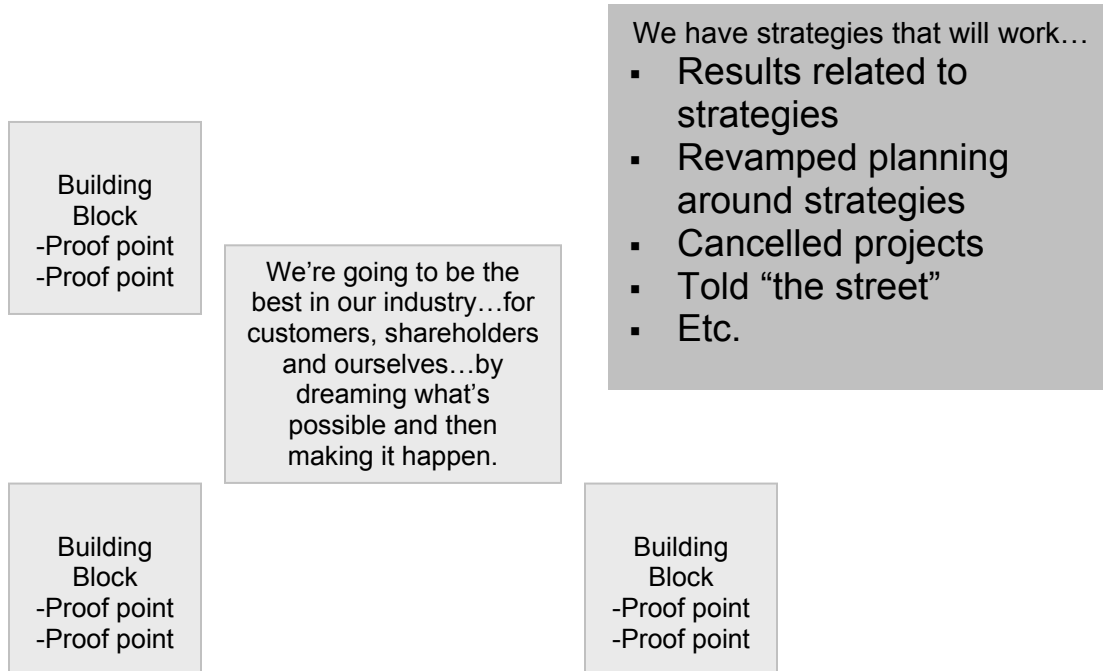
Building blocks are the things that must happen to advance the cause, combined with motivating concepts that employees articulate that make their work environment attractive to them. In short, they are what must happen for the cause to become reality, combined with the reasons employees like where they work (or what is lacking). Sometimes these are one in the same, other times they are very different.

The above example of a building block appealed to employee concerns around the lack of direction coming from the company as well as a perceived lack of commitment on the part of management to fixing the company's problems. In short, employees wanted to believe management knew what it was doing and was committed to making the right things happen. While addressing this concern, this building block outlined the business proposition of what the organization had to do in order to achieve the cause.

There should be no more than four building blocks in the message platform, although the platform can evolve over time depending on conditions. The number of building blocks is limited by the capacity of most people to communicate. Experience tells us that more than four blocks makes the message platform too complicated and lengthy to remember and integrate into day-to-day communications. At the same time, more complex and lengthy messaging is very difficult for employees to comprehend and connect to.

In addition, the building blocks and the cause must work in concert as a “story.” Each must related to and lead to another. For example, this building block example led to others about investments, financial responsibility, and working together.

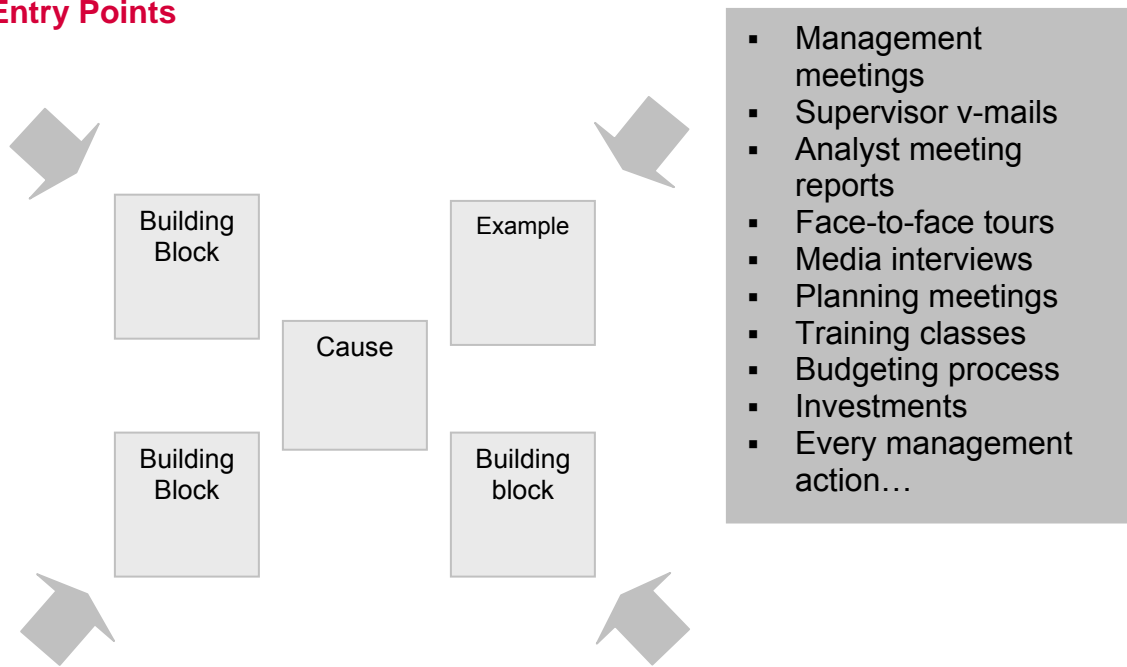
Proof Points



Proof points are rational, concrete evidence of the building blocks. Proof points usually consist of management actions, strategies, goals, objectives, and programs. There can be any number of proof points for each building block, and one proof point might support more than one building block. If a building block has no proof points, or the proof points are not very convincing, then management must take positive action to address the issue or put at risk the results and opportunities made possible by an engaged work force.

In this example, there were numerous proof points around the building block of “strategies that work, that we can achieve and that we will stick to.” These included explaining in very public forums how the strategies were supposed to work and progress made against them; continuous updates on how successful implementation of the strategies was helping achieve the cause; changes in planning processes that showed these strategies *were* the strategies by focusing everybody on them instead of all the other things that were important in the past; canceling sacred cow projects that were either off strategy or did not meet financial goals (which also saved a lot of money), announcing management’s commitment to the strategies to the financial community, and more.

Entry Points



Entry points are opportunities where management—from front-line supervisors to the CEO—can deliver all or part of the message platform. It is important to realize that delivery opportunities present themselves in venues as diverse as the company newsletter, a planning meeting and a conversation around the water cooler.

The most obvious opportunities involve regular communications, such as newsletters, postings, employee meetings, executive visits, and the like. We try to use existing communications

vehicles to deliver the message platform instead of creating new ones. Occasionally, however, we recommend new vehicles and activities to deliver and support the message platform.

Opportunities also are presented by day-to-day operating activities (or can be created as part of regular operations): shift meetings, training classes, department meetings, and operating communications, such as production updates and organizational changes. Along these same lines, operating “events” such as installation of new equipment, testing or applying new processes, product changes, restructurings, and other significant changes can be used to deliver the message platform.

Opportunities around regular communications and operating activities should be identified and optimized through a planned approach to message platform delivery.

Many important opportunities arise in ad hoc conversations with employees conducted in the course of daily business. These can be the most powerful opportunities to deliver the message platform because they relate message concepts directly to individual employee situations. To facilitate these ad hoc conversations, we often provide “triggers” that generate conversation, as well as training for managers on how to recognize and exploit an opportunity.