

CEO Communicator

Organizational communication and performance insights for the C-suite.

Top-Performing CEOs Make Organizational Communication a Priority.

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BY: JAMES O'GARA

CEOs: When Was The Last Time You Truly Looked at Your Story?

Business is moving at light speed. Changes are happening inside and outside of your organization faster than ever before. Yet, when was the last time you stopped down to really evaluate your corporate story? The story that is supposed to communicate who you are, what you offer, why you are different and where your company is going?

As a CEO or C-suite executive, can you honestly say, without a doubt, that your company's ...

- > Value proposition is still relevant based on changes in customer requirements and buying behaviors?
- > Positioning is still aligned with your go-to-market strategy and vision for the company?
- > Story is complete even with the changes and additions that you have made to your products / services portfolio?
- > Key points of difference are still ownable given the current competitive landscape?

As a CEO or C-suite executive, it's your responsibility to ensure that the answers to these questions are undeniably "Yes." You own the company story. No, not just the story you share with Wall Street or the investor community — but the one that is shared with your customers. The story your front-line employees, sales organization, digital properties, content marketing and social channels are delivering in the market every day.



Jack Welch was infamous for reviewing all of the presentations his leaders delivered across the organization. He did this for a very good reason. The business was constantly evolving and the story had to keep pace. It had to stay aligned with the company's vision and strategy if it was to pull the business forward. And to ensure the message was being delivered consistently, he made it a priority to stop down and ensure alignment started at the top.

We need more CEOs like Jack who are strongly committed to delivering a consistent and fully aligned corporate story.

Based on our experience, the message being delivered by most companies trails far behind the strategy C-suite executives are focused on executing.

The story no longer supports desired positioning based on where the company is today ... let alone where it is headed. The story doesn't align with the buying preferences and behaviors of the company's current and

desired target audience. It is no longer a differentiated story — based on changes that have transpired in the competitive landscape.

This is a problem. Why?

Because today, more than ever, your corporate story is omnipresent in the customer experience. It is the one thing that is “always on” and being consumed 24/7. If this story is not aligned with your company's go-to-market strategy and vision — you will not win. If it does not connect with what your target audience truly cares about — you will not win.

You've probably heard this statistic over and over again ... “prospects are almost two-thirds of the way through the buying process before they even talk with someone at your company.” How does this statistic relate to the topic we are discussing? Well, it means that the majority of a customer's selection and buying decision is now based on what?

You guessed it — your corporate story and messaging.

CEOs must make clear, compelling and strategically aligned corporate messaging a priority if they want to win.

They must create intentional stop downs once, if not twice a year, to fully audit and bring their company story into alignment with their vision, mission, strategy and customer requirements. They must answer questions like ... is our current story complete and accurate? Is it crafted in a way that will enable us to achieve our desired business objectives? Is it designed to engage and connect with customers who will control our future success?

Here's the bottom line: CEOs and C-suite executives who develop and deliver a corporate story that is intentionally designed to pull the company forward will win more customers and become leaders in their respective markets.

James O’Gara is the CEO and founder of OnMessage, a management consulting firm that specializes in helping C-suite executives formulate intentional messaging and communication strategies to create clarity in the minds of employees and customers. Clarity that increases employee engagement, improves the customer experience and maximizes organizational performance.

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To learn more about OnMessage visit www.itsonmessage.com.



A photograph of three business professionals (two women and one man) sitting around a white table in a modern office setting, engaged in a meeting. They are sitting on orange chairs. The background shows large windows and a whiteboard.

CEOs Need to Realize What Truly Drives High-Performing Organizations.

Studies show that most CEOs separate culture initiatives from their business strategy and story. Actually, culture is the byproduct of your story and strategy in action. The words and actions of every employee embody your company's story and strategy.

CEOs and C-suite executives must understand that words matter. They must acknowledge that the message behind the company's story and strategy play a significant role in the type of culture that takes root inside their business.

So, the real question here is, what is the state of your go-to-market story and strategy? How clearly and consistently are they communicated up and down your organization?



One way to find out is by answering the following questions...

Do our employees understand the company's story?

- > Our company's purpose?
- > How we want to be positioned in the market?
- > Who we are?
- > What we do?
- > The value we deliver?
- > What makes us different in the market?

Do our employees understand our strategy?

- > Vision?
- > Mission?
- > Values?
- > Customer needs and desires?
- > Promise to customers?
- > Pillars of our go-to-market strategy?

Executives who answer these questions with a resounding “yes” will most likely have high-performing cultures. Executives who answer “no” or don’t really know the answers to these questions need to understand that lack of clarity is negatively impacting their culture and business performance.

The fact is, CEOs who produce winning cultures maintain complete clarity and alignment between their story and strategy. They also ensure that their entire employee population understands, internalizes and activates the company's story and strategy in daily work activities.

Your story and strategy ... create a shared mindset.

When employees have a deep understanding of what your company stands for, what it does and how it creates value for customers, their purpose becomes clear. They feel more connected. They believe what they do matters. Clarity of purpose is a powerful motivator. And, it's born from a clear, compelling and consistent corporate story that aligns with your go-to-market strategy.

Your story and strategy ... drive aligned actions.

When leaders and team members across the organization understand how the strategy connects with the story, congruent actions and decisions unfold. Your company's vision, mission and values go beyond words on paper and take on a life of their own. Employees see how strategic decisions, investments and initiatives connect with the story. They understand how their marching orders align with the bigger picture. For this to happen, leaders must ensure the story and strategy are consistent and omnipresent.



Clarity and connectivity are the keys to a high-performing organization.

When your story and strategy are clearly defined and documented —and fully immersed in your company's culture — magic happens. As research from Duke University states ...

“An effective culture is like an invisible hand at work inside of each of the employees that helps to guide their decisions and judgments in a way that the overall corporation would desire it to be.”

Culture is formed when consistent words and actions, aligned with the corporate story and strategy, are constantly on display — when what is expected and what is acceptable become second nature to each employee. Everyone seems to operate from the same sheet of music. Which is why one executive who participated in Duke University's research said, *“Culture is your sheet music to success. It is no different than an orchestra. You can hire the best trumpet players, oboist, violinist, and unless they are all playing from the same sheet of music at the right tempo, you will fail. If you have the trumpets playing too loud, the song won't sound right. It is that delicate balance of getting people on the same page.”*

Do your employees have the clarity they need to perform at the highest level?

The problem is, most C-suite executives and business leaders are not providing employees with the same sheet of music to play from. As a result, employees lack clarity — clarity around what the company stands for, how it differs from the competition, and what its greater purpose is. They also lack clarity around the story the company needs to tell in the market and the promise it needs to make to customers.

Without clarity around the company's story and strategy, there is nothing for the employee to connect with. There is nothing shared from department to department, or division to division.

When it comes to maintaining organizational clarity, one executive interviewed by Duke University said it best:

“A good leadership team and good CEO will put in the processes to make sure the message filters down to the very bottom of the organization unchanged.”

The key word here is unchanged.

CEOs who want to establish high-performing organizations must understand it all starts with a clear, consistent corporate story and strategy. Then they must ensure that story and strategy is infused throughout their employee population.

Anchor Messages CEOs Use to Combat Change and Create Clarity.

Product and service innovation, customer requirements, competitive movement, digital transformation, mergers / acquisitions ... the pace of change is increasing on every front in business.

As a result, many CEOs and C-suite executives feel like firefighters. Constantly adjusting strategies and messages based on prevailing winds shifting from minute to minute.

The job of a C-suite executive is not to fight fires. Instead, the CEO and C-suite's job is to establish anchors for the organization in a world of constant change.

More specifically, they are responsible for setting clear expectations for what will not change. What will remain true and constant – no matter what. Irrespective of changes going on inside and outside of the business.

What are those anchors? They are the messages that...

- > Describe the heart and soul of the business
- > Differentiate the brand
- > Distill what the company stands for
- > Define customer experience expectations

Often, these “anchor messages” get pushed aside when the company is going through rapid change. It's all about the here and now. It's all about daily tactics and firefighting. The sad thing is ... this is precisely the wrong thing to do. Because when the storms roll in — employees and customers need to call upon those anchor messages.



They need to be reminded of what matters most and the things that aren't changing. They need to connect with messages that define the foundation of the business. Messages that will guide how they react to change and make decisions that are in the best interest of the business – long-term.

When competitors are knocking at their door, when customer service issues crop up, when technology fails, when product delays occur ... that's when “anchor messages” matter most. That's when these messages directly impact business performance.

Executive teams that have established and communicated clear, compelling and consistent anchor messages – can weather any storm. They can get through the daily fires and still deliver superior business results. Those that have not engrained these messages into the hearts and minds of employees and customers ... cannot.

- > Do your employees and customers clearly understand your company's purpose?
- > What about your brand promise?
- > Do employees embody your core values?
- > Do employees and customers understand what differentiates you from the competition?
- > Do they have a firm grasp of your vision?

Only when employees and customers have knowledge of and belief in these “anchor messages” can they rise above daily distractions and disappointments – and remain loyal and true to your business. Anchor messages create a sense of stability and clarity around what matters most long-term. They relate to your company's purpose, mission, values and promise to customers. They relate to your customer experience goals and long-term strategy.





As we work with executives around the world, we often see these “anchor messages” posted on breakroom walls and in brochures throughout the buildings we pass through.

Rarely do we see them come to life in the words and actions of the employees walking the halls. But when we do – it is noticeable.

There is clarity and calmness in the air. There is clear, intense focus in their eyes. They recognize that trials and tribulations will rock the business – but they know the executive team has positioned the company to rise above it. Employees are able to stay focused on the things that matter.

They understand that while products and services, business processes, technology, competitive pressure and other aspects of the business may change – the most important things will not. Those are the “anchor messages” that create clarity and alignment – up and down the organization – even when fires pop up from week to week, month to month and quarter to quarter. They rise above the flames and focus on solutions that align with the company’s anchor messages.

If you are a CEO or C-suite executive – you need “anchor messages” that guide and shape the beliefs and actions of employees and customers. You need to ensure those messages are engrained in their minds so that when change occurs and all hell breaks loose ... they instinctively grab hold of what matters most.

Four Behaviors of High-Performing CEO Communicators

BY: JAMES O'GARA

According to extensive research published in the *Harvard Business Review* (resulting from 17,000 CEO assessments), there are four specific behaviors that prove critical to CEO performance. The study found that high-performing CEOs ...

1. Decide with Speed and Action: They make decisions earlier, faster and with greater conviction.
2. Engage for Impact: They excel at planning and executing disciplined communication strategies.
3. Adapt Proactively: They focus on the big, long-term picture as they adapt.
4. Deliver Consistently: They stay true to their convictions and follow through on commitments.





Let's look at these behaviors through the lens of CEO and C-suite communications. More specifically, communication strategies they employ in support of the company's purpose, vision, mission and business strategy.

1 Decide with Speed and Action

The successful executive teams we work with are very decisive. Especially when it comes to the direction they are taking the organization and the story they want to tell (internally and externally). They have a high degree of conviction in the company's purpose and communicate it consistently up and down the organization. They will accept nothing short of absolute clarity and alignment among leaders across the organization with respect to the company's vision, mission and strategy.

2 Engage for Impact

The *Harvard Business Review* states that CEOs who excel at bringing others along for the ride invest time developing and executing strategic communication plans. We find this to be true as well. Successful executive teams, that we work with, spend the time and energy required to "pull strategic messages through" the organization and ensure there is a plan for translating those messages into actions that positively impact organizational performance.

3 Adapt Proactively

The study in HBR also discovered that while it was important for all CEOs to adapt and change course in a rapid manner — only those CEOs who made daily decisions rooted in a clearly defined, long-term view of the organization's strategy, vision and purpose — actually performed at the highest level.

4 Deliver Consistently

Lastly, the study found that a stunning 94 percent of high-performing CEOs consistently followed through on their commitments. This is a huge flaw we see in many CEOs with respect to organizational communication. Most CEOs are unwilling or unable to stay the course. They are way too reactive and, as a result, knee-jerk the organization in different directions based on changes happening around them. With that said, we do work with high-performing CEOs who are consistent and true to their convictions. These CEOs leverage persistent and sustained communication to drive clarity and alignment around the four dimensions of organizational performance (corporate story, strategy, values and purpose).

It is revealing how these four general behaviors mirror the traits we see in high-performing CEO communicators. However, it should not be a surprise that effective strategic communication is essential for becoming a high-performing CEO.



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