



**College and University Professional  
Association for Human Resources**

# **You *Can* Get There From Here: The Road to Downsizing in Higher Education Second Edition**

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# Chapter 3

## EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION: THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED?

Good policy drives good publicity; however, even the best policies can fail if they are not effectively communicated. All too often, institutions either do not adequately prepare for the necessary communications to support their restructuring initiatives, or they create a good plan and then veer off course when they come under fire from either internal or external sources. In a world where electronic communication enables information to be disseminated easily and quickly on the information superhighway – and without any particular regard for accuracy – the communication challenge is particularly acute. If you do not develop, deliver and properly manage your messages, you can find yourself in hostile and uncharted territory.

A well-conceived communication strategy – and the execution plan that stems from it – can help greatly in your institution's optimization efforts, assisting the restructuring team in determining the right messages to send at the right time and in the right way. The communication strategy and plan should be developed by individuals who work closely with the restructuring team, but still maintain their independence. Staying independent of the decision-making process allows the communications team to raise questions and offer suggestions to ensure that the rationale behind those decisions is sound and that messages delivered will be as well received as possible by various stakeholders.

Best practices with respect to optimization-related communications can be distilled down to a core set of principles and guidelines that institutions should use to design and implement their communication strategy and plan. This chapter offers a primer on these guidelines and principles, which can be organized into the following categories and are described in the sections that follow:

- Passengers, Drivers, Routes, and Timetables
- Rules of the Road
- Getting from There to Here . . . and Here to There

Many institutions understand the importance of developing – and executing – a well-defined communication strategy, and as a result they have been able to implement difficult changes, including rightsizing, relatively smoothly. Throughout the chapter, as we offer various guidelines and principles, we provide examples of how these guidelines and principles can be applied to develop and deliver optimization-related communications from the recent economic downturn.

### **Passengers, Drivers, Routes, and Timetables**

As you develop a communication strategy and prepare your communication plan, you need to think about who your audiences are (i.e., the passengers), who will be delivering the messages (i.e., the drivers), the communications channels through which the messages will be delivered (i.e., the routes), and the schedule for delivering those messages (i.e., the timetables).

## Passengers: Who are your main audiences?

Regardless of whether your institution is public or private, large or small, the individuals and groups that have a vested interest in your downsizing efforts (i.e., your stakeholder groups) are the same.

Specifically, you will need to think about how you will communicate with:

- Faculty and staff
- Students and parents
- Alumni and donors
- The local community, including the media

The messages for each of these stakeholder groups will be essentially similar; however, each group has a specific set of interests that should be explicitly addressed, either through global or customized communications. Customizing communications to address particular self interests and/or anticipated responses from various groups requires a great deal of care, however, because doing so could send unintended messages. For example, a message to students and their parents reassuring them about an institution's commitment to academic quality could be viewed as hypocritical if departments and services that directly serve students are affected by a university's rightsizing efforts. In addition, a message to the whole university emphasizing the importance of students and faculty to the university's mission may serve to alienate non-academic staff if they are given the impression that their contributions are not valued.

### EXAMPLE

#### Dartmouth University

In an open letter to the university community in November 2008, President James Wright wrote, "the Board agrees with our financial projections and goals: we need to protect our academic strengths - of which the core is the tenure-track faculty and our overall educational environment, and we need to do all we can to support Dartmouth's employees - as they support Dartmouth in all that they do." (<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~presoff/1113.html>)

Given the ease with which information is disseminated in cyberspace, you should be prepared for the fact that different groups will be exposed to the communications sent to others, so you will want to make sure they are consistent both in fact and in appearance. The need for consistency is especially important if you anticipate that your communications will be scrutinized by individuals looking for every opportunity to criticize and/or undermine your institution's efforts.

### EXAMPLE

#### University of Maine System

In January 2009, Chancellor Richard L. Pattenauade formed a task force to address the university system's long-term financial sustainability. The task force includes union representatives for both faculty and staff. In his announcement, the Chancellor said, "The make-up of this task force offers an excellent perspective and familiarity with Maine and higher education's purpose, operation, and governance . . . I am grateful to all members for their willingness to accept this vitally important assignment." (<http://www.maine.edu/pdf/TaskForcenewsrelease1-28-09.pdf>)

## Drivers: Who will deliver the necessary messages?

It is critically important to be strategic about who will deliver core messages to various stakeholder groups. The President is an obvious messenger, especially for global communications going to the

university community as a whole and/or the media, but other institutional leaders have important roles to play as well. Potential messengers include the following:

- Members of the Board of Visitors or Trustees
- Provost and Vice Presidents
- Academic deans
- Department chairs
- Non-academic managers and supervisors
- People in internal client-facing roles, such as HR and support staff
- People in external client-facing roles, such as public relations and development staff

All too often, these individuals are inadequately prepared to properly explain the situation or provide the necessary support to various stakeholders. Therefore, your communication strategy should include a plan for preparing anyone with communications responsibility to handle questions and concerns expressed by various members of the academic community by providing communication support materials that include the following:

- Key messages to emphasize
- Talking points
- Manager/supervisor guidelines

EXAMPLE

University of California at Davis

The Human Resources section of the UC-Davis website includes detailed layoff guidelines as part of the Manager and Supervisor Toolkit, including a layoff checklist, a layoff packet of information to give employees, and guidance on how to communicate a layoff.

(<http://www.hr.ucdavis.edu/Elr/Er/Layoff/layoff-information-supervisors/>)

### Routes: How will the messages be delivered?

The communication channels through which your messages will be delivered are more numerous and complex than ever. Written communications are no longer limited to letters sent via the postal service or articles in printed periodicals. Institutions are increasingly relying on email and their school websites – as well as electronic newsletters, blogs, and social media channels like Facebook and Twitter – to deliver messages to various stakeholder groups. The ease and speed with which messages through these different channels can be shared further reinforces the need to consider all stakeholder groups in each message, regardless of who the intended audience may be, and to ensure the messages consistently underscore the key principles you want to reinforce through your optimization efforts. The internet is full of examples of email messages and the responses to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) reproduced in whole or in part in media outlets and blogs within a day of their being distributed internally. The bottom line: every communication you write is a *de facto* press release, and should be written with that in mind.

EXAMPLE

Boston University

An email message sent by President Robert A. Brown to faculty and staff in October 2008 was reported on the next morning in the *Boston Globe*, and then later that day in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (<http://tiny.cc/voJUG>). His announcement to freeze hiring and delay future construction projects included the following media-ready quote: "I feel it is important to act preemptively to manage the potential short- and longer-term risks to us created by the current

economic uncertainty." (<http://www.bu.edu/budget/letter100108.html>)

Due to the ease with which messages can now be delivered electronically, there is a risk that leaders will “hide” behind electronic communication channels because of the size of the audience they can reach and the speed of delivery. It is important to balance “high tech” and “high touch” communications, however, especially when there is bad news to deliver. Formal gatherings such as town-hall and departmental meetings, media interviews by university leaders (not just official spokespeople), and informal access through a commitment to an open-door policy, are all important means of reinforcing the humanity – and the humans – behind key optimization decisions.

EXAMPLE

Washington University in St. Louis

In discussing his voluntary salary reduction, Chancellor Mark S. Wrighton was quoted in the *New York Times* in November 2008 as saying, “I’m generously compensated, I know that. We’re in very difficult financial times. I’m in a position that is not at risk, but the rest of the university community, especially in administration and support, must be wondering if their jobs are secure. I wanted to let the community know that I’m sensitive to the situation.”

(<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/23/education/23college.html>)

EXAMPLE

University of Missouri System

In a February 2009 memo to members of the university community describing proposed compensation and benefit changes, President Gary D. Forsee announced that he had scheduled a series of town hall meetings at each campus in the coming weeks “to visit with you about how the university is positioning itself to meet the financial challenges ahead.”

([http://www.umsystem.edu/ums/president/budgetnews/documents/090203\\_statement.pdf](http://www.umsystem.edu/ums/president/budgetnews/documents/090203_statement.pdf))

In addition to using various communications channels to *deliver* messages, it is also important to open up channels to *receive* messages. Typically, the best means to do this include providing a chat log feature on a school website, a specially-created email address, and a specially-designated hotline or campus number to call. Because some people may be reluctant to share their ideas, questions or concerns publicly, you should allow for anonymous postings and/or calls.

EXAMPLE

University of Kansas

In a set of Frequently Asked Questions for “Surviving a Layoff” published in March 2009, the Human Resources and Equal Opportunity department provided contact information for two individuals in their group who were available to “provide support to staff wanting help with change and stress management.” For people who may prefer “to seek support from outside the university,” they provided the contact information for the Employee Assistance Plan provider. The FAQs also included the general email address, website address, and phone number for the department. ([http://www.hreo.ku.edu/files/documents/uss\\_layoff\\_faq.pdf](http://www.hreo.ku.edu/files/documents/uss_layoff_faq.pdf))

## Timetables: When will the messages be delivered?

The communications plan should be integrated with the optimization plan so that consideration is given to the timing and content of various communications throughout the implementation process. The main communication phases, and the primary focus of each, are as follows:

- **Preparation:** The initial communications will set the stage for the changes that are likely to occur in the coming weeks/months and prepare stakeholders for those changes. During this phase, the focus is on providing background information as well as details and implications of the current financial situation.
- **Implementation:** The initial communications during the implementation phase will focus on announcing the actions that have taken place (e.g., salary reductions, hiring freezes, layoffs) and how those actions will affect various stakeholder groups as well as the institution as a whole. The next round of implementation communications will provide more explanation as to what decisions were made and why, in addition to offering more logistical details. These communications will also focus on preparing the university community to move forward.
- **Post-implementation:** The focus of communications in the post-implementation phase will be on preparing faculty and staff for the future, by focusing on how the institution will regain its operating and financial strength and continue to pursue its strategic mission.

In addition to considering the *planned* communications (i.e., the communications directly related to your optimization efforts), you must also consider *unplanned* communications (i.e., other communications being delivered independent of the optimization efforts) and how they may serve to reinforce or undermine the optimization messages. For example, the university in the throes of an austerity campaign may choose to forego holding a gala to celebrate the opening of a new building on campus, even if the event would be paid for using private, restricted funds.

### EXAMPLE

#### Emory University

When the financial crisis was unfolding the fall of 2008, President Jim Wagner announced pre-emptive cuts in anticipation of future reduced budgets. In an open letter to employees, he encouraged them to think of ways to reduce expenses by forgoing spending on “nonessential” items like holiday cards and parties, noting that even small savings can make a big difference. (<http://www.emory.edu/home/news/releases/2008/10/emory-and-the-economy-letter-october-2008.html>)

## Rules of the Road

All effective communication campaigns are built on a set of guiding principles; adhering to these principles is even more important when those campaigns are designed and executed to help communicate during difficult periods in an institution’s history. Although not an exhaustive list, the following provides some basic “rules of the road.”

### Focus on what the audience needs/wants to hear, not just what you want to say

Probably the single biggest communications mistake that many people make is assuming that the information and message they want to deliver is the message their recipients need/want to hear. This assumption is often based on a well-intentioned but naïve projection of their own perspective on individuals who often have fundamentally different – and potentially opposing – perspectives.

Effective communication always begins with an understanding of the issues and concerns that are most important to different stakeholder groups – an understanding that guides *what* is communicated, and *how* by providing a framework for developing and delivering information and messages. For example, the leaders of most colleges and universities are strongly focused on institutional reputation and standing, as they should be. As important as an institution’s reputation is generally, however, it is not the most important factor for rank-and-file employees, who are more focused on “what’s in it for me?” Communications directed to faculty and staff must explicitly take their concerns into consideration.

EXAMPLE

University System of Maryland

In an email to the “University of Maryland Family” announcing a furlough plan in December 2008, President C. D. Mote, Jr., wrote:

We all agree that furloughs are painful and that they are especially difficult for some members of our university community. . . . The guiding principle for the design of our furlough plan was equity and fairness for campus employees, while satisfying operational mandates covering our educational mission. What is equitable and fair is in the eye of the beholder. However, consultations and inputs from across our community have helped us come to a general conclusion of what is fair and equitable treatment. That is the foundation of the plan. The senate executive committee has reviewed and commented on the plan and supports both its concept and specificity. We have consulted with our campus unions on its Implications to our employees. The AFSCME demonstrated an extraordinary Spirit of understanding in support of the plan, as has the Fraternal Order of Police. ([http://www.umd.edu/umnews/mote\\_letter121908.cfm](http://www.umd.edu/umnews/mote_letter121908.cfm))

### **Communicate frequently, even if you’re not sure what to say**

The second most common mistake organizational leaders make is that they believe it is better to say nothing if they do not have something definitive to share. All too often, however, the void created by that silence gets filled with rumors and speculation that are fueled by cynicism, fear, and mistrust. It is better to err on the side of over-informing than to risk accusations of holding back or even censoring information, which breeds employee suspicion, mistrust, and low morale.

EXAMPLE

Michigan State University

Michigan State University’s President, Lou Anna K. Simon, has a blog. From December of 2008 to February 2009, she posted six entries, at least half of which addressed financial issues and their implications in terms of staff. In these entries she updates the community on the processes university leadership are going through to address the financial challenges they face, even if they have not come to any decisions yet. For example, in her February 14, 2009 entry, she wrote, “We have not yet made a decision about tuition or possible workforce reductions but we will be reviewing all of our options as we move through this thorough review process in the weeks and months ahead.” ([http://president.msu.edu/desk/index.php?site/building\\_a\\_sustainable\\_future/](http://president.msu.edu/desk/index.php?site/building_a_sustainable_future/))

### **Honesty and transparency are critical**

The corollary principle to frequent communications is the need for consistent honesty and transparency, especially when some of the messages you have to deliver will contain bad news. If people don’t respond well to a lack of communication, they can become downright hostile when they sense that a communicator is holding back and/or not providing the complete story.

The need for honesty and transparency is even more important when stakeholders raise concerns and/or ask specific questions. Unanswered questions are like ticking time bombs that can become more dangerous if they are not properly defused.

EXAMPLE

Beloit College

During the fall of 2008, Dick Niemiec, an alumnus and former trustee serving as interim president of the college, made a concerted effort to keep students and faculty informed about the budget challenges the college was facing and what that would likely mean in terms of staffing. His honesty and transparency were generally well received by members of the academic community, even when the news was difficult to hear.

(<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2008/11/10/beloit>)

### Show them the money

Effective communication involves more than just relaying information and stating facts – it involves education. And when you are communicating about financial matters, that education must include some discussion about money. Most employees, not just those in higher education, have a limited understanding of how their organizations make and spend money – and that lack of understanding can lead to inappropriate and unfair judgments about optimization efforts. The best defense against this possibility is to help faculty and staff understand the different sources of funds, how different monies are allocated and spent, the financial issues that may arise from specific factors, and how the optimization efforts are linked to those financial issues.

EXAMPLE

Email from Carnegie Mellon's president, January 2009

The global recession has affected and is expected to affect all of our sources of revenues. Our endowment has experienced a significant decrease in value, and we are forecasting that it will end this fiscal year down by 30 percent, with slow recovery in value thereafter. We are planning for the smallest increases in tuition in many years, at the same time that we expect financial aid requirements to go up. We are forecasting lower sponsored research revenues and reduced gifts, and slower payments of past pledges. (<http://tumanov.com/blog/2009/01/carnegie-mellon-affected-by-the-recession/>)

### Balance objectivity and empathy

In addition to focusing on the “head,” effective communications focus on the “heart.” The objectivity that is manifested by an honest discussion of the situation and its implications must be tempered by empathy, which is reflected in an acknowledgement of and respect for the recipient’s feelings. As noted earlier, people are primarily focused on their own needs and concerns, and that self-focus can often cause them to view situations irrationally and emotionally. Recognizing the emotions people are likely to be experiencing can calm raw nerves because doing so serves to validate their feelings and let them know that their innate humanity is both expected and accepted.

Although it is generally okay for institutional leaders to express their humanity as well, they must do so with caution, never losing sight of the responsibilities incumbent on them due to their leadership roles. Especially during difficult times, people expect their leaders to rise above the fray – keeping their heads when all about them are losing theirs, to paraphrase Rudyard Kipling. Not doing so can quickly undermine their efforts to manage the optimization process in a reasoned and rational way.

Recognizing the efforts of individuals and groups who go above and beyond the call of duty to help the institution respond to its economic and optimization challenges is another way in which leaders can convey the importance of both the “head” and the “heart.”

EXAMPLE

Clemson University

In response to concerns about the impact of furloughs on lower-paid workers, Clemson set up a relief fund to provide financial assistance to those individuals. In a report on the fund, President Jim Barker thanked the more than 300 donors, stating, “Immediately after the announcement, faculty and staff began asking how they could help their fellow employees who would be hurt the most by the furlough. . . .They suggested a relief fund, and I am proud we could make that happen. It says a lot about the unity and spirit of the Clemson community.”

(<http://www.clemson.edu/president/budget/fund-relief/index.html>)

### **It’s about both the journey *and* the destination**

Addressing short-term needs is the main priority when developing and delivering optimization communications; however, you should always keep longer-term goals in mind as well. As your institution deals with current challenges and moves toward a new future, the psychological contract between faculty and staff and the school will probably change. The institution will offer a new value proposition to its employees, and in response it may expect a fresh commitment and different behaviors. It’s important to identify what that value proposition and what those behaviors are when the change process begins, so that they can be shared, reiterated, and reinforced as the optimization plan is executed and communicated.

EXAMPLE

Large, complex multi-campus community college system

The President described an initiative designed to find positive ways increasing or improving service to students, implementing innovations and creating the opportunity for savings that will reduce the need to put positions at risk as follows:

[It] expands our ability to reach non-traditional students, students working during times when classes are traditionally offered, students who live at a distance from our campuses, and single parents with child care challenges. At the same time, our very capable faculty and staff are able to create both courseware and opportunity through applied technology and innovation. Through this longer term initiative, we will better serve our mission, contribute to student success, and save jobs while at the same time contribute to meeting our quality sizing targets. (confidential internal correspondence)

### **Identify key messages and reiterate them consistently**

As you develop short- and longer-term goals for your optimization efforts, you should also identify the philosophy and concepts that underlie them. Doing so will enable you to identify the key messages you want to convey in all of your communications, which will provide a good framing device for developing those communications, as well as a good quality control check to ensure each piece you develop properly reflects the key messages you want to emphasize.

Many of the key messages associated with an optimization effort will focus on change, emphasizing the *new* ways in which the institution will function going forward. But it is important to balance the change messages with a reinforcement of the institution’s core values. Those values have a historical foundation that has created a sense of pride in and commitment to the university community. Employees of institutions of higher learning generally identify strongly with their employer, and shared values are the

ties that bind them. Reinforcing those values will provide reassurance to all stakeholder groups, and connecting them to the change messages will help build bridges between the past and the future.

EXAMPLE

Harvard University

In a letter to faculty, students, and staff in November 2008 about the global economic crisis, President Drew G. Faust wrote:

For all the challenges such circumstances present, we are fortunate to be part of an institution remarkable for its resilience. Over centuries, Harvard has weathered many storms and sustained its strength through difficult times. We have done so by staying true to our academic values and our long-term ambitions, by carefully stewarding our resources and thoughtfully adapting to change. We will do so again.

([http://www.president.harvard.edu/speeches/faust/081110\\_economy.php](http://www.president.harvard.edu/speeches/faust/081110_economy.php))

When it comes to communicating key messages, repetition is key: if something is worth saying once, it probably bears repeating. The effective use of repetition reinforces a message, and it also increases the likelihood that it will be remembered – and eventually internalized – by the reader.

### **Don't just talk; listen (and demonstrate that you've heard)**

As discussed earlier, it is important to create organized and supportive opportunities for faculty and staff to ask questions and raise concerns as the optimization plan is executed. As important as informing constituents is listening to them and responding in necessary and appropriate ways to the thoughts and feelings they express. They must know that communication is a two-way street.

EXAMPLE

Cornell University

Cornell has created an electronic suggestion box, which can be found at <http://www.cuinfo.cornell.edu>. Clicking on the link to "Send President Skorton your suggestions" takes you to a page (<http://assembly.cornell.edu/Suggestions/BudgetStrategies>) that contains comments received by community members and describes how the university has formed a Campus Savings and Efficiency Committee to follow up on the ideas received.

### **Stay the course, even when the road gets bumpy**

It is almost guaranteed that the optimization process will not go perfectly smoothly – and by extension neither will the associated communication process. There will always be unintended consequences, unexpected turns, potholes, and landmines. When the road gets bumpy, it will be tempting to abandon the plan and change course, sometimes dramatically. If you have invested the time and resources to develop sound strategies and plans, however, you should seriously consider whether changing course is the right action to take. Doing so may be politically expedient, especially in the short term, but it won't necessarily help you achieve your longer-term goals and objectives. In fact, these crisis points are key moments at which the strength and success of your optimization efforts are determined. Although you should certainly reevaluate your plans, you should not lose sight of your foundational principles and goals. Once you have assured yourself that you're on the right track, you should communicate your evaluation process, reaffirm your commitment to a sound course of action (with adjustments as necessary), and explain why that course of action is in the best interests of all stakeholders.

## Getting from There to Here . . . and Here to There

When creating your optimization communications, you should keep the following questions in mind. Although they will not be explicitly addressed in each communication, it is important to help everyone stay oriented. Doing so will prevent people from feeling lost or compelled to engage in “backseat driving”.

- **Where are we?** Remind people where you are in the process, and where a specific communication fits into that process. For example, each letter from the President typically should include sentences like, “A few weeks ago I sent you letter . . .” or “This is the second of three letters I am writing to address . . .” If the letter is posted on the institution’s website, these phrases can include links to the earlier communications so that people can refer back to them.
- **Where have we been? How did we get here?** When the optimization effort begins, it is critical to help the various stakeholder groups understand the factors leading to the decision to change the organizational structure and/or modify the workforce, as well as the actions that were taken to address financial constraints before the optimization process began. Although this educational effort is most important for the initial communication, each piece should include brief references to and reminders of these factors and actions.
- **Where do we go from here? How will we get there – and when?** Each communication should not only address the present and the past, but also the future. In some cases, that future will be an immediate next step, but as the optimization efforts continue it will become increasingly important to focus on the longer term, particularly with respect to how the institution will adjust to the changes and prepare to rebuild. As the communications shift in focus from the present to the future, they should provide a message of hope for a brighter future and articulate a road map for how that brighter future will be achieved. Although it is virtually impossible to make any specific time commitments, it is important to convey some sense of how long the road to recovery will be.

### EXAMPLE

#### Cornell University

In the conclusion to a letter to the Cornell community in January 2009, President David J. Skorton wrote:

Moving forward, we will continue to foster the university’s long-term stability and protect its assets through the careful stewardship of our financial and human resources as well as our natural and built environment. In the coming months, we will vigorously pursue proposals to achieve improved operational efficiency, including the strategic planning efforts of the provost, executive vice president and other leaders. The success of these undertakings will require broad community involvement and participation . . . in order to insure long-term success. I count on your continued input. Through all phases of strategic planning and implementation, we will strive to maintain and improve our transparency.

All of these measures are being undertaken to preserve and enhance Cornell’s quality, competitiveness and historic character. It is essential that we join forces to make the necessary effort to sustain our university’s excellence in education, research, scholarship, creative activity, outreach and clinical care in order to thrive during these turbulent times and position Cornell university for success in the years to come.

(<http://www.cornell.edu/president/statements/2009/20090125-fy2009-budget.cfm>)

## Conclusion

The last thing any institution trying to optimize wants to end up on is a “road to hell” paved with good intentions. Without a well designed and executed communications approach to support its optimization efforts, however, that is exactly what could happen. Sound planning, respect for key constituencies, and honesty and transparency are key to ensuring that not only do you *say* the right things, but that you demonstrate a commitment to *doing* the right things.