Voice of the CEO and C-Suite: A Defining Factor in Organizational Performance

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CEOs Don’t Just Own Strategy. They Own the Story Behind It.

If an organization succeeds or fails at implementing corporate initiatives, navigating a crisis, completing a merger, launching a new product line, or living up to the company’s vision, mission and values … the CEO is accountable.

Why? Because he or she owns the strategy. No, not just the business strategy – the messaging and communication strategy that is required to make it a success.

Sure, C-suite executives hold themselves accountable for strategy. However, what many executives have not acknowledged is … they own the story behind it.
In a recent article published by Wharton School of Business, communications expert Walter G. Montgomery said …

“CEOs commonly blame lousy communication when well-laid plans go awry. Yet, paradoxically, communications is an undervalued, lightly regarded discipline in the theory and practice of corporate leadership.”

Think about how much brain power and energy you and your C-suite put into shaping strategic business initiatives.

Now, think about the small amount of time (in comparison) you spend on the messaging and communication strategy in support of it. As a C-suite executive, you may not be the one to actually put words on paper (many do) – but you absolutely need to lead, shape and guide the messaging and communication strategy that is used to bring the strategy to life. No one knows the business strategy like you do. No one knows the story behind it like you do. You need to be involved throughout the entire journey.
Montgomery went on to say...

“Chief executives need to focus on communications as a management capability more seriously than they typically do. They should lead a thorough rethinking of what communications does and should do, subsequently transforming it into the constructive force it can be.”

Modern CEOs are taking Montgomery’s advice.

> They know, if communication breaks down, business performance goes down.

> They realize business strategies, when backed with the right messaging, deliver better results.

> More importantly, modern CEOs know they have to own the process, because at the end of the day … success or failure lies on their shoulders.

**Winning business strategies are driven by successful messaging and communication strategies.**

So, if you’re a CEO or C-suite executive, it’s time to redraw the boundaries around strategic communication in your business … placing yourself and members of your C-suite squarely in the middle of it.

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Great CEOs are Consistent, Persistent Communicators.

Great CEOs and C-suite executives never underestimate the power and influence their message can have on the business.

They realize a crystal-clear message — that generates strategically aligned decisions and actions — is what separates high-performing companies from the also-rans.

However, most CEOs underestimate what it takes to formulate a message employees truly embrace and the work required to convert that message into desired business results.
Great CEO communicators don’t make this mistake. They spend a significant amount of time working with experts to formulate their message. They get outside counsel to ensure that message is relevant and resonates with stakeholders up and down the organization. They also put “control mechanisms” in place to ensure the message does not get diluted as it filters its way through the organization and into the customer experience.

One of the great CEO communicators was Jack Welch. Like him or hate him, he knew how to convert a message into action. In the book “Jacked Up,” the author describes how Welch took the time to review every senior level presentation his top team delivered at the company. Some would say he did this because he was a control freak. However, great CEO communicators see the genius in this disciplined action.

Welch put this process in place to make sure his message was understood by leaders, translated correctly and delivered consistently up and down the organization. Great CEO communicators realize this is just one of many control mechanisms they must put in place if they want the message to manifest itself into desired business outcomes.

A recent Harvard Business Review article said, “Understanding the importance of being understood is what makes great CEOs great communicators.” However, in today’s always-on, noisy and hyper connected business world, being heard — much less understood — has become extremely challenging for CEOs. That’s why CEOs must be extremely intentional about formulating and managing their message. To do this, they need to get outside counsel, put rigorous processes in place and follow a disciplined cadence.

Ultimately, as the CEO, if you want strategic initiatives to translate into business results — you must put strategic message development, delivery and management at the top of your priority list.

Is this a priority for you? Let’s see. What’s your message around the company’s …

> Fiscal year business priorities?

> Primary market or customer opportunities?

> Latest organizational change initiative?

> Recent merger or acquisition?

> Vision, mission, values and culture?

If none of these are relevant, pick one of your top initiatives.
What message are you delivering to ensure its success? Do leaders understand the message? Are they translating it correctly and consistently? Is that message driving desired actions from frontline employees? Is your message positively impacting business results?

The Harvard Business Review article I referenced earlier went on to say …

“… if people can’t constructively enhance and advance the CEO’s essential message inside the enterprise and out, then something is profoundly wrong with either the people, the message, or the CEO.”

Are your strategic initiatives being operationalized in a consistent, comprehensive and effective manner?

If not, does the blame lie on your people? Your message? Or, the fact that you have not yet put all the pieces in place for you to become a great CEO communicator?

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More CEOs Need to Speak Their Minds.

This may sound counterintuitive and go against everything happening in the world today, but CEOs and C-suite executives need to speak their minds.

They need to deliver the message they know must be received to drive change or improve results at their companies. The reality is … this is not happening today.

The world we operate in is so hypersensitive, over-filtered and politically correct that the voice of the CEO and C-suite has been diluted.

The CEO’s message has lost its authenticity. It has lost its power. And more importantly … it is losing its impact on business performance.
In most organizations, CEO and C-suite messages are getting watered down, dumbed down and filtered to the point where they no longer serve their original purpose: to move the organization forward and in a very specific direction.

We see this every day. Too many cooks in the kitchen. Too many so-called experts in the room watering down the recipe. Too many stakeholders across the business adding their preferred ingredients. By the time the message leaves the boardroom and finds its way into the organization, it no longer serves the original strategic intent. Your job is to deliver a message that matters and makes a difference. Not make everyone happy. Maybe that’s why world-renowned researcher and author Michael Porter said ...

“Strategy 101 is about choices:
You can’t be all things to all people.”

As the CEO or a C-suite executive, you are being paid to make a choice.

The choice about what message needs to be communicated to move the business forward. You must ensure that unfiltered message accomplishes its strategic intent up and down the organization. Even if that isn’t the story others would like to hear or tell.

In the book “Good to Great,” Jim Collins said executives are responsible for getting ...
“the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats.”

Your message in support of critical business initiatives should do just that.

Especially when it comes to messages that are intended to move the business forward. Like your message around vision, mission, go-to-market strategy, culture, brand, positioning, organizational change, etc.
You don’t need translators. You don’t need filters. What you need are the right messengers who will deliver the right story to the individuals you want on the bus.

With that said, many executives lean on outside counsel to ensure the right story (their story) comes together without non-value add interference. An advisor who understands their business, their strategy, can capture the story in the voice of the CEO and package it in a clear, compelling and consistent way. Not someone who fancies the written word or gets hung up on a creative way to spin the story – but a trusted advisor who will ensure the strategic intent behind the story is ultimately achieved.

If you’re a CEO or C-suite executive, it’s time to take back control of your message.

It’s time to speak directly to your constituents in your true voice. No more filters. No more translators. Just a true, authentic message that you genuinely architect and intentionally deliver to move your business forward.

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What is Your C-Suite’s Story?

Twitter, Slack, Chatter, LinkedIn … the business world we operate in today is driven by instantaneous communication.

Employees, partners and customers now have immediate access to the messages being delivered by your organization. And the message starts at the top. So, the question is: What’s the story coming out of your C-suite?

As a C-suite executive, it’s time to acknowledge that the new currency in the digital age of business is communication. The ability to develop, deliver and activate a crystal-clear message will define market leaders and laggards in the future.

C-suite executives must embrace this fact. They can no longer ignore the impact strategic messages have on business performance and the technologies that are changing how those messages are delivered. Any inconsistency or crack in the armor can negatively impact employee engagement, brand reputation, customer retention and, ultimately, the financial performance of the business. That’s why the voice of the C-suite is more critical than ever before.

Modern executive teams get this.
They are investing the time and resources required to formulate strategic C-suite messages that matter and leveraging innovative technologies to deliver that story across their organization and into the marketplace. These executives understand, before they can leverage technology in a positive and meaningful way, they first must define the stories they have to tell. The messages that must get through to employees, partners and customers.

As a C-suite executive, ask yourself … what are the stories we have to share? What messages do we need to champion and manage over time? What messages will ultimately determine the success of our organization?

Is your team on message? Can your C-suite answer the following questions with absolute clarity and alignment …

> What’s the story behind our brand and purpose?

> What’s the story behind our go-to-market strategy?

> What’s our culture and employee recruitment story?

> What’s the story behind our current organizational change initiative?

> What’s our story to current and prospective investors?
C-suite teams that spend time defining these strategic messages and ensuring there is a “pull-through and activation” strategy behind the story – will outperform their competitors.

And a critical part of the pull-through and activation strategy is the cadence by which the C-suite actively participates in the communication process. How they leverage the latest communications technology – on a consistent and intentional basis – to ensure the message is delivered precisely when and where they want it.

Is your CEO and C-suite active on Twitter? How is this channel being used?

Are your C-suite executives leveraging enterprise messaging technology like Slack to engage leaders across the organization?

What about LinkedIn to communicate with partners and customers?

Are you intentionally using these technologies to explain and reinforce strategic messages that must get through to positively impact business performance?

Communication pull-through and cadence should be part of every C-suite meeting. It should become a cornerstone of how your team operates month to month, quarter over quarter. The goal is to actively manage a consistent, sustained cadence by which each C-suite executive supports and delivers strategic messages through the technologies that matter most.

The days of delegating strategic, organizational communication to others … are over. C-suite executives must take the reins – like they once did years ago.

Why? Because only those executive teams that make strategic messaging development a priority; define sustained pull-through strategies; and leverage innovative communication technologies – will succeed at engaging employees, partners and customers in meaningful ways. Ways that ultimately drive business and financial performance.

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