Chapter 6

From the corporate to the employee voice

MIND THE GAP

If you are one of the three million people who use London Underground every day, you will be painfully familiar with the announcements made over the tannoy. We are told to 'mind the gap' or 'stand back as this train is ready to depart'. The messages wash over us weary commuters; they may reach our ears, but rarely our brains. However, very occasionally Transport for London employees will inject some personality. On a busy morning at Aldgate East, one passenger reported hearing: "Please use all available doors. There are some really good ones at the front of the train." Then there was the announcement heard during an extremely hot rush hour on the Central line: "Step right this way for the sauna, ladies and gentleman…unfortunately towels are not provided."[1] These rare personal broadcasts have a magical effect. Travellers who would never have dreamt of making eye contact exchange a smile or even a few words. With just a touch of humour, warmth and personality, these announcements break a spell; suddenly we are no longer sleepwalking through our journey, alone in a crowd of faceless strangers, we have connected with

the message and each other through a shared experience.

Now consider your workplace. While you would hope that employees are somewhat more alert than an army of zombie commuters, they are still more than capable of filtering out a message that fails to interest or inspire them. We are bombarded with so much messaging and so many announcements that we have become skilled at, and accustomed to, sifting information as soon as we receive it. This is bad news for a corporate world where too many messages blandly warn staff to 'mind the gap', rather than give voice to the many personalities within its walls.

TRYING TO PLEASE EVERYONE

I have heard it said we should blame the grey-suited corporate communicators for the monotone nature of much internal communication because passionate communicators with style, flair and personality are simply not attracted to corporate roles. If only it were that simple. In my experience, the individuals working in corporate communications are full of life, character and opinions. If anything, they are some of the most challenging and nonconformist people in central function roles. It is too simplistic to blame those that broadcast – or even create – these messages. Instead, we must look at the culture that underpins how and why communication decisions are made. Sadly, for many corporates, collective behaviour is driven in part by fear. Most organisations have numerous constituencies they need to please, or keep on side: employees, trade unions, shareholders, institutional investors, lobby groups and the media. All of these combine to help shape public and consumer opinion and influence the share price. The amendment and approval process for all broadcasts, whether internal or external, is, in effect, a test; will this communication offend one of our many stakeholders? To err on the side of caution, the message is honed to be as safe

and sterile as possible, but while this results in a message that is unlikely to offend, it is equally unlikely to engage. Trying to please everyone results in pleasing no one.

ONCE MORE, WITH FEELING

Of course, some would argue that certain announcements are meant to be clear and unambiguous, the facts represented plainly, without commentary or opinion; and certainly without sentiment. Newsreaders, at least those in the traditional mould, are particularly adept at this – keeping emotion and personal disposition in check, at most allowing themselves a raised eyebrow or an extra two-second pause before moving on. However, when their façade slips and genuine emotion is revealed – even for a moment – our connection to the broadcaster and the story shifts; suddenly it is not just the facts, but also the meaning behind them that is being conveyed.

Of all the news broadcasts announcing President Kennedy's assassination in 1963, one is replayed over and over. Walter Cronkite, by then already a veteran broadcaster, was the CBS news anchor that day. During one of his many bulletins on that Friday afternoon, he was handed a sheet of paper. Cronkite stopped speaking, put on his glasses, looked at the bulletin sheet. He read: "From Dallas, Texas, the flash, apparently official, President Kennedy died at 1pm Central Standard Time." He took off his glasses and glanced up at the clock on the wall. "Two o'clock Eastern Standard Time, some 38 minutes ago." Clearly choked with emotion, Cronkite paused, taking a moment to put his glasses back on. With an audible croak in his voice, he resumed, telling viewers that Lyndon Johnson would become the 36th president of the United States. It is not the degree of Cronkite's emotion that touches us – it is the momentary slip of a consummate professional – but more that, for a moment, Cronkite was not merely announcing the

news, he was feeling it.[2] Similarly, when covering the moon landings in July 1969, Cronkite could not hide his boyish enthusiasm at the events unfolding before him.[3]

By allowing enough of his personality to shine through, Cronkite became more than just a mouthpiece for announcements. He was, as President Obama said at his 2009 memorial service, "a familiar and welcome voice that spoke to each and every one of us personally".[4] Cronkite put just enough of himself into his broadcasts for his audience to feel not just informed but emotionally connected to the story. It is hard to fake emotion; politicians and bad actors remind us of this regularly. Phony emotion feels deceitful to the onlooker, whereas a display of genuine feeling builds trust. In 1972, the US polling company Oliver Quayle asked Americans which public figure they most trusted; Cronkite topped the poll.[5]

Corporations are experts at drafting news announcements. These factual, impersonal statements have often been amended and approved by a committee. They are not so good at allowing enough personality to shine through to make an emotional connection with their staff. Take your company's name off the header of your most recent communication, replace it with that of your biggest competitor and ask yourself if the language or tone would feel incongruous? Probably not. There is a generic character to most of these announcements – clear, confident, often unequivocal and sterile. It is a tone that typifies not just press announcements but also the raft of communication that organisations disseminate both internally and externally. In this chapter we examine the contrast between the corporate and human voice – with all its frailties and foibles. We explore why the life is often squeezed from corporate communication and argue that a shift towards more human language and expression would take corporate communication to a new level of effectiveness, not least by engendering greater trust. In

the eminently quotable *The Cluetrain Manifesto*, we are told "in just a few more years, the current 'homogenised' voice of business – the sound of mission statements and brochures – will seem as contrived and artificial as the language of the 18th century French court".[6] The authors argue, "natural, human conversation is the true language of commerce".[7] We have a truly global communications network, we should restore "the banter that came with the bazaar…tear down power structures and senseless bureaucracies and put everyone in touch with everyone".[8]

AUDIENCE IS KING

The danger when crafting any communication – from a speech to a news article – is losing sight of your audience. Effective communication is built around the needs, values and expectations of the recipient. It should speak to them about their interests and in their language. The more specific you can be about the recipient, the more detailed portrait you can paint, the more tailored and powerful your communication. In their essay 'The Audience is Dead; Long Live the Audience!', Deborah Jermyn and Su Holmes argue that "as we settle into the 21st century, this perception, and the concomitant notion of a 'mass' audience, has become increasingly fragile and problematic".[9]

Just as they can often water down the content of announcements, organisations have a tendency to do the same with their audience; they standardise and dehumanise recipients, viewing them as 'stakeholders' or 'interested parties' rather than people. In a productive audience-speaker relationship, a speaker must recognise his or her audience as more than a crowd of passive onlookers; they are an active and integral part of the communication process.

When clients ask us to develop more differentiating and

engaging communications, we start by asking 'who are you?' and 'who is your audience?' because a clear understanding of both has often been lost or forgotten. These can be surprisingly difficult questions to answer. They require profound self-analysis, raising questions about an organisation's past and future, and its definition of success. Getting people to agree on such things without producing insipid, bland statements is challenging. The question 'who is your audience?' might appear easy to answer, but too often we find organisations know surprisingly little about their audience, even when it is on the payroll. Sadly, too many rely on their all-staff engagement survey to judge the mood of employees when these blunt, quantitative surveys cannot do much more than check the temperature of the patient. They rarely, if ever, diagnose an underlying condition. Knowing your audience means talking to them. It means asking open questions that enable you to find the root cause of both positive and negative feelings. Identifying the personal values of your audience, and understanding the language and terminology they use, helps craft communication that feels relevant and meaningful. Effective communicators know this already; audience analysis is not new, and in the external world of marketing is always a matter of course.

WHAT THEY PAY TO READ

As readers, we feel a familiarity and fondness for our favourite newsstand or online titles; they know us and speak directly to us about our concerns and interests. Your employees no doubt have their preferred titles – those they feel speak to and about them. That is why, when creating content for employees, our first question is 'what are they paying to read?' That is where we set the bar. Employees too rarely have the option to unsubscribe to their company's communication – but they can ignore it. They may not be spending their own money on this content,

but it is competing with the titles and channels they *are* paying for.

The pessimists will say that internal communicators' budgets do not stretch to those of the news corporations, so we cannot hope to compete with mainstream media for readers' attention. However, as internal communicators, we do have one significant advantage over traditional outlets. We really know our readers – or at least we should do. Certainly, if you are not sure what your employees are paying to read today, you can simply ask them. Indeed, we would argue that you should be researching the employee base as thoroughly as your marketing team researches your organisation's most profitable customers. This means moving beyond traditional demographic or HR information and moving to a more rounded analysis of employees' social and economic habits inside and outside work. How do they spend their money? Where do they go on holiday? What TV programmes do they watch? What newspapers do they read? What smart devices do they own? What are their favourite apps? Mainstream media finds these insights invaluable when making editorial decisions about content, approach, tone, personality and humour – employee media must do the same.

The internet has served to raise audience expectations of specialised and targeted content – and online it almost always comes free. As Charles Leadbeater explains in *We-Think,* "the web provides many more niches for people to start a conversation on something about which they feel passionately. The old, industrial media, newspapers and television, do not have enough room to cater for all the majority interests of their readers and listeners".[10] For internal communicators, the key lies in the appropriate use of channels. An all-employee publication is unlikely to be a suitable place for an in-depth discussion or debate on the intricacies of a new process or product,

but it may be possible to provide an online forum for those who want to engage with the topic. We would suggest creating such a space, or, even better, allowing employees the freedom to create one for themselves. By doing this, a communicator not only ensures employees have an outlet for these specialised interests, but also demonstrates a recognition of their needs as an audience.

BETTER BROADCAST

Having a genuine conversation with readers about proposed content through an editorial panel or network of champions can help keep broadcast channels relevant to readers. If you ask, employees will tell you exactly what they want to know more (and less) about. They will explain what would make a piece of communication credible and interesting, and equally what feels like propaganda or marketing hype. It would be wrong to assume your employees have no appetite for corporate strategy and that you have to force-feed them this information by dressing it up to be something it is not. Tailoring information, and speaking in a human voice, does not stop you talking business. For some clients, our internal communication is about helping to develop thought leaders within the industry. Internal content should not be limited to long service awards, product launches and project updates.

This mistaken assumption that "there is no great demand for information about corporate-level decisions that do not immediately impact on the employee's local work area"[11] may stem in part from the vastly successful *Communicating Change*, written by TJ and Sandar Larkin in 1994. With chapters such as 'Your employees don't care about the company', they preached that it was line managers and local work areas that held all the power. However, not only was their book focused on change management, it was based on research conducted by IABC

and Towers Perrin in the 1980s that was fatally flawed. Rather than have respondents rank preferred sources, they were asked to pick *one* source for *all* their information. Measurement consultant Angela Sinickas has long argued that these were the wrong questions, based on an illogical premise. "We all prefer different sources for different types of information."[12] It is the job of the communicator to identify the right source, time and tone for each message.

American academic Tom Davenport believes "there is no such thing as information overload because as an information hungry society, we can stand all the information we can lay our hands on – about the stuff we're interested in. It is only when we are forced to slog through material we do not care about that we experience overload".[13] Our research supports such a claim. Year after year, employees can list a range of subjects they would be keen to learn more about: the performance of the company against its targets, what the competition is up to, a sneak preview of the company's future plans, bright ideas they can borrow. When people feel overwhelmed by the volume of communication they receive, it is because far too much of it is too long, badly written, poorly signposted, mistimed and probably irrelevant.

Newsstand titles use a range of research methods and analytics to monitor reader habits and opinions. Advertisers often demand this to justify the return on their advertising spend. Every aspect of reader behaviour is assessed and tracked to paint a picture of what people are reading, when, for how long, where and, most crucially, why. These insights are used to make editorial, design and platform decisions; it is why (whether readers can see it or not) their favourite title is constantly evolving. For communicators then, having grabbed the attention of the internal audience, how do we keep it? It requires a strong editorial vision based on what interests and excites the

audience, followed by close monitoring of the readership. Are they still engaged? If not, why? A paying readership will vote with their wallets, so any decline will be painfully apparent. For internal communicators, a decline may be less obvious, so regular measurement is vital to check that a message is still engaging its audience.

It is also worth remembering the level of openness and honesty that is needed with employees. Organisational change expert Gary F Grates believes "companies make a mistake when they use a marketing lens of a marketing approach in dealing with employee communication… you can sell to customers because they don't see what's behind the curtain. They just see the end product, and they base their relationship with a brand on what that end product does or doesn't do. When you're an employee, you see the warts. You see under the rug".[14] There is no point proclaiming particular values in the hope of winning over employees if this same group can see full well that such values are all talk and go undemonstrated in their working life.

ENCOURAGING 'STIRRING PERFORMANCES'

Those looking after a company's purse strings might justifiably ask why money is being spent providing the workforce with communication that echoes commercial publications and websites. Surely we are employing people to work, why should they need to be entertained? Investing in high-quality communication is not about providing a benefit; it is about exploiting untapped commercial advantage. As Douglas McGregor explained: "The blunt fact is that we are a long way from realising the potential represented by the human resources we now recruit into industry."[15] It is not an employer's duty to provide the self-respect or self-fulfilment that leads to discretionary effort or, as William Kahn puts

it, "more stirring performances". However, McGregor does believe it is their duty to create the conditions that allow individuals to find this for themselves, not least because "people deprived of opportunities to satisfy at work the needs which are now important to them behave exactly as we might predict – with indolence, passivity, unwillingness to accept responsibility, resistance to change, willingness to follow and demagogue, unreasonable demands for economic benefits".[16] As communicators and leaders, we see disengagement manifest itself in these behaviours regularly, and it is clear that such passivity has financial implications.

Clearly, a printed or online title, however carefully crafted, is not capable of driving employee engagement by itself. This is true for all communication because words are never enough. Personal experience must support stated intentions. The role of any official internal channel is to reflect and support the corporation's strategy. If this is to motivate, engage and collaborate, the communication that emanates from within the walls of the corporate structure must support this objective. Conversely, corporate channels cannot be used to mask faults and imperfections. When a problem exists, a clear, frank explanation is needed of what is wrong and why is more effective than a contrived or clipped response. Equally, if not all sides agree, an acknowledgement of this is more effective than simply turning up the volume on the megaphone. To have content that truly engages with employees, organisations need to become comfortable with being honest and transparent.

MAKING IT PLAIN

Plain language is the foundation of any honest conversation. Throughout this book, we have seen how a culture of trust is necessary for individuals and groups to share their thoughts openly. Opaque or confusing communication strikes at the

heart of a trusting relationship. A lack of clarity suggests a deliberate attempt to misinform even though it may simply be a bad choice of words.

Research from employees and subpostmasters said the Post Office's tone across all its communication was bureaucratic and patronising – a hangover over from its civil service roots. So we helped it embark on a tone of voice progamme. Led by the internal communications team, employees from Finance, HR and Marketing attended workshops to explore why this tone persisted, why it needed to change and how to tackle it. While the Post Office acknowledged it needed to adopt a tone more in keeping with its values and strategy, change would not be easy. During the workshops, those responsible for crafting and sending material to employees identified a number of obstacles.

Legal language – *we have to say it like this*
Complexity – *there's no easy way to explain it*
Tradition – *this is how people expect to receive it*
Lack of time – *we don't have time to re write it*
Fear – *we can't be that bold and direct*

We addressed each of these concerns. One of the most difficult was working with legal and regulatory teams to find ways to make their language more accessible. Step-by-step plain language guidelines were developed. People were encouraged to submit examples of poor communication to be rewritten, and by taking a 'train the trainer' approach, the programme spread. Over time, the organisation started to 'speak' in a voice that echoed the relationship it wanted to develop with its internal audiences, which also better reflected its external marketing.

When the telecoms giant BT embarked on a similar process of changing the tone and style of its internal communication, it became clear that it was a full-time job for an expert. This led to the appointment of Jon Hawkins, BT's head of brand

language. Speaking at the Institute of Internal Communication's conference in 2014, Jon explained that the company carried "an awful lot of baggage from our previous background as a Government department. The civil service had a particular writing style, which is old-fashioned and stuffy. We're also a technical company so we get wrapped up in technical jargon." Jon's role is to help present a more human, consistent and distinctive face to the world. BT's language programme has been running for five years. It started with writing workshops for people involved in communications and spread wider as managers asked for their teams to be trained. Around 8,000 people across BT have attended a writing workshop, including employees in China, Australia and the US. Jon reinforces the view that the programme does more than introduce plain language; it also captures the distinctive personality of BT in all communications to its 87,000 employees.

Plain language does more than build trust; it saves money – sometimes significant sums. Forms are more likely to be completed correctly, fewer queries arise and instructions are more likely to be understood and followed. A study involving naval officers tested the effect of two business memos, one written in plain language and another in a bureaucratic style. Those who read the easy version understood it better, took between 17 per cent and 23 per cent less time to read it and felt less need to read it again. The projected cost saving if all naval personnel, not just officers, were given plain language documents was estimated to be between $250 and $350 million a year[17]. In 2010, the promotion of plain language was given a boost when President Obama signed the Plain Writing Act, ushering in a law requiring federal agencies to use "clear Government communication that the public can understand and use".[18]

Of course, sometimes inaccessible or jargon-laden language

is deliberate. Writer Steven Poole calls this 'unspeak', language engineered to make simple ideas more complicated, direct or deflect blame and make unpalatable truths more agreeable. One of his many examples is the difference between 'climate change' and 'global warming' – the first sounding far less concerning than the second.[19] The manipulation of language to shape opinion is nothing new. The worry for communicators is that some corporate voices hinder rather than help conversation. During an average working day, what do the messages employees encounter say about their employer? An interesting exercise might be to gather communications from a typical day at work – from the signage we see walking though reception, the poster next to the coffee machine, the notice on the back of the toilet door and the forest of emails cluttering our inbox. If your corporate voice were personified, how would you describe this individual? Would you welcome a conversation with him or her; or would you be more likely to cross the room to avoid them? As BT tone of voice expert Jon Hawkins says, this is about more than accessible language and a friendly tone. It is about conveying a distinctive personality based on a set of values or principles. Brand experts tell us that from the consumers' perspective, every 'touch point' with the organisation must reaffirm these differentiating beliefs. Does your employer brand – the totality of people's experience internally – stack up? Do the recruitment ad, induction pack, intranet, weekly team briefings and messages on payslips all tell the same story? Or are there glaring discrepancies that undermine how the organisation aspires to communicate? If so, you may need to instigate a programme to identify and address this.

REALLY HEARING THE EMPLOYEE VOICE

The shift from the corporate to the employee voice is not simply about replacing one style with another, moving from

cool detachment to a warmer, personal tone. Equally it is not solely about paying more consideration to the requirements and desires of employees; it is about viewing internal communication in an entirely new way. The IPA and Tomorrow's People 2012 report on employee communication, 'Releasing Voice', states that "effective employee voice demands a new mind-set, a paradigm shift".[20] In the past we saw internal communication as a transaction between sender and receiver. Now we must see it as a collaborative effort between those who originate, reshape, like and share information. This puts traditional roles – those of 'audience', 'editor' and 'broadcaster' – under threat and means we must rethink the tactics we once employed to gather, write and disseminate content. Published content is now the start of a conversation. Readers can rate or 'like' an article, make a comment, raise a question or share it with others. It is not unusual to find the comments made by readers at the end of a story more interesting than the story itself. This has implications for the internal communicator, some of whom will not feel ready to have their content openly reviewed and judged by the audience.

In all aspects of our life, the way we create, consume and interact with content has altered. We are now far more active participants in its generation and development. This shift has been felt keenly even in television broadcasting where the audience was once clearly defined, quantifiable and confined purely to the role of spectator. Audiences are granted new degrees of power as we now schedule our own programmes. Pay-to-view, view on demand, record and download options mean we choose when, where and how we view content. The programmes themselves – reality and talent shows such as *I'm a Celebrity, Get me Out of Here!*, *Big Brother*, *The Voice* and *The X Factor* – depend on audience participation, while their sister shows such as *Big Brother's Little Brother* rely on the

"constant solicitation of viewer opinion".[21] Deborah Jermyn and Su Holmes argue that while the traditional concept of a merely passive audience may have been exaggerated in the past, there is no doubt that today the audience is being asked more directly and often for their feedback and comment. This is shaping content across the spectrum, from reality shows to news programming. In short, the audience has far greater self-awareness and is increasingly comfortable in a more participatory role.

Nowhere is the collaborative spirit between those who produce and consume content more apparent than on the web, as Weinberger explains: "Every blogger is a broadcaster, and every reader is an editor."[22] Accordingly, when organisations do take steps to embrace an open, more participative conversation with their employees, it is typically around online content on social intranets. Here employees are increasingly invited to comment on, rate, share and 'like' what they read. This is a welcome step, but too many organisations still have someone standing at the gate, deciding which comments to let through. This desire to 'control the message' is both antiquated and counterproductive. People love to talk, especially about subjects they care about. Many companies paying good money for customer insight restrict and inhibit employee feedback when this is both free and easily attainable. Plus, because employees see under the hood, their insights are more likely to be grounded in the operational realities of your business than those of your customers.

UNLEASHING ANARCHY

Boris Groysberg and Michael Slind believe organisations need to move on from "giving employees a say behind closed doors to giving them a say in an open forum".[23] The benefits are clear: more varied organisational content and a boost in

engagement, as "employees become active producers (rather than passive consumers) of content".[24] However, their research shows the reluctance within many organisations to embrace this 'open forum'. Despite the existence of European Works Councils and similar bodies, most still feel reticent about handing over the megaphone. When Groysberg and Slind surveyed participants in an Executive Education programme at Harvard Business School in 2012, 51 per cent said the goal of "encouraging employee voice" had no priority or low priority at their company.

They asked participants whether employees throughout their company "are able to publish original content (such as blog posts) on internal channels". Nearly half of them said no. They also asked whether employees "are able to participate freely and openly in intranet-based discussion forums", and again 51 per cent said no.[25] In the same year, the IPA found that one of the main barriers to accessing the 'employee voice' cited by business leaders, HR professional and managers was employees themselves. The most common barrier was "cynicism from staff" highlighted by 54 per cent of employees, while 44 per cent cited "getting buy-in from staff" and 39 per cent the "lack of response to initiatives".[26]

Be honest, what would be the more insightful read – your corporate strategy or the comments from staff on it? We still meet clients who are nervous of giving their employees an unrestricted voice. Most have internal naysayers and those who, for whatever reason, seek to cause trouble, but companies that allow a truly unrestricted dialogue to flow find they do not need to appoint guardians of the conversation, as Larry Solomon at AT&T explains: "What happens over time is that the community self-polices."[27] Just like on the internet, trolls and troublemakers are quickly identified, and if their complaints are unreflective of the group feeling at large, they are

dismissed, ignored or actively rebutted. Our clients who are already allowing open conversations among staff have told us of the power of having complaints about the organisation being refuted and attacked by frontline employees, as opposed to by a corporate response from head office. Of course, it may be that negative sentiments are more broadly expressed than an organisation would like, but if this is the case then by allowing for such a discussion, managers can uncover issues and act to solve them before they fester and lead to resentment and disengagement.

Asking employees to rate and review content can also help to combat the constant challenge of ensuring internal communication stays credible and involving. If it is hard for an internal communication team, with a small budget, to constantly research audience views in order to create tailored, meaningful content, why not let the audience do much of the work for you? In *Crowdsourcing: How the Power of the Crowd is Driving the Future of Business,* journalist Jeff Howe considers the power of the audience when it comes to voting on content. He looks at businesses such as Threadless.com that rely on the opinions of their consumers to dictate their production practices, ensuring they have customers ready to buy before they even print a T-shirt. *American Idol*, Howe tells us, "isn't a television show; it's the largest focus group in history".[28] Imagine the power of knowing that you have buy-in from employees before you launch an initiative, or how they like to be communicated with in a crisis.

In chapter 8, we explore ways practitioners can use the power of collaboration and conversation to create more effective screen-based communication. However, we should not imagine that the ability to comment on and interact with content is limited to digital content alone. The inclusion of a letters page (with genuine employee questions and honest

responses) can work wonders to ensure a printed publication stays connected to its audience.

CONTENT NOT COMMENT

As we have seen online, audience participation rarely remains restricted to simply responding; audiences soon take content *creation* into their own hands. Not so long ago, gathering and disseminating news and information was the preserve of a handful of commercial and governmental institutions; it could not be done without money or power; usually both. Today, individuals around the world, empowered by digital technologies, are contributing to and creating their own news. From the 'Arab Spring' uprisings to the effect of severe weather events, people are making the news in a literal sense.

Governments still try to control the agenda by issuing carefully worded and timed statements, but it only takes one eyewitness with a smartphone to destroy any semblance of control. *The Economist* report 'Social media: The People Formerly Known as the Audience' recounts how Sohaib Athar, a computer consultant living in Abbottabad, the Pakistani village where Osama bin Laden had been hiding, unwittingly described the operation to kill bin Laden as it happened. A series of tweets: "Helicopter hovering above Abbottabad at 1AM (is a rare event)"[29], "A huge window-shaking bang here in Abbottabad…I hope it's not the start of something nasty :-S"[30] gave an on-the-ground perspective to an event that journalists simply did not have. *The Economist* report tells us that the rise of social media means reporters no longer act alone, gathering the news. Instead, news "emerges from an ecosystem in which journalists, sources, readers and viewers exchange information".[31] This change, it argues, began in 1999 when blogging tools first became widely available. Jay Rosen, professor of journalism at New York University, believes that this resulted

in "the shift of the tools of production to the people formerly known as the audience".[32]

Dan Gillmor, seasoned journalist with *The San Jose Mercury News*, also believes that today's web tools have given rise to what he and many others call 'participatory journalism'. The reaction to his blog about technology in Silicon Valley made him realise a significant fact: "My readers know more than I do." This is the reality for every journalist, no matter what his or her beat, according to Gillmor. He relishes this as an opportunity rather than a threat, because when readers share their knowledge "we can all benefit. If modern American journalism has been a lecture, it's evolving into something that incorporates a conversation and seminar".[33]

The suggestion that an 'amateur' readership can improve on the work of well-established journalists, forced to adhere to standards of fact-checking and accuracy all-too often ignored by Twitter users, is not unchallenged. Andrew Keen, for one, is furiously against the idea of distinguished *New York Times* reporters being dropped in favour of the work of "millions and millions of exuberant monkeys – many with no more talent in the creative arts than our primate cousins" who, rather than pumping out Shakespeare on their typewriters, are "creating an endless digital forest of mediocrity".[34] Keen may be right to argue that a bored student's commentary on the Syrian situation be paid less heed than that of an experienced conflict journalist, but he fails to deal with the argument that a Syrian citizen may offer even greater insight. He may be outraged that the crowd allows such frivolity as 'grumpy cat' to have its time in the spotlight, but he is wrong to dismiss the invaluable contributions of an amateur audience when it came to the front-line reporting and collaborative aid efforts after events such as Hurricane Katrina.

Just as Andrew Keen is worried that the journalistic and

intellectual elite is losing its privileged position as gatekeepers of culture, there are communication professionals who fear losing control of the corporate messages, which they have until this point diligently produced for employee consumption. The role of internal communicators in producing high quality broadcast material should not be disparaged. Undoubtedly, a specialised and professional approach has worked well for many years, keeping employees informed and feeling involved. However, the time has come to surrender some of this control – to be less of a mouthpiece for those above and more of a facilitator, enabling meaningful conversations from every corner of the organisation.

There are many ways employees create content – through user-generated content, discussion forums, chat rooms, blogs, collaborative publishing, grassroots reporting or old-fashioned letters to the editor. All of these make company communication richer, more complete and credible. There is a good chance ideas will surface that may never have been shared at all, or that an issue will be raised and resolved rather than left to fester. Alan Rusbridger, editor of *The Guardian,* calls the process of audience involvement in the gathering, filtering and dissemination of information, the "mutualisation" of news. He believes: "If you are open to contributions from others, you generally end up with richer, better, more diverse and expert content than if you try to do it alone."[35]

Groysberg and Slind give an example from EMC Corporation, one of the world's largest computer-storage providers. In 2009, EMC used employee-generated content to kickstart a conversation about gender inclusion. In the run-up to International Women's Day, the company encouraged a group of employees who were also mothers to produce content about 'the working mother experience'. The contributions it received resulted in a traditional printed book — a coffee-table tome

of more than 200 pages entitled *The Working Mother Experience*. In total, 96 EMC women from 15 countries wrote a contribution dealing with the highs and lows of being both a successful employee and mother. Frank Hauck, EVP of Global Marketing and Customer Quality and executive sponsor of the project, believes that "taken as a whole and as individual stories the book presents a new view of EMC – from the inside".[36] This globally collaborative project could only have come from within, from the individuals themselves, and is infinitely more powerful because it speaks of their experiences in their voices.

EMPLOYEES DRIVING THE AGENDA

Currently, the corporate centre drives the communication calendar and 'messaging', which may be planned months in advance. A shift from cascade to conversation demands a revolutionary approach. Instead of starting with the key messages and strategy of a senior few and tailoring these to fit the interests of the many, we should do the opposite. Let us start with the ideas, thoughts and issues of the many and make these the corporate agenda. Vineet Nayar, former CEO of HCL Technologies and author of *Employees First, Customers Second*, says: "Bosses genuinely believe that by virtue of their position at the top of the pyramid, they have a better view of the landscape and are the best situated to make decisions that will benefit the entire organisation."[37] Nayar believes the opposite. Most employees "know very well what is wrong with a company, sometimes even before management does or at least before management is willing to admit it".[38]

At this point, we must acknowledge that for many senior executives, the thought of the 'rank and file' driving the communications agenda will sound absurd and frightening. We can imagine their concerns: *If the crowd governs*

communication, surely anarchy will reign? Won't an unfettered conversation raise difficult, if not unanswerable, questions? Won't this create greater uncertainty and, in the end, do more harm than good? These anxieties are understandable because for many years, before the internet and social media, executives had the appearance of control over the communications agenda. In organisations with highly unionised workforces, low employee engagement and trust, or those with employees seemingly resistant to change, the tendency of the corporate centre was to 'package' information in a carefully controlled and edited manner. Bad news was not delivered until absolutely necessary, no matter how wild the rumour mill. The ever-present threat of industrial action meant communicators operated with heightened sensitivity and care, often repeating the same message over and over again, no matter how tired or unbelievable it had become. If the corporate centre has ears, now is the time to whisper in them: 'This approach doesn't work and never has'. Limiting internal communications to one-way corporate platitudes or bland announcements over the tannoy destroys trust, understanding and limits commercial success. Few workforces are perfect in every respect, but change and transformation is not achieved by issuing edicts. As Groysberg and Slind explain: "One-way, top-down communication between leaders and their employees is no longer useful or even realistic."[39]

In conversation with Neil Taylor

A founding member of language consultancy The Writer, managing director Neil Taylor openly confesses to an obsession with good language.

With a degree in linguistics and three books under his belt, Neil is on a mission is to rid the world of corporate jargon, humanising the way we write at work.

Why does improving the way we communicate matter?
Language is rarely seen as something that needs fixing by next week, like a problem with a product or service, but it lies beneath everything. It's the tool for doing business, which means everyone is using it regardless of his or her job.

As writers, we should care whether people read what we've written, but we lose sight of that. We feel we're taking an enormous risk by saying something in a different, more personal way. I think there is a huge risk in the opposite – keeping it generic and having no one read it.

We all recognise business jargon, and in focus groups people have no trouble identifying those offending terms and phrases common to their organisations. But what happens when you

ask why, knowing it's jargon, they all use this language. Often people simply want to comply with the norm – they don't want to stand out from the crowd.

What breeds this complicity?
One of the main reasons much corporate language is unnecessarily long, complex and robotic is fear.

Some mimic the language around them because they think it must be right. Others become so immersed in the linguistic style of the organisation they unquestioningly adopt the same style through a process of osmosis.

There is widespread fear of challenging legal language in particular, although in reality legal teams are more approachable on this subject than their reputation suggests. The problem is that they are often used to getting their way. To stand up to the legal team and negotiate a change in language takes guts. That brings us to a crucial trait in the fight for better language at work – confidence.

When people are experts in their field or confident about a specialist subject, why do they lack confidence when it comes to writing?
It's scary to say what you really mean because then you have to live up to it. You are no longer hiding behind reams of corporate mumbo-jumbo.

It's no coincidence that people usually end up writing less as a result of the work we do with them.

We find that employees typically have a simple version of something they need to write in their heads, but have a nagging fear of how they will be perceived if they write with simplicity. As a result, they spend much of their time translating a simple message into something more complex and generic, making it fit what they see around them.

A study by psychologist Daniel Oppenheimer found that the simpler you write, the more intelligent people think you are. It takes intelligence to understand and present something complex in a simple way.

An important part of our work is finding that one important sentence from a forest of PowerPoint slides crammed with information.

Is simplicity the route to success?
Far from it. Good and simple should not be confused. You can write something that is easy to understand, but if it doesn't reflect any personality, then it will be as dull as ditch water. The tone should represent the distinctive culture of the workplace and the personality of the writer. That is what makes communication human and differentiates one organisation from another.

When you are helping people write more effectively, is there a sudden lightbulb moment?
For some people with confident personalities, it can just be a case of flipping a switch. But there are many people out there who have to work at it over months and years, because they have these fears and behaviours I've mentioned ingrained in them.

Others are just so wired into the corporate world that it can be a long journey, and that's understandable. Our challenge is helping them find what makes them human and using it in work. Setting a task as simple as rewriting a sentence in a way that makes it feel like it's your organisation's voice or culture can be a real challenge for people.

All of those fancy flowcharts, phrases and graphics might seem impressive, but the most effective parts of a presentation are those that actually reflect what the company and its culture are like.

It's important to acknowledge that good language might already exist in an organisation's language, but it could just be buried. That's why it's just as essential to look at the parts people already perceive as well written.

The penny can drop when someone has written something new, or found what they should be shouting about deep inside what's already there. The correlation is feeling personally engaged with the language.

Does the moment of realisation trigger a change?
It depends on the person and context. As I mentioned before, it's a case of getting people to go with their instinct and allow themselves to communicate what they think in the first place, rather than complicating it.

Practice is key though. When The Writer was in its early days, we thought that awareness of the right language was the problem and persuading people to use it was the challenge, but actually, most people realise the value of what we offer.

The hard bit is making it stick, because this stuff is so ingrained that people need to keep plugging away at it to prevent slipping back into old habits. The change has to become a part of the culture and be something regularly acknowledged, discussed or refreshed.

What does success look like?
Our field is actually more measurable than you might think. Maybe it's saving money through reduced call times, an increase in consumer satisfaction or even employees reading more email news because whoever is sending it out now recognises that they don't need to bombard people – there are definitive ways to see change as a result of the work we do.

How many times have you ever thought you wanted a work-related piece of writing to be longer and full of more

complex language when you read it? For some reason, putting a pen in someone's hand blinds them to their own sense. Success is getting them to think clearly again.

Who is to blame for the prevalence of bad writing?
It's very rarely the fault of any one person or even any organisation.

For example, we had a client in a highly regulated industry and coincidentally worked with their regulating body at the same time. In our view, the client's reports and appeals were overly lengthy and complex. The language made it difficult to truly understand what they were trying to say. They believed being more direct would be inappropriate because the regulator spoke in the same language.

When the regulator presented us with a response they planned to send to our client some weeks later, their language was indeed the same. The regulator's reasoning was the same too; they were just trying to reflect the client's language.

We can all get trapped in this stand-off where no one can remember who told who to speak in this dehumanised, generic way, and no one is willing to make the first move to change it.

How do we get out of this rut?
Again, it comes back to confidence. Someone has to be bold in breaking the norm.

Just think about a CV. It's the most competitive piece of writing anyone will ever do; so why do so many people insist on making their CV look exactly like everyone else's? There is a fear of exposure and stepping outside the bubble of language everyone else is using.

Part of the problem is the way job adverts are written. We see the same generic copy in job adverts and therefore the same

replies to them. We work hard to convey our personality in person, so why wouldn't we do this in an email?

We did some work with a county council team responding to complaints about social workers. The people writing these letters were often extremely angry. To be on the receiving end of these complaints is difficult. Typically, replies would be written formally, keeping an emotional distance from the recipient. Employees didn't want to tackle the pain and anger felt by the complainant, but a genuine compassion in their replies actually improved relations and helped solve issues faster.

Is there a parallel between an organisation's leaders speaking in more open language and its workforce following suit?
Sometimes, but often it's more complicated than that. Acceptance has more to do with a broader culture than the approach of a small number of leaders. There are many leaders who don't talk in a bland, corporate style, but their workforces do. This raises an interesting question: Does the authority that comes with being at the top mean you don't have to talk 'corporate' any more, or has this person reached the top because they embrace a more human language?

Look at the behaviour and language of your organisation's social media team – they are often getting it right. It's their job to humanise the company and they're working with tools useful to this approach.

Is the brevity imposed by social media an important weapon in the battle to change language?
Limiting how much people can write forces them to work in a different way. Twitter and its 140 characters is the best example of this today, but people have been constraining themselves by writing on Post-it notes and sticking them in places for upwards of 40 years.

The problem has been not recognising that this process of constraint can be applied to a different context, like the workplace, with the same results.

Has the approach to plain language within the workplace changed over time?

When we started The Writer in 1999, it could take up to 18 months to make real tracks within an organisation. Our challenge then was getting people to understand and make more natural language a part of what they did. In 2014, the perception of language as integral to business success is steadily increasing. Addressing the problem is becoming a common task on many communicators' to-do lists.

This is a blessing and a curse. It makes businesses much more willing to approach us, but it's a challenge to really change the way people use language in the long term if it is merely a tick-box exercise. There has to be a genuine underlying desire to communicate better.

It sounds pretentious, but I believe what we do is good for the world. We're not here just to exercise our linguistic superpowers; we want to help give people the confidence to speak normally.

People spend so much time at work that if we can make their interactions more human and fulfilling there, this can have a dramatic impact on their lives.