

BY CAROL A. POORE

LEVERAGING

“3V” COMMUNICATION

TO SUPPORT STRATEGIC
MANAGEMENT

Despite decades of shared knowledge about how to shape winning strategies and achieve results, a stunning 90% of businesses still fail to reach strategic goals.¹ One of the key reasons for this is ineffective communication throughout the entire strategic management process. An average of 95% of employees don't understand their organization's strategic direction and what they need to do to make their strategy work. Furthermore, 85% of executive teams spend less than one hour per month discussing strategic goals, and more than half spend no time at all.¹ As a result, employees don't understand their organization's strategy, and they lack the emotional commitment needed to achieve strategic goals.² The objective of this article is to present the principles of “Vital + Visual + Visible Communication” (3V Communication) to enable organizations to foster employee engagement, overcome longstanding strategic management communication challenges, and achieve superior results.

LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES FOR 3V COMMUNICATION IN STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

Only 15% of employees worldwide are *engaged* – emotionally invested – in their jobs, committing time, talent, and energy in adding value to their team and advancing the organization's initiatives.³ To address this dilemma, principles of 3V Communication provide a helpful framework to support employee engagement throughout the strategy lifecycle, or strategic management process, encompassing the five key groups of strategy activities: formulate, implement or transform organization, execute, engage, and govern.⁴ These interconnected 3Vs borrow from communication theory focused on exploring the ongoing, interactive process of omnidirectional discussion and construction of meaning in both internal and external communication arenas so that messages are understood.⁵

To be *vital*, communication must be *essential and meaningful* throughout the strategic management process. When an organization's strategic management process is valued and indispensable to the organization's future, all interconnected and continuously executed groups of

strategic management activities are viewed as vital. For example, the strategic plan is highly regarded as a life-giving roadmap to the future – a plan worthy of implementation – not a shelf ornament.

To be *visual*, strategy communications must *include illustrations and picture elements*. Visual in the context of strategic management communication aim to bring to life the entire strategic management process through infographics, animated diagrams, charts, photography, and newer techniques such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR). Visuals create meaning and clarify complex information. They help employees grasp key messages and discover how their respective roles contribute to the organization's envisioned future success. Visuals also enhance external stakeholder communication with customers, investors, donors, elected officials, and community leaders.

To be *visible*, strategy communication has to be *easily seen*. In contrast to being visual, *visible* communication puts the entire strategic management process in a conspicuous, continuous spotlight, not hidden. For example, visible, large-scale communication tools include websites, employee forums, and social media platforms that reach targeted internal and external audiences. When strategies are visible, organizations are well-positioned to create stakeholder engagement.

LEADERSHIP PRACTICES FOR STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT USING 3V COMMUNICATION

Strategic management is a continuous process that draws together an entire enterprise, from senior management to work-teams, to devise and deliver a strategy to achieve that future. The following 3V Communication practices are both relevant and crucial for supporting a vibrant strategic management process.

Vital communication practices

Three vital communication practices provide support for the entire strategy management process.

First, **the CEO must take the lead as chief strategy ambassador**. CEOs are expected to be the "face"

for the company, communicating directly with employees, the public and investors about financial and strategic issues. Vital communication begins with an organization's CEO who leverages a variety of tools to reach internal and external audiences. For example, to prepare for strategic planning activities, the CEO could send a personalized invitation to each participant. This simple outreach by the CEO adds gravitas, creativity, urgency, and an all-hands-on-deck tone, priming the pump for purposeful strategy conversations.

Second, **the chief communication officer (CCO) and communication department should be included as key strategy partners** alongside the CEO and executive team. Most organizations do not routinely include CCOs and communication staff in the strategic management process.⁶ These stakeholders play a key role as internal strategists. Indeed, communication professionals are experts at developing communication plans, strategy toolkits, and creative digital and social media communication to engage employees and include the employee voice.

The practice of involving the CCO and communication staff should result in a strategy management communication plan. This plan should articulate key strategies and messages, prioritize internal and external audiences, and outline a diverse group of interactive communication tools that invite employee feedback and support strategy execution and governance.

Third, **all leaders (from executive to project teams) should receive a strategy toolkit and strategy training support**. For example, the communication and HR departments could collaborate to create a strategy toolkit and online training modules to equip managers, supervisors, and team leaders to connect unit goals, activities and performance incentives to enterprise-level goals. The toolkit should prompt interactive strategy discussions for departments and work groups, and support one-on-one employee-supervisor meetings throughout the organization.

An example of a global company demonstrating vital strategy communication practices is The

Mercedes-Benz Group AG. Chief Executive Officer and Chairman of the Board of Management Ola Källenius takes the leading role in communicating the organization's all-electric vehicle strategy, "electromobility by 2030." To put the EV strategy in a big spotlight, Källenius and his executive team host strategy forums to update employees and external stakeholders, including investors. Forums are recorded and posted on the company's website to reach a global audience. The Mercedes-Benz Group AG communication department also plays a prominent role in supporting the strategy by developing communication tools including strategy videos, animated illustrations, and an exceptional employee website.

Visual communication practices

The human brain processes visual images 60,000 times faster than text, and 90% of information transmitted to the brain is visual illustrations and pictures.⁷ Whether aligning the operating model to a new strategy or monitoring strategic goals, the following visual tools can enhance the entire strategic management process.

First, create **visual infographics** to simplify, engage, summarize, and inform throughout the strategic management process. For example, the Association for Strategic Planning created an infographic to illustrate five major groups of activities associated with strategic management.⁴ Infographics can show how strategic priorities connect with goals and performance metrics. The public library of Winnipeg, Canada created an infographic to connect four strategic priorities to eleven strategic goals. The infographic was produced as a poster, as well as featured on the library's website.

Second, **transform a boring written strategic plan into an exciting digital magazine** featuring infographics, videos, photography, and animation. Even organizations with limited budgets can hire a designer to produce an abbreviated, innovative, magazine-style digital story. North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences showcases its strategic plan through a digital publication shared on the website.⁸



Third, to support strategy governance, **select a visual dashboard system** to monitor strategy performance. Visual “green-yellow-red” dashboards create efficient, real-time performance management transparency. Companies such as ClearPoint Strategy, Agile Strategy Manager, and Cascade have created cloud-based goal tracking tools and training programs available by subscription. Visual dashboards promote goal ownership and employee alignment with strategies.

Fourth, consider how **novel visual communication tools**, such as AR and VR, could visually inspire a shared view of the future. The global market for AR and VR is estimated to explode in the next few years, generating revenue of USD\$165.3 billion by 2027, up from USD\$28.2 billion in 2020.⁹ AR is a technology that superimposes a computer-generated image on a user’s view of the real world to provide a composite view. VR uses computer technology to create a simulated environment.

Both AR and VR are already being used to create immersive military planning, training, product testing, gaming, entertainment, and enhanced retail experiences, such as IKEA’s virtual furniture staging program. This groundbreaking technology could be used to create immersive visual experiences that simulate future scenarios, transcend time and distance, and engage stakeholders in imagining the future.

Visible communication practices

Along with being *vital* and *visual*, strategic management must be *visible* – easily seen. The following communication practices support large-scale visibility for ongoing strategy management.

First, **host frequent, interactive, all-employee strategy forums** presented by the CEO and executive team. Live forums recorded for rebroadcast – whether held virtually, in-person, or in a hybrid format – can create visible, timely, two-way dialogue about the strategic management process. Organizations can use strategy forums as an occasion to celebrate

goal progress, invite Q&A, and offer break-out discussions.

Second, **maximize your website and intranet** as visible, expansive strategy communication platforms. An organization’s website is the most powerful, cost-effective global marketing and communication tool available, working 24 hours a day as a visible strategy communication channel. Few global Fortune 500 companies use corporate websites to share strategic initiatives such as excerpts from the strategic plan, CEO and leader op-ed columns, strategy white papers, podcasts, and videos. This is a missed opportunity.

For example, Walmart shares strategic priorities such as sustainability, diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) on its external corporate website, and creates visible employee success stories to show how employees are helping the company achieve strategic priorities. Walmart also uses an employee intranet as a portal for sharing strategy communication and training.

Third, **use social media** to create visible, wide-reaching strategy communication. By a more than two-to-one ratio, employees said they would prefer to work for a CEO who uses digital and social media. A majority of employees believe the CEO’s social media presence has a positive impact on a company’s reputation.¹⁰ However, less than half of S&P 500 and FTSE 350 CEOs boast a presence on social media. Hence, organizations should use social media to elevate their reputation through their CEO and the voice of their employees and customers. For example, Walmart’s President and CEO Doug McMillon reinforces strategy messaging on LinkedIn, Instagram and Facebook, chatting about the organization’s sustainability, DEI and commitment to communities. He frequently recognizes employee accomplishments on social media, which builds employee engagement. Starbucks, in turn, encourages the baristas, to become visible influencers on social media. The company established “Starbucks Partners” on Instagram and Facebook where baristas can share their Starbucks customer service and product stories.

CONCLUSION

The principles of Vital + Visual + Visible Communication provide a framework with potential to improve strategic management communication and strategy connectivity, especially as more employees are working from home. While these principles and practices may *seem* standard, most are rarely deployed.⁶ As 3V Communication tools continually evolve, these principles offer powerful ways to forge strategic management employee engagement as well as enhance external stakeholder value.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Kaplan, R. S., & Norton, D. P. (2005) The office of strategy management. *Harvard Business Review*, October.
- ² Kruse, K. (2012) What is employee engagement. *Forbes*, June 22.
- ³ Gallup, Inc. (2021) (rep.). *State of the global workplace 2021 report*.
- ⁴ Association of Strategic Planning. (2022) *Body of knowledge 3.0*.
- ⁵ Van Ruler, B. (2018) Communication theory: An underrated pillar on which strategic communication rests. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(4), p.367-381.
- ⁶ Association of Strategic Planning & International Association of Business Communicators (2021) Workshop polls conducted in March and October.
- ⁷ Eisenberg, H. (2014) *Humans process visual data better*. Thermopylae Sciences + Technology.
- ⁸ State of North Carolina. *Strategic Plan 2021-2023*.
- ⁹ Vnyz Research. (2021) *Global augmented reality and virtual reality market – analysis and forecast (2021–2027)*.
- ¹⁰ Mullaney, C. (2019) Connected leadership. *Brunswick Review: The Integrity Issue*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carol A. Poore, PhD, MBA, is president of Poore & Associates Strategic Planning, serves on faculty at Arizona State University’s School of Public Affairs, and is author of *Strategic Impact: A Leader’s Three-Step Framework for the Customized Vital Strategic Plan* (Fast Company Press, 2021) endorsed by the Association for Strategic Planning.
E: carol@carolpoore.com.