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Communication Health Check –
Measuring Corporate Communication Performance

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Abstract
A Communication Health Check, based on an existing tool for measuring communication quality, was customized for Finnish companies and supporting software was developed to create an online tool. A pilot measurement procedure was performed in a medium-sized company based in the country's capital, Helsinki. The aim was to see if the tool would be useful in the Finnish context, and whether a benchmarking function or further customization would be preferred. The tool was considered easy to use by the respondents and its main function was considered to be enabling organizational learning.

Keywords: Corporate management, quality management, audit, performance indicators, scorecard.

Introduction

In the area of corporate communication, interest both in the return on investment in communication and in the accountability of communication has grown. Return on investment in communication activities is difficult to demonstrate, as communication is not the only factor affecting corporate results. Accountability for communication, in turn, refers to taking responsibility for the communication strategy choices made and how these contribute to the organization's objectives. Accountability can be viewed, both, on the micro level of single specific communication actions and the competence of individual communication experts, and on the macro level of the communication department and the communication performance of the organization as a whole. The macro level is the focus of this paper.

Communication has been seen, following Kaplan 2010, as an intangible asset that can contribute to the social capital, reputation and legitimacy of a company and its activities (e.g. Luoma-aho, 2005; Aula & Mantere, 2008). Communication contributes in various ways to organizational strategy making. This can be visualized in a strategy map, a means proposed by Kaplan & Norton (2004) that has also been applied to the area of corporate management, as is shown in Figure 1.
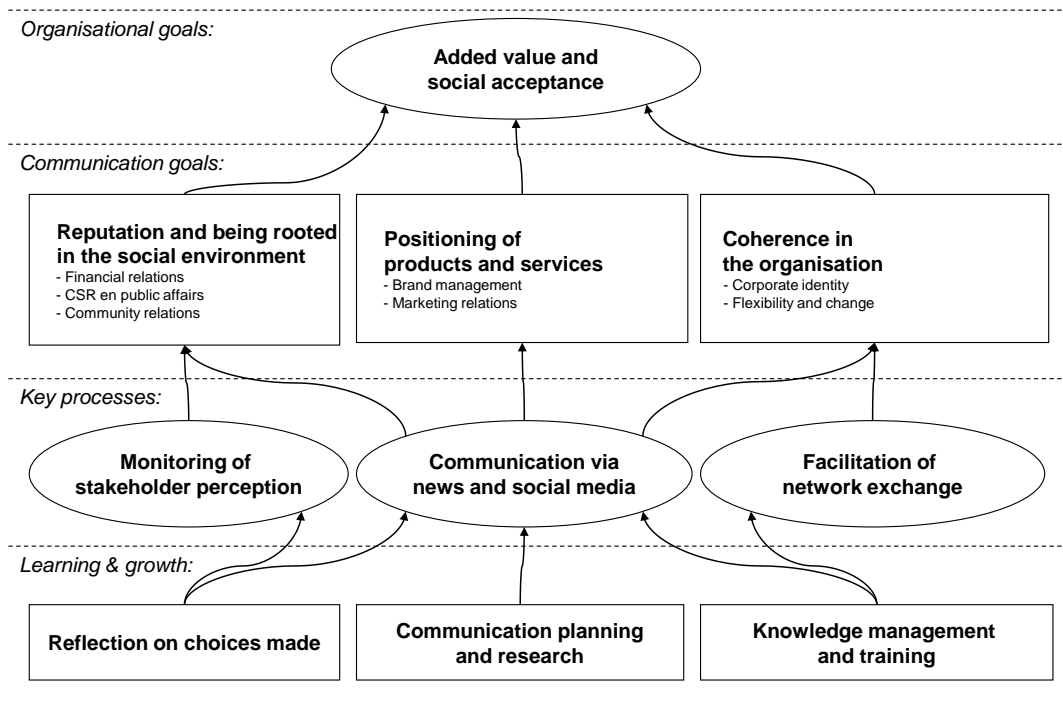
Organisational goals:

**Added value and
social acceptance**

Communication goals:

**Reputation and being rooted
in the social environment**
- Financial relations
- CSR en public affairs
- Community relations

**Positioning of
products and services**
- Brand management
- Marketing relations

**Coherence in
the organisation**
- Corporate identity
- Flexibility and change

Key processes:

**Monitoring of
stakeholder perception**

**Communication via
news and social media**

**Facilitation of
network exchange**

Learning & growth:

Reflection on choices made

**Communication planning
and research**

**Knowledge management
and training**

Figure 1. Example of a strategy map for communication (Vos & Schoemaker, 2011)

Communication can contribute to a company's economic and social goals by seeking to enhance its corporate reputation, positioning of products and services, and internal consistency. According to Vos and Schoemaker (2011), this is done through key processes such as monitoring of stakeholder perceptions, arranging interaction with stakeholders and facilitating network exchange within the organization. Learning and growth are emphasized by Kaplan and Norton (2004), and in the case of corporate communication they can be promoted through reflection on the communication strategy choices made and accountability for the outcomes of such decisions. The latter can take place in the form of performance measurement.

Performance measurement can be implemented on three levels, the level of communication products (output), communication processes and stakeholder satisfaction (interaction), and on the level of results or effects (impact), as described by various authors (e.g. Vos & Schoemaker, 2012; Zerfass, 2008). In practice it is mostly done on the level of output, as the higher levels are difficult to measure.

The method followed in this study builds on the assessment principles laid down by the European Foundation for Quality Management (Ahaus & Diepman, 2002), and employs a scorecard indicators as proposed by Kaplan and Norton (2001, 2006). Similar scorecard tools have been developed for human resources (e.g. Becker, 2001) and IT (e.g. Keynes, 2005), and also for governmental communication (Vos, 2009), and crisis communication (Palttala & Vos, 2012). The aim of such measurement tools is to identify strong and weak aspects so as to help further improve performance and enhance meaningful dialogue between management and employees on both strategic and operational issues (Kald & Nilsson, 2000).

In this paper, we adopt a self-assessment method that will enable us to measure the macro level of communication by the organization as a whole. The method (Vos & Schoemaker, 2004) is the only complete tool published in the English language and no empirical results obtained from its application have been published thus far. In Finland, prior to this study, the tool had not yet been used. The tool includes the three types of communication goals mentioned in the strategy map in Figure 1, which it labels 'concern communication', 'marketing communication' and 'internal communication'. Also included is the area 'organization of communication', in which learning and growth are emphasized. For each of the above-mentioned four areas, five dimensions of communication quality (clarity, environment orientation, consistency, responsiveness, and effectiveness and efficiency) are measured. This results in a matrix structure with 20 boxes, for each of which 2-4 indicators are provided with an explanation (summarized in Table 1).

Table 1. The structure of the measurement tool

Quality dimensions	Concern communication	Marketing communication	Internal communication	Organization of communication
Clarity	Clear positioning of the organization	Clear positioning of brands	Information to staff is clear	Communication vision is clearly defined
Environment orientation/ linkages	Maintain networks for the organization's reputation	Maintain networks for distribution and sales	Communication reinforces commitment and supports change management	Communication function is well embedded in the organization
Consistency	Consistency with other functions and with other communication domains	Consistency in marketing mix, with R&D and with other communi-cation domains	Consistency with HR and with other communication domains	Common starting points for communication, with room for organizational units
Responsiveness	Monitoring and action based on issue management	Monitoring and action based on market research, consumer trends and customer complaints	Communication contributes to internal views on external changes and communication skills encourage internal responsiveness	Feedback is used for innovation of communication
Effectiveness and efficiency	Assessment of corporate reputation, cost efficient methods	Assessment of brand images, cost efficient methods	Internal communication audits, cost-efficient methods	Assessment of communication quality, time management

The tool emphasizes that the vision for communication is clearly defined within the organization and that the different communication domains, in particular concern, marketing and internal communication, cohere. It also underlines the importance of monitoring issues and trends in the social environment and using the results to enhance interaction with stakeholders. The elements mentioned above are measured on response scales (1=strongly disagree,

2=somewhat disagree, 3=don't agree or disagree, 4=somewhat agree, 5=strongly agree, and 0= don't know; not included in calculation of means). The outcomes are multiplied by 20 for readability and thus mean values are presented on a scale between 20 and 100, where outcomes below 75 usually point to a need for improvement and indicate that communication could do more for the company.

The measurement is part of a quality cycle, from orientation and preparation to the implementation of the measurement, followed by improvement activities and evaluation, after which a new cycle starts, the aim being to continuously improve the quality of the communication and its value for the organization.

The measurement tool employs self-assessment strengthened by such facts and figures as are available (such as stakeholder evaluations), with the recommendation to gradually include more of these. The results of the audit tool may be compared to previously set targets, the results of a previous year, or the results of other business units or companies. In the pilot implemented here, no such comparisons or benchmarks were available, and a one-time measure was conducted as a first tryout.

Method

The aim of customizing the measurement tool was to better suit it to Finnish companies, update the content and translate the indicators into the national language. The purpose of the pilot project was to test the effectiveness of the tool in the Finnish context; that is, to see if it would function as a basis for reflection on the contribution of communication to the company, and whether there would be interest in applying it in a standardized form suitable for benchmarking among Finnish companies or whether it should be further customized on the level of the individual firm.

The tool was adapted and piloted in 2013, after which the results were further analyzed and the process evaluated. After updating some of the indicators, e.g. those related to social media use, the translation was done and the texts of the indicators were pretested by 5 practitioners and academics. Next, the digitalization of the tool was undertaken.

The pilot company was found in cooperation with Procom – the national association of communication experts in Finland – by announcing the project in its e-letter. The participating company was a middle-sized services organization located in Helsinki. Contact with the pilot company was arranged by the management consultant involved, while the researchers focused on analyzing the data and reporting the results. The 24 invited respondents comprised communication experts, human resource experts and general managers.

For each question, the mean values and their standard deviation were listed, and for each of the four areas a semantic differential graph, also known as a snake diagram, was created. In addition, the answers to an open question asking participants to evaluate the process were listed. The results for the five dimensions were presented in a cobweb graph. The report was compiled and anonymized by the researchers, and discussed with the pilot organization by the management consultant. The results were also discussed within the pilot organization with a view to further development of communication in the organization, as well as further development of the tool.

Findings

The area of concern communication (defined as external communication with other stakeholders than clients) was rated relatively high by the pilot organization involved (score of 75 on a scale of 20-100). Clarity in the positioning of the company was evaluated as good, although room for improvement in the maintenance of relations with the media and interest

groups was indicated. The scores for consistency were satisfactory, although there were indications that responsiveness could be further improved, in particular, the monitoring of issues. While opinions on the effectiveness and efficiency of communication differed, the results indicated that more attention could be paid to the measurement of the company's reputation and to the effects of communication among stakeholders. The company was advised to discuss the scores showing high deviation (differences of opinion) with the respondents concerned to further clarify the situation.

The area of marketing communication received relatively low ratings (mean score of 66 on a scale of 20-100). Relatively high scores were given for the positioning of the main brand; this is an important aspect of brand management and seen as a critical factor (Vuorinen, Uusitalo, & Vos, 2012). However, lower scores and differences of opinion were observed regarding how well relations were maintained in the distribution channel, and therefore the company was recommended to discuss these results internally. Similarly, it was suggested that the company look into the differences of opinion on the consistency of its marketing communication with its other activities. Regular monitoring of the market and changes in the views of consumers received low ratings, indicating a need for further attention. The related graph is shown below in Figure 2.
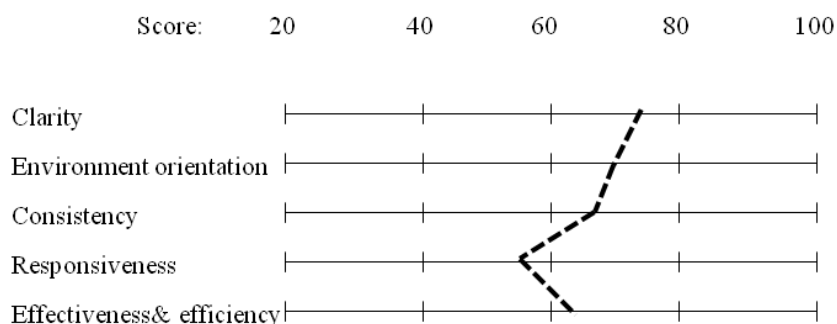

Figure 2. Semantic differential concerning marketing communication.

The indicators for internal communication with employees were considered satisfactory (mean score of 73 on a scale of 20-100), although the scores for some indicators, in particular responsiveness to employee input, suggested room for improvement. This relates to employee empowerment and motivation (Zeglat, Aljaber, & Alrawabdeh, 2014), as well as involvement in decision making (Mykkänen & Tampere, 2014). More attention could also be paid to the available parameters on the use of the company's intranet, and to conducting polls to clarify employee satisfaction with internal communication.

The last set of indicators concerned the organization of communication in the company. Here, the mean score was relatively high (75 on a scale of 20-100). While clarity received high scores, the results also showed that communication might systematically be improved if more detailed measurements were carried out.

Finally, the scores for the five dimensions of communication quality were presented in a cobweb graph. The bigger the space marked within the lines, the better the results are considered to be. The mean values, on a scale of 20-100, were: Clarity – 82; Environment orientation – 75; Consistency – 77; Responsiveness – 62; Effectiveness and efficiency of communication – 63.
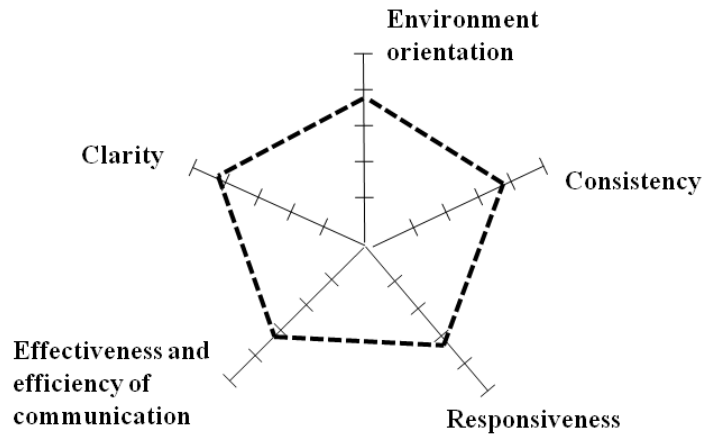
Figure 3. Cobweb with scores for the dimensions of communication quality.

The cobweb graph shows that, in general, the results for the pilot company were encouraging, although the report also indicated some starting points for further improvement. In particular, the results show that the company has a stronger inside-out (with, e.g., high results for clarity) than outside-in orientation (with lower results for responsiveness and measuring client views).

The evaluation of the tool indicated that the respondents considered the tool easy to use and that filling in the answers individually motivated them to discuss the final results together. Sharing the results with other companies so as to set a benchmark was not an objective; instead, the focus was on gaining a quick overview of insights as a basis for internal dialogue on how to further strengthen the value of communication for the company.

Discussion and conclusions
It should be noted that to conduct a measurement process like the one described here needs strong commitment and an open culture of learning. In the present case, the preconditions were met, but this cannot be assumed to apply in all cases, as quality measurement is a sensitive matter and the results need to be interpreted with care. For example, a high level of ambition may lead to lower self-assessment. Finding out what indicators receive relatively high or low scores seems to be a particularly worthwhile goal in terms of the allocation of resources. For example, it might be possible to maintain high scores with less manpower, whereas in the case of low scores more manpower might be needed to boost performance. It is recommended that self-assessment be supplemented with other measures, such as measures of reputation or online likes by stakeholders. Measures like these can thus act as an early warning system that points to what needs attention before this manifests in the company's trading figures. Moreover, such an assessment can be implemented by an independent external communication consultant. This solution is also recommended if further customization is required.

Further customization to suit the company situation of the company might be more valuable than benchmarking with other organizations, although this would need confirmation in a broader investigation than the present pilot. This would be in line with views according to which measurement should reinforce the organization's strategies and match its particular culture (e.g. Neely, Gregory, & Platts, 1995). However, internal benchmarking among different business

units may also enable exchange of insights and organizational learning. Where the precondition of an open culture of learning is met, performance measurement can be a motivating experience. This notion accords with Wouters (2008), who states that performance measurement should primarily facilitate improvement of processes instead of acting as a control device. Accordingly, the method piloted in this paper was not seen as a means for performance measurement and control, but rather as a way to support reflection and organizational learning.

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