



Internal Communications

Working Group Project Summary



“Our lives begin to end the day
we become silent about things
that matter.”

Martin Luther King

ENOUGH WITH THE GLOBAL E-MAILS . . .

An introduction to the genesis of the Internal Communications Working Group

Okanagan College officially opened its door in July, 2005 after a 15-month transition following the announcement of the evolution of Okanagan University College into UBC Okanagan and Okanagan College. Transition team leaders prioritized internal and external communications during this period of significant change with an emphasis on letting employees know of decisions being made by the transition team, gathering input, ideas, finding out about concerns: these were all high on the list of activities central to the successful development of two successful post-secondary institutions.

Even before the door-opening ceremony and the launch of the new College identity and focus, the institution, through dialogue and discourse among its leaders and soon-to-be employees, decided that it would seek to establish itself as a Learning Organization. Such organizations depend and thrive on internal communications: finding better ways to share meaningful information and best practices is critical for organizational success.

The Committee Members

- Marc Arellano, Chair
- Kerry Rempel, Business Administration
- Kathy McLean, Facilities Management
- Claudia Cable, Library Services
- Allan Hickey, IT
- Mike Minions, Ed Tech Co-ordinator
- Joanne Thomsen, CS Vernon
- Leif Burge, Chair, Geography & Earth and Environmental Science
- Deborah Warren, Computer Science, Vernon
- Quentin Hughson, International
- Siri Marken, Health

With its first year of operation behind it, Okanagan College gathered many of its employees together in August, 2005 for an organizational development conference called Next Steps. That two-day exercise focused on how best to improve the organization and achieve the aims and goals of a next step. Employee feedback, gained through working sessions, focused on a number of key areas. A subsequent survey of employees established that improved internal communications was a priority for Okanagan College, to take advantage of the momentum that had been achieved through the transition and first year of development and to build on the culture reflected in the College's Mission, Vision, Values and Key Directions.

In January, 2007, with President Jim Hamilton and Public Affairs Director Allan Coyle as project advocates, the Internal Communications Working Group Charter (see [Appendix 1](#)) was established and a call for volunteers went out, with Marc Arellano identified as Working Group Chair. With a representative sample of employees from outside of the Leadership Team as colleagues, and with Coyle as a resource, the working group was tasked to identify a number of ways that internal two-way communication could be improved at Okanagan College, with minimal new investment and

with an eye to immediate or near-term implementation. Although the committee was composed of a variety of participants with a spectrum of interests and goals ([see Appendix 2](#)), the members collaborated with a positive spirit and focus on making Okanagan College an even better institution and workplace.

The Discussion

At the heart of the discussion among participating working group members was a recognition that as good as communications can be, there is always an opportunity to improve. There was a sense that within the College there is a generally positive culture to be found, supported and built upon: one member (new to the College in 2005) described it as a sense that there are a lot of people at Okanagan College who will go out of their way to help fellow employees and students – more perhaps than can be found at other institutions.

Through discussions about the internal communications opportunities and issues at Okanagan College, it also became clear that there was a sense that the institution would need to improve its internal communications if it were to keep alive and nurture the culture of change it has developed. The entire leadership team – not just the executive – needs to be more proactive about communicating with and listening to their colleagues throughout the institution. Some members of the committee expressed the sense that they felt more “engaged” last fall in the wake of the Next Steps sessions.

“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

- George Bernard Shaw

The development of a Learning Organization will also require a focus on internal communications at the peer-to-peer level: it isn't just a matter of better two-way communication between Leadership Team and staff and vice versa, but also a matter of empowering people with information and insights that are best shared between colleagues and across departments and units. [Peer-to-peer communications](#) joined the [hierarchical communications channel](#) as a focus for improvement for the Internal Communications Working Group. Discussion soon revolved around important elements of accessible communication, e.g. questions like “who to turn to for help,” “where to turn for advice,” “who is responsible for what,” and “what department does what?”

The third channel identified by the group – [organizational](#) – came through the exploration of internal communication practices, challenges and opportunities. This focus, in essence, is on mechanisms and means to communicate information within a diverse and complex organization, in a manner that encourages participation, buy-in and interest. Recognizing that much of Okanagan College's focus to date has been on establishing an identity for itself

externally, there was a sense that as an organization we need to find a way to provide to staff the information, advice and insights that will leave them feeling informed about the organization, our shared goals and better prepared to talk about the College. The channels of communication must also provide them with opportunities to involve themselves with the organization writ large – in much the same way that the Next Steps sessions of August, 2006 permitted. With our vision to be the employer of first choice, Okanagan College needs to communicate in different and better ways to help staff understand what each other are doing and to take advantage of their expertise to improve the College.

A review of other organizations that are tackling or have tackled the issue of improved internal communications makes it clear that these issues – and the possible solutions the Working Group identified – are not unique to Okanagan College. Post-secondary institutions, especially those as diverse as Okanagan College with several campuses, have similar problems: making the best use of information technology without taking away from the importance of the face-to-face interaction, for example. Making best use of information technology without being burdensome was another common problem. (A common refrain and an identified issue for the Working Group was the idea that we send out too many global e-mails, some of which are of little interest to many recipients. Every time a global e-mail clutters the in-basket of an employee to whom the message isn't pertinent, the value of that mechanism of communication is eroded.) One of the clear messages is that in finding better ways to build internal communications, the College has to find a way to better manage the use of global e-mail.

Outcomes and Recommendations

The Working Group compiled a list of [27 recommendations](#) and ideas that answer the project charter. Some have been acted on in a partial manner (there is now an organizational chart online, for example) and others can be addressed in either the short- or long-term. All deserve consideration. The tables below summarize those ideas and recommendations – the red-coded recommendations are those that the group felt should be acted upon quickly:

	Short- term	Long Term	Priority	Responsible Unit
Peer-to-Peer solutions				
Online organizational chart - departmental charts still required, and org chart should be linked to various areas (I.e. telephone directory, HR)	Org chart now online Needs more		1	HR
		X		HR
Paper-based phone book w/directory of committees - Do as PDF, so can be updated frequently. Work with IT and use the database that feeds the online staff directory (update directory and link to Outlook). Could do it on an on-demand basis, too.	X		1	Public Affairs IT
Utilize "helpful" culture of staff and faculty , e.g. we can help each other find answers and solutions - facilitated by more information about who is where, who does what where, implement program to recognize those who go above and beyond in terms of helpfulness	X	X	3	All units - guided by HR
Better use of staff photos and position descriptions outside of program offices	X		2	All units - facilitated by Business Services
Create clusters of interest - physically and online (faculty with similar research or program interests situated next to each other, for example), develop technological platform to facilitate (educate to existing technology)		X	2.43	VPs - all units
An online space for questions, where people could post ideas, a low-stakes place where people can feel comfortable to explore ideas and issues. Hold an live online forum once a month or an asynchronous version		X	2	Public Affairs IT Services
Series of revolving open houses between departments, campuses	X		1	All units/ Leadership Team
Common lunch hour or designated PD day for staff and students (rooms could be utilized for PD, meetings and student groups)		X	3	VPs to review
Hierarchical (vertical communication) solutions:				

Establish a regular program of "coffee with the president" or "tea with the VP" that involves different people from the organization and allows them to raise issues or ideas	X		1	Executive
A "new employees" night that could involve the mentors and Leadership to create a sense of community (dinner, drinks, cake and coffee). Combine with opportunities for new staff to become familiar with all campuses.	X		1	HR, Executive, Leadership Team
Townhall meetings that would involve members of the executive and various members of the Leadership Team.	x		3	Regional Deans, Executive, Leadership Team
More PD days/Next Steps-style conferences for F2F communication with the Leadership team	x	x	1	Executive, HR, Leadership Team
Create an open-door atmosphere with President, VPs, Dean and Directors (open house for the new executive offices an idea)		x	1	Executive, Leadership Team
Organizational (college-wide) solutions:				
A weekly or bi-weekly "newsflash" delivered electronically and available online that college employees can subscribe to that will update people on coming events, developments, issues, press releases, media coverage, etc.	x		1	Public Affairs, all units
Improve info on new hires and departures	X		2	HR, Public Affairs
FAQ to help people make sense of the organization (needs based). Develop an "Ask Us" FAQ for all employees that mimics the online database developed by IT - ensure there is someone there to respond to the questions, though. Need to develop buy-in from departments.		X	4	HR, Public Affairs, Leadership Team, HR, IT
Mentor program for new hires	X		1	HR, all units

Limit quantity of global emails, i.e. create parameters/policies for use	X		1	Public Affairs, Leadership Team, Director of Legal Affairs and Policy Development
Create an opt-in communications channel, e.g. via MyOkanagan	x		1	IT Services
Produce internal communications materials (like the Journal) more frequently (paper-based)	x		1	Public Affairs, all units (submitting)
More training to take advantage of communications technology like myOkanagan - Use opportunities like Next Steps, develop communications materials, use the Journal as a tech tip centre, online course (like Ironpoint) that introduces all staff to what it is like to be a student and focuses on myOkanagan.	X	X	1	IT services, Public Affairs, Leadership Team, HR
Global events calendar w/rss feed for automatic updating to subscribers	x		1	Public Affairs, IT services
Pit, Cafeteria and Library (high-traffic areas) is a great place to have a screen with rolling messages	x		1	Regional Deans, Public Affairs
Fun student competitions (OC Olympics, bowling, etc.) is a way of bringing staff and students together	x		1	Student Services (Campus Rec)
Editorial Board (Face to face or electronic)	x		1	Public Affairs, IT services
Electronic dropbox for comments, suggestions, etc. (see online space - could be built in)		x	3	Public Affairs, IT services
Nametags worn daily by all staff to identify individuals	x		1	Leadership Team, all units

Appendix 2

Committee Member Statements

Leif Burge

My tenure at the college began at the transition. My interest is in creating and improving the sense of academic community at Okanagan College through improved communications.

Kathy McLean

Originally I wanted to be included in this group to try and close the gap between the Leadership team/Executive and staff and faculty by improving two-way communication.

However, over the course of our meetings it was discovered that there was also a huge gap 'horizontally' between peer to peer. This needed to be addressed as quickly as the 'vertical' Leadership team/Executive and staff and faculty. The committee, in my opinion, came together with some very insightful ideas and hopefully these ideas can be implemented with a successful result.

Claudia Cable

My friend told me about this committee. As a support staff member who works directly with students I get asked lots of information and directional questions that I sometimes have trouble answering. I felt that since I've had problems in the past with internal communications I could contribute to the discussion. I was very pleased to have been chosen to participate on this committee.

Allan Hickey

I volunteered to help "move the message". To use my IT background as a resource and to experience the tools and techniques my colleagues use to communicate.

Quentin Hughson

In dealing with IE students, I need to communicate effectively across linguistic and cultural barriers. I enjoy the challenges of cross-cultural communication but was frustrated by the lack of timely information on college events that IE students might want to attend. Volunteering for the ICWG allowed me to voice my concerns and discuss solutions that would help me schedule activities without conflicting with OC events. The added bonus was learning what communicative difficulties others were experiencing, and learning of the tools we already have available to us that we can utilize more effectively...

Marc Arellano

I initially joined for the free refreshments. It soon became apparent, however, that I could share in a unique process focused on re-aligning how and why we communicate internally at OC, and to advocate for a link between improved communications and student success.

Kerry Rempel

I joined the internal communication working group because I believe in the potential of Okanagan College. Transitioning from one culture to another doesn't happen in a year, and it certainly doesn't stop after two. If my input can help Okanagan College continue on the path that it's begun and I can help to shape the culture in a positive way, I feel that the transition is continuing, and that gives me focus for the future.

Mike Minions

My most pressing need was to find a way to target and contact specific groups within the OC community without having to annoy everyone with a global e-mail. I've also been searching for a way to share ideas, ask questions, and engage in an ongoing discussion about how we do things here at OC with people I don't happen to bump into in the course of a day. Creating an effective structure for various forms of internal communication is an essential element in encouraging the growth of communities of learning.

Joanne Thomsen

Effective internal communication that includes all campuses is key to the success of Okanagan College. I'm happy to participate on a committee that is looking for ways to make Okanagan College even better.