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"There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about."

Margaret J. Wheatley

Margaret is a management consultant who studies Organisational Behaviour and served on the Advisory Board of the Obama presidency. If anyone understands the power of a community when aligned to a leadership value, it's Margaret.

But as we've witnessed politically and culturally during the past few years, a 'traditional' structure can be quickly torn down when the community has different values to that of the standing leadership.

Social media gives huge prominence to community, despite the concept being nearly 300,000 years old. Social media has changed the scale at which our communities can grow; and the speed at which values can be enforced and entrenched. We connect fast with other people in our 'communities' via hashtags, infinite scrolls and open forums.

But what happens when these communities come together rapidly in business - and when their values differ from those of the board or the shareholders?

Change.

Change is the only outcome for any business that opens its doors to social media driven communities. As Margaret says, "there is no power for change greater than a community."



The watercooler is no longer the centre of workplace gossip, or the main place to vent our frustrations. As our familiarity with workplace social media grows, so we're becoming more comfortable making statements digitally to our 'communities'. Gossip becomes a message. Whereas previously, messages were crafted by Internal Communications teams and the CEO, carefully planned to deliver on strategical targets or hit revenue targets, now they are pushed from the ground up to meet the need of whoever clicks 'post'.

What does this mean for a business of say, 50,000 people when 12,000 of those people (24% - the number usually assumed to be the 'tipping point' for serious movement) don't agree with the direction of travel? 12,000 may seem a large number in a medium-sized company, but those 12,000 don't even need to be active ambassadors for a message to land. A business of 50,000 could have just 600 influencers, each bringing 20 people into their community to reach that tipping point.

So effectively, just **1.2% of a workforce can drive a movement** to make a change.

Communities are empowered to act on their values in ways that can have a phenomenal impact on businesses. A community will be driven to ensure their values are represented in the wider culture to start a ripple effect. And because that value is so deeply engrained, it takes precedence over the strategy and focus of the wider business and leadership.

As workplace social media becomes increasingly influential, 'watercooler gossip' can easily turn into a movement for change. We see this in the geo-political shifts across the globe: 'fake news' is our 'watercooler gossip', leading in turn to the hardline messages and movements which have shaken and restructured governments.

This is not to be alarmist; but it does suggest that **'leadership' must evolve.**

The power of a true leader is their ability to influence those around them. A leader of a 50,000 strong business may represent just 0.002% of the employee population - but they should be able to influence thousands with a single, well-constructed message. The big change is in how they influence.

Traditionally a leader was well received if they were more autocratic and had all the answers. Now, thanks to technology and a shift in cultural norms, leaders are expected to be more democratic, transparent and inspirational. For these new leadership traits, social media within a business can be incredibly powerful.

It's an opportunity to demonstrate a shift in attitude, from command and control, to coaching and collaborating. Social media allows leaders to have open, two-way conversations with employees; to listen to growing movements; and to deal with them directly and openly. It's ok not to have all the answers – as long as you're seen to be asking the right questions, and listening to all contributions.

Modern leaders see social media not as a medium for delivering internal communications campaigns and push messages; but as a means for listening and responding to the employee



voice. It's a way to simultaneously lead and listen to the powerful communities around them. Social media put the last two presidents in the White House – that macro example will be reflected on micro levels across businesses in the next 2-5 years.

Top 5 tips for managing communities as an Internal Comms team:

- Plan your message and responses to both negative and positive engagement
- Be reactive to the communications around you, and be willing to jump onboard and engage with things that aren't 'owned' by IC
- Listen. Sometimes just listening is more powerful than any response or action.
- You can't control social media channels. They're not owned; they're earned. Being a communicator doesn't mean you've earned the right to be heard.
- Be yourself. Fake news isn't tolerated; and neither is fake leadership.

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