



Waukegan Materials, Inc.

TEACHING NOTE

Purpose of Case Study

1. To encourage students to think about the role of strategic communication within an organization.
2. To focus student attention on the goals of specific communication situations.
3. To help students understand the importance of analyzing the situation (audience, purpose, occasion) when writing in a business context.
4. To focus student attention on primary and secondary audiences for written communication.

Identify the Business Problem

The business problem in this case involves communicating an important message not only to an individual within the organization but also to the organization as a whole and possibly the surrounding community. The goal is to deliver the intended message (recognizing an employee for exceptional performance) in such a way that it reinforces the strategic goals of the organization.

This teaching note was prepared by Cynthia Maciejczyk under the direction of James O'Rourke, Concurrent Professor of Management, as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation.

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Forecast the Most Desirable Outcome

The most desirable outcome is for the intended message to be received by the recipients. Inherent in communicating a message of this kind is the danger that the recipients will misinterpret the company's motives or be scornful of the circumstances.

Identify the Communication Issues

The writer in this case must take into account the general work environment within the company.

- Do employees generally have a positive attitude?
- How effective is Waukegan's internal communication network?
- Will employees likely value and support this recognition program?
- How should the company compose a message targeted at individuals who will be seen and interpreted by a larger audience?

Discuss How to Address the Issues

The writer must give careful thought to how the message to the employee-of-the-quarter is worded. The message, while personal, will also need to convey an important public message: how Waukegan treats its employees. The publication of this letter has the potential to enhance the public image of the company and create a strong positive reaction among employees. Because management will want strong employee support for this program, the message must be appealing to all employees. This presents an exercise in tact; for, while you want to recognize and highlight the achievements of one individual, you do not want to denigrate the efforts of his coworkers in any way.

Teaching the Case

At the beginning of class

Because this case does not involve complex facts or events, you can distribute the case at the beginning of the class period in which it will be discussed. Give the students 10 minutes to read the case and ask them to think about the issues described above.

For the remainder of the class

Spend the next 5-10 minutes of the class session briefly recapping the facts of the case.

Then, for the next 20 minutes, have the students identify the issues.

Some points for student consideration may include:

Potential employee response to this program. Are there clues in the original memo that can help the students determine employee response. There were more than “two dozen nominations” for the first quarterly employee recognition awards. How can the writer capitalize on this sentiment?

Conveying a personal message while at the same time making a statement to a larger audience. Students must consider several audiences when composing this message to the employee: the employee himself, his coworkers, managers, and the surrounding community.

The recognition award itself. Have students give some thought to an appropriate tangible award. In this company, with these employees, what would be considered an appropriate token of appreciation (special parking privileges, restaurant gift certificate, cash gift, decorative plaque, engraved pen, etc.)?

Paying attention to what the president is asking of the general manager. In their transmittal memo students must take care to respond to Magers' specific requests. In addition to a letter, he asks for additional information: what suitable gift would be, its cost, and an annual budget for the program.

Last portion of class

Summarize student responses. Ask students for their communication plan.

Issues to consider include:

Strategic communication objectives. What are Waukegan’s strategic business objectives and how can they be linked directly to the communication objectives?

Audience analysis. Who is the primary recipient of this message? Secondary audience? What are their characteristics, goals, information needs?

Message construction. Although this message is written to a single individual, it is likely to be seen by a much larger audience. How will this affect the development of the message?

Medium selection. We already know that a letter of appreciation will be written. But what of informing other members of the company? Ask students to think about ways of informing the company population in general about this event.

Measurement of outcome. How will we know if we have succeeded? What criteria should we use to determine success? If we're not successful, what should we consider changing first: medium, message, audience, or objectives?

Last 5 minutes of class

Conclude the discussion.

The key to this case, as with nearly all other management communication cases, is to let the students speak freely, but guide their comments toward the communication issues the case presents.