



Spartan Industries, 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 to the surrounding community. Additionally, this case calls for a negative message to be delivered to a group of individuals within the firm who did not get a promotion. Negative news is always difficult to deliver, especially in a competitive situation. The goal is to deliver the intended messages in such a way that they reinforce 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 messages to be received and accepted by the recipients. With regard to the negative message intended for those individuals who did not get the promotion, the most desirable outcome is that they will understand and agree with the selection of their coworker. The company can also use the news of this promotion to bolster its public image within the community.

Identify the Communication Issues

1. The writer in this case must take into account several issues when composing and delivering these messages.
2. Timing issues: should the promoted individual receive his message before the general employee population; what about those not selected for promotion?
3. How to deliver the message to the general population (general all-hands meeting, all-hands memo, e-mail).
4. How to deliver the message to the surrounding community.
5. Primary and secondary audiences for both the message to the promoted employee and the message to those not promoted.
6. How to compose a message targeted at an individual that 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 **promoted employee** is worded. While the message will certainly laud the performance of this individual, the writer must be careful not to cast any negative reflections on the other individuals up for the promotion. It is almost certain that this message will be seen by other individuals within the company. The message must also relay important procedural information: when the promotion will take effect, what the new job duties will entail, perhaps the percentage of salary increase. The writer must remember to answer all the questions the recipient might have.

The message to **the employees not selected** must be carefully worded as well. Although the writer may choose to use an indirect approach (burying the bad news in the middle of the message), it's almost always more appreciated when the writer comes right to the point. In this case, the recipients will want to know immediately if they got the promotion. The message should be worded positively with an eye to maintaining the recipient's goodwill. The writer

should explain the reasons that Bob Johnson was selected and should *not* apologize for the decision. An apology serves only to weaken the intended message: that the best person was selected for the job.

The **strategy memo** must be clear and specific about each step in the sequence of actions that need to occur to accomplish management's communication goals. This memo is about *action*: who should do what and when to get the proper messages out to the proper recipients. In their memos, students should consider the following:

- Respond to the General Manager's queries. Do what you can to make his job easier. Coordinate important staff actions in advance, give him good ideas, help him get things done.
- Don't simply repeat what the boss said in his memo, and don't gratuitously congratulate the boss on his great judgment.
- Do list the facts as you know them and discuss their meaning and implications.
- Assign individual responsibility for each of the actions that are important.

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 negative response to the news. There may be some employees who will feel negatively about the selection of Bob Johnson for punch press foreman. How can students address this issue in their messages?

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

How to publicize the positive aspects of this promotion to the surrounding community.

Have students discuss ways to promote this event in the community (contacting the local media for an interview with Bob Johnson, issuing a press release, sending e-mails to other constituencies such as business partners and key customers).

Paying attention to the specific requests of the general manager. In their strategy memo students must take care to respond to the general manager's specific requests.

Last portion of class

Summarize student responses. Ask students for their communication plan.

Issues to consider include:

Strategic communication objectives. What are Spartan'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 to the individual selected for promotion and a letter to those not selected will be written. But what of informing other members of the company and the community? Ask students to think about ways of informing the company population and the surrounding community 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.