

Mapping 4: THE CHANGING COMMUNICATIONS FUNCTION

Marco is clearly throwing a lot of ideas and suggestions at the foundation CEO, with respect to what to do about, and how to think, communications. I'm sure we'll also need to provide some guidance about "operationalizing."

The points that follow are a re-working of a document I gave you before. I think it will make more sense now, as a way to explain – or map – the evolution of the communications function from something quite straightforward and easy to put in one box on the organization chart, to something that is much more complex and falls into a lot of boxes on the chart. But it is still more descriptive than actionable.

For discussion in the meeting or your later input: What needs to happen to the document below – where does it need to go – to be really helpful to a CEO who wants to rethink the foundation Communications job, in the light of Marco?

Some key steps in the evolution of the communications job in foundations:

1. A number of "felt responsibilities" have traditionally drawn foundations into communications activity:
 - Provide information to grantseekers and the public
 - Meet disclosure requirements; act in a transparent way
 - Give distribution or exposure to (some) exemplary reports/products
 - Support (some) grantees in their public education and policy advocacy activity

2. This work has been carried out through such communications-based activity as:
 - Producing brochures, annual reports, printed versions of guidelines; recently, developing web versions of same
 - Sharing disclosure forms and statements
 - Circulating grant announcements to media, others

- Providing grant-related support for media, public education and advocacy campaigns carried on by nonprofits

3. Increasingly, foundations aspire to do such things as:

- Share information and knowledge within and across foundations
- Distill and share lessons learned with problem solvers, public
- Develop enduring relationships with civic, business, public sector leaders
- “Learn to learn” from others
- Project a compelling sense of mission, purpose and value to stakeholders
- Build cultures of innovation inside foundations
- Create, sustain and learn from cross-sectoral partnerships
- Lift their public policy work to new levels of impact
- Build networks among grantees, and “across” foundation and grantee clusters
- Make the “walls” between foundations and the rest of the world less rigid
- Make a bigger difference in nonprofit capacity/performance
- Gather regular input about how foundations are experienced and valued by others

4. While most of these aspirations are not communications-driven in a traditional sense, the desire to meet them is driving development of an expanded, communication-based “repertoire of tactics” for foundation people:

- Turning foundations into knowledge portals for consumers far beyond the media and grantees
- Developing new constructs and vocabulary for foundation value
- Incentivizing knowledge creation, management and dissemination
- Sponsoring or nurturing communities of practice within and beyond foundations
- Supporting grantees in networking, dialogue, civic engagement
- Forging new strategic alliances among parties within/beyond foundations
- Building culture in a purposeful way to support performance
- Mounting initiatives with visible sponsorship of foundations to inform public debate, lead people to issues, build constituencies for change
- Joining multi-party, multi-foundation conversations

- Creating brand identity and true brand equity
- Expanding use of customer satisfaction research
- Increasing the traffic of ideas and experience, into and out of, the foundation

5. This new activity pushes hard on any previous definition of “communications” in foundations. It also disperses communications work among many different people in the foundation. Said another way, it is causing a change in the “prime actor,” from a communications perspective:

Early stage communications responsibilities were generally vested in 1) public information officer and/or 2) director of publications. These jobs were continuing, formally designated, “primary” for those who held them, and most often second/third tier on the organization chart. They did not require close proximity to the CEO vision.

Emerging communications responsibilities are vested in people who may not have communications in their titles at all. But whatever their job titles, they are performing as navigators, knowledge brokers, web masters, learning coaches, listeners, conveners, conversation brokers, brand managers, initiative strategists, visionary leaders, change agents. Their work is often situational, and informally designated. They are found up and down the organization chart and include program officers and the CEO and Board. They are most likely marching to an organizational imperative/culture that flows from the CEO’s strategic vision and leadership.

6. The new communications “functionality” sketched here at the individual foundation level, also has an analog at the field level. For example, *a foundation* had a public information officer to dispense information. *The field* created the separate Foundation Center, to “take care of” the aggregate information function without requiring any continuing investment of foundation leadership other than financial. Now, emerging communications thinking pushes *a foundation* to pay more attention to capturing and sharing lessons learned, and acting in concert with others– and pushes *leaders in the field* to explore how they must invest their own time together to create a culture of sharing and action across foundations.