

Internal Communication as a key Instrument of Change

*An interview with Indira Nair, Senior
General Manager, Communications,
Malaysia Airline*

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Picture this. You are a successful professional in the world of communications. You are respected. You have “cracked the code” - the code to success in your industry. Life is looking pretty good. And then, you meet a man. You decide to jump ship. It’s a flying ship. It’s Malaysia Airlines. Add one “minor” detail. Cash fuels this ship. The company has enough cash to keep it airborne for just three more months, with no safety net. The Prime Minister has firmly declared, “No more bailouts.” You take on the role of leading the charge on communications and you hit the ground running. Your name is Indira Nair.

I first met Indira some three years ago at her Malaysia Airlines office in Subang. I recall observing her calm, softly spoken, humble yet confident persona. She speaks slowly, thoughtfully and intelligently. Indira has a presence about her. When she speaks, people listen. Since that meeting, Indira's name has come up from time to time in conversation with people in the industry. Based on the snippets of information that I picked up, I could see that Indira was a respected and well-liked figure in the advertising fraternity. And since I first met Indira, Malaysia Airlines has undergone a major turnaround. This is the story of how Indira, has been a major change agent within the airline.

The brand promise raised expectations too high...it needed to change

The MAS slogan was "Going Beyond Expectations." MAS ads were doing a great job of building expectations. And cabin crew were winning awards. But there was a disconnect between the advertised brand promise and what was being delivered by most of the rest of the organisation. As a passenger of MAS, I was always impressed by the cabin crew. However, the story at my other key touch point with the airline - check-in - was inconsistent. Depending on who the check-in person was, it might be friendly and fast one time and transactional and slow another time... Indira and her senior MAS management team had their work cut out for them. The brand promise of "Going Beyond Expectations" set too high an expectation. When the customer experience does not match the expectations that have been set, customers become dissatisfied. It was time to re-brand.

And so, "MH" - Malaysian Hospitality - was born.

The information vacuum

Urgent need to fill an information vacuum

Indira joined MAS in February 2006. The fuse had been lit, and the "no cash, no bailout time-bomb" was going to explode in three short months. Levels of trust in the organisation were low. "There was an information vacuum in the company. This was being fuelled by rumours and gossip. Employees would open the newspapers to find out what was happening," said Indira. She saw an urgent need to fill the vacuum. The only problem was that the tools and infrastructure for effective internal communication were not in place. "There were printed newsletters, no intranet and a static e-mail system. I thought to myself, 'where do I start?' it was daunting," she said. So, Indira started at the very beginning. "It was a matter of rolling up our sleeves and getting down to basics. The first objective was to kick-start the communications channels and to get them out into the organisation," she said.

The first step is to understand the target audience - employees

Internal communications has a target audience - employees. The first step was to understand her audience. "I needed to understand the workforce – how they got information, where from and what they believe," she said. She did this by using some ageless technology – she spoke to people, starting with her team. "People in MAS have been with the airline for a long time, and have a strong affinity to the brand," she said. She found that people were more than willing to talk.

Indira and her team worked at a grueling pace. Within two weeks of her joining the airline, Idris Jala announced the turnaround plan. A 47-page document outlining the Business Turnaround Plan (BTP), in both English and Bahasa, was distributed to every one of the 20,000 plus employees in the organisation.

Filling the vacuum

A variety of communications channels were developed. Bulletin boards were placed in 12 "hotspots" around the company. Information was disseminated, printed and put up on the boards. The intranet quickly went up. There was a competition to name the intranet. Idris announced the winner at the same town hall that launched the Business Turnaround Plan. Berita, the MAS newsletter was refreshed and reformatted to provide information in a fresh, readable format. Indira unblocked the organisation's information arteries. Company announcements were communicated and cascaded to Board members, employees and on to the media swiftly and with military precision. The standard procedure was for the announcement to go to the Board, and 10 minutes later to employees. The media would get the same information 10 minutes later. This was referred to as the "the +10+10+10 process." Cascade packs were developed for major presentations by Idris. This might include video footage and PowerPoint presentations with speaker notes. All of these were supported by weekly circulars from the CEO.

Trust was rebuilt through communication

The information vacuum was being filled. Gossip was being replaced by fact. Trust was being rebuilt and the employees were starting to get galvanized. Indira said, "The reaction among employees was, 'wow', management is being open!" A key driver behind this was speed and extensive internal communication.

There were comments of discomfort among the management team about the newfound openness of the communication. “They asked, ‘should we say that?’” said Indira. I said, “Why not? The media will now quote the true source of information rather than just rumours. Idris said that as long as we do not violate any Bursa rules, it was okay to share information with employees. If you keep information from the Board or from employees, they will get worried. We were rebuilding trust.”

“So, the early stages were about simple internal communications. It was structured and logical. With the +10+10+10 process, we could not miss anything. It was systematic,” she said matter of factly. Listening to Indira, it all sounded logical enough. What was incredible was the quality of the thinking and the speed of execution. Indira gave some insights into what was happening within her team. “They were shell-shocked at the speed at which things were happening. I would write something in five minutes and out it would go. My team executed the plan. We couldn’t be too analytical. We didn’t have time. We all had to hit the ground running,” she said.

Keep it simple, make it fun

As the saying goes, “Sell, don’t tell.” A key objective of the change process was to get employees back on board – to fire them up around a common cause. Indira and her team did this by involving employees in the communication process and by adding generous doses of fun.

**The Intranet
became a
“happening
place”**

MH Pulse, the MAS Intranet site, has become a "happening place" on the internal communications landscape. "When we started, we got 300 hits a week. We now get 20,000 hits from employees every month." Indira’s team drives traffic to Pulse by making it interesting with photos, on-line alerts and contests. Pulse is now an accepted tool where people can find information and updates. "It's not your policy location. We often run MH Pulse Polls where we ask for employee opinions on issues. We get 800 to 1000 responses." When I commenced this interview, I thought that I was going to be speaking to Indira Nair, a very clever internal communications expert. By this point, I realized that I was talking to a highly effective change agent who achieved results by focusing on the fundamentals.

Visual symbols reinforced the change process

Visual symbols and reminders are an integral part of any change process. Once again, Indira went for the jugular vein of simplicity. "We gave out MH button badges at the town hall talk – we weren't sure if employees would use them. Employees, including cabin crew, proudly wore them". A rolling series of posters was developed. They were to be seen everywhere around the organisation. The messages on the posters came from employees. "We had polls such as, "What do you think MH stands for?" she explained. The responses were simple. And so were the messages on the posters. Simple, but powerful. For example, one poster said, "Smile! Treat people with respect!" It's not rocket science, but it gets the right message across in a way that connects with employees.

You will learn in any course on Marketing 101 that it's important to stay in touch with your customers, to engage them, to connect with them and to give them what they want. Indi's customers are MAS's 20,000 employees. She applied the fundamentals of Marketing 101 and got them to shape their own messages. And, in doing so, she sold an idea to them in a powerful way. The core idea revolved around MH – Malaysian Hospitality - and what it means. TMI works on the "3 by 3" Rule. That is, to get a message across effectively, we have to communicate it at least 3 times in 3 different ways. Indi's team are communication grandmasters who used a multiple of the 3 by 3 rule.

Getting communication down into the organisation

Many things happen at the top of the organisation that do not filter down into the ranks. Indi was instrumental in setting up a team of champions that now number 180 employees in Malaysia and overseas. This is the team of MH Juaras – champions – who play the role of change agents within their own sections of the organisation. "We asked for influencers among middle managers. They would be people who would listen to who had drive and leadership capability." Title was not important. The MH Juaras went to an initial 2 day workshop where they planned a program on what they would do to engage their team members, keep the communication flowing and to get projects up and running. The real challenge for them was to make MH come alive. All change processes involve projects. And, yes, being a MH Juara means extra work on top of normal work loads. It was important to keep this group energised. They met every quarter with the CEO to give him feedback. During this process, Idris would share with the group the company's business plan. Once again, this is a simple, yet powerful strategy.

Brand champions – a key instrument of change

Recognize your brand champions

Employees want to make a difference. However, being human, they want to feel that their efforts are being noticed. There is no better way of achieving this than to arrange quarterly get togethers with the CEO. And there were little rewards at the end of the year. Nothing big, but rather, a gesture of “thank you for going the extra mile.” Reward and recognition is more systemized now. Rather than have MH Juaras feel that they have an extra job, their additional duties and performance are now built into their KPIs.

Support your brand champions

As might be expected, there were different levels of support for the MH Juaras among their bosses. Each MH Juara had a buddy in the Communications Division. “If we had feedback that they needed support or that information had not been cascaded, we made a supportive call to the relevant boss. We would say something along the lines of, “We hear that employees have not heard about...Can you do us a favour and make sure it happens in the next week.”

The impact of the MH Juaras was huge. The organization now has 180 change agents and communicators with their shoulders to the grindstone and ears to the ground. They helped to build and sustain the momentum of change.

Senior management played its role

Indira lavished praise on Idris Jala, the CEO who steered MAS into higher, safer altitudes. Idris was mentioned throughout the interview as the enabler. He was open to new ideas. He rolled up his sleeves. He broke down barriers, for example by having lunch in the MAS cafeteria with employees. He wanted to connect with employees. And, it seems, employees wanted to connect with him. And, of course, Idris was very focused on the bottom line. That’s what this was all about. Apart from Idris Jala, senior management played an active role in the communications process. Divisional Heads all had to do Turung Padang – walk the talk. If any of them were travelling, we would remind them to visit the MAS office.

After all of the thinking and planning, the long hours, deadlines, challenges and obstacles that MAS faced, things turned around. A major contributing factor was that the culture was turning around. “My role is to keep MH alive in the system, to get it embedded,” said Indira. And, now, three years down the track, MH is very much alive. “It didn’t happen overnight, but we now have people living and breathing it,” she said. “MH is real. It has become a common language. People anchor on it...”

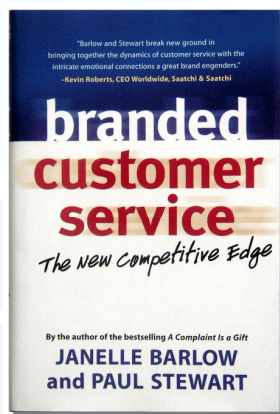
There is a lot more to the story. I have just scratched the surface. I had respected Indira before the interview. By the time we finished, I was in awe of what she and her team at the MAS Communications Division had achieved. And, by the end of the interview I was heartened that, in this fast changing world, fundamentals are as powerful as ever – if in doubt, use common sense, listen to your target market, creatively use all of the tools around you, keep it fresh... and focus on execution. We look forward to seeing MAS continue to rise to the higher altitudes where it belongs.

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TMI has a full branded customer service implementation process which embeds On-Brand into your culture. This process has been inspired by the thought-leading book, written by 2 senior TMI Partners, Dr Janelle Barlow, President, TMI US and Paul Stewart, Director, TMI New Zealand.

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