

How Do You Get 60,000 People Talking At Once?

By Tom Brown

KEY LEARNINGS

- ❖ A shift in strategy can paralyze a company.
- ❖ Everyone needs to share in the communications.
- ❖ Even people at the top will struggle in their roles.
- ❖ The shift is not a top-down job.

Prudential's
Jody Doele:
Strategy Becomes
Action At Prudential
Insurance



“*They were talking with each other and with the chairman about all the key business and people issues. They were engaged in the business and with each other in new ways.*”

✓ The Challenge

In a giant company, how can you get everyone on the same page when making a shift to a new strategy? Simply call 215 meetings.

In late 1997, **Art Ryan**, Prudential Chairman since 1994, realized that the only way to make the company's bold new strategy actionable would be to insure that every associate in Prudential both knew and understood the strategic direction. He also decided that 2000 would be the perfect time to encourage its managers and associates to think fresh about the future of the company.

Jody Doele, who's Vice President of Learning & Leadership Development for Prudential, can still recall how frustrating it was to have smart, solid strategic decisions happening at the top of the company, "but each time a decision was made, it paralyzed the organization because relatively few inside the company understood the reasons for the decisions. Top-down



communication wasn't working; the corporate culture at the time meant that information was a form of power, and it was hoarded." It was at that point that the company began an aggressive, non-traditional exchange

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Top-down communication wasn't working.
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of information with 60,000 Prudential associates from all over. It was at that point that the company launched One Prudential Exchange.

Ultimately **Rick McKnight**, of Vector Strategic Resources, Inc., and **Jim Haudan**, of Root Learning, Inc., joined Jody in the 215 one-day meetings involving an average 250 people per session.

These meetings were augmented by 25 managers-only get-togethers, which were critical because the managers were to play a key role in the process: as facilitators for the large-group sessions.

✓ The Response

✓ Tough Work, Good Payoff

“One Prudential Exchange, or OPX, was historic,” says Rick McKnight. “Getting everyone in the company communicating was a major effort, but it paid off in at least three ways.

“First, it gave all employees a common business literacy. Second, this enabled everyone to have common strategic understanding. And, third, this enabled everyone to find personal ways to align themselves with the strategy. OPX was a major attempt at broad dialogue and alignment — and it has succeeded so well that, by popular



Rick McKnight

demand, we’ve initiated a second phase to the project!”

Jim Haudan agrees with Rick’s assessment. Jim and his company

helped the OPX process by providing a “learning map” approach to the large meetings. “The learning maps were a great way to help Prudential people

construct a direct line of sight — from what customers demand of Prudential to what everyone inside the company does each day. And Prudential was definitely making history by having senior executives facilitating the process!”



Jim Haudan

Jody Doele says that Prudential was much like most large-scale corporations before OPX: senior managers would talk with one another as did people on all the other levels of the company. But such communication barred strategic depth. OPX changed all that — and fast!

“We saw immediate results,” she says. “Some of the first signs of change were evident when the Prudential executives who ran the large meetings began learning how to be more engaging with an audience of employees. In the OPX sessions, they came out from behind the podium and

✓ Quick Results

✓ The Employees Were Amazed!

talked with and listened to the participants, taking a facilitator role versus a telling role.”

Jody also quickly sensed that employees were amazed and appreciative. “Employees expressed in the very first meetings how much they appreciated learning about the business fundamentals of the organization, even though they may have been employed at Prudential for many years. They said they really felt in the dark before OPX happened.”

Rick adds, “Our mission in OPX wasn’t very complicated. We



wanted all 60,000 Prudential associates to understand the company strategy, to care about it, and to take action to make it happen.

“We’re building now on the success of OPX by staging new meetings to help Prudential people define how they can do the right work, in the right way, to achieve the right results.

“We’re optimistic that, in this new OPX phase, we can build and track a measurement system at every level of the company — so people can constructively dialogue on how well they are helping to implement strategy.”

No one who went through OPX could possibly feel the same about their work and how it ties to the strategic direction of Prudential overall. At the top of the list of people who changed was Jody herself.

“There are so many memories,” she says now, happily. “This work has had a substantial impact

on me personally and professionally.” Jody especially recalls an early-on one-day session involving 200 senior managers as well as the CEO and the executive team. “We made them talk about the first learning maps and about their critical role as OPX went forward. And we didn’t know what to expect.

“So the CEO did the appropriate kick-off and then they began

✓ A Substantial Impact

✓ So Many Memories

working on the maps — and they instantly loved them! More than that, they were talking with each other and with the chairman about all the key business and people issues. They were engaged in the business and with each other in new ways. They were learning (even if they didn't know it), and even the chairman was modeling new leadership behaviors.”

Then came the moment of truth. Jody asked the assembled group of managers to pair up and sign their names on a large wall calendar as facilitators for the hundreds of planned OPX meetings. “Even though we advised them not to pair with someone they knew or worked with, they swarmed to the calendar. They were three deep! And many came up to me and shared disappointment that they couldn't get a date!” The key lessons?

Lesson #1 People, at all levels, want to be engaged in making the company a success. More than simply having a strategy, there must be ways to translate strategy into personal action.

Lesson #2 People, even senior

people, are often struggling in their roles. They, and everyone else, need tools and coaching to help show them the way. “OPX showed us that senior executives are just human beings and want to succeed just as everyone does; they were quickly willing to commit time and emotion to the process once they could see how

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Then came the moment of truth.
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they could personally connect,” Jody says. And that learning was replicated at all levels in the hundreds of OPX meetings.

Lesson #3 “Even in a mega-corporation,” Jody concludes, “you can work the system simultaneously. It doesn't need to be top down. All levels can engage at the same time.”

Jim sees the joint accomplishment on OPX as something both unique and major: “It was a conversation driven by strategic levers.” He adds that the speed with which Prudential staged all

✓ Major Lessons To Be Learned

✓ OPX:
A New
Model

the meetings, its thoroughness in providing access to all 60,000 associates, its unflagging commitment to the OPX process, and its focus on translating broad corporate strategy down

to each individual work unit (while using top managers as facilitators) have made Prudential a new model for all-employee communications — and a more robust corporation. §

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