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Engage Your Top 100 Relationships With a President's Letter

by Gary Hubbell

CEO communications can be powerful tools if properly conceived. Consider developing a "President's Letter." Its purpose is to create a mechanism for engaging targeted people in dialog with you about important issues to your organization and to your constituency.

1. **Identify the top 100 people** with whom you want to have a relationship, on behalf of your organization. Note: it is important to limit your list to 100. You must think about the people on this list as those with whom you will actively attempt to develop (if necessary), maintain, and deepen a relationship with your organization. Don't think about adding groups or clusters of people (e.g., all elected officials, all clergy, all neighbors within 3 block radius, etc.). Add names based on the perceived strength of each individual. You'll be hard pressed to manage relationships with more than 100 people, so stick to that threshold for your own sanity. Remember, you're not building a mailing list, you're developing a relationship pool.
2. **You are creating a letter series with an invited response.** This will be different from anything else you produce. It's not a newsletter, it's not a blog. Done properly, it is a conversation....on paper...and it's written by the CEO. Despite the fact that I first employed this idea in the late 1980's at the Milwaukee Public Museum, I believe it has great value today where so much communication is electronic and brief. A personal letter still stands out. You'll want to consider a frequency great enough to establish continuity and dialogue, but not so frequent that issues shrink in importance in order to have something to say. I suggest three or four times per year.
3. **Identify the issues to introduce and about which you want advice.** Start by reflecting on your strategic plan, your strategic direction, and the environment in which your constituents live. Identify and list key issues and problems facing you and your constituents. Attempt to identify 6 - 8 issues/topics to be explored over the next two years. Doing so will help you visualize the arc of the conversation. Topics may build upon earlier ones--just as they normally do in a two-way conversation.
4. **Write the letter, introduce the issue, and invite response.** The length should be governed by what it takes to properly introduce the idea. If it takes one page or four pages, that's fine. You're not writing fundraising copy here, you're writing a personal letter to a single individual. Tone and style should match that approach. The only difference is that you're sending the same letter (with personalized inside address) to 100 individuals. The key to each letter is that you must introduce early on that you are seeking their advice. At the end, you need to ask for their advice, insight, feedback, reflection. You're inviting them to phone you (best) or send an email (good) or drop you

e-musing...is an episodic thought burst intended to seed ideas and to stimulate discussion among organizational leaders.

a note (also good). Your very first letter should introduce your intention to periodically share issues and ideas about which you'd welcome advice and feedback. You need not ask for their permission to continue sending them these issue letters. If they are so inclined to request you stop, they'll tell you.

5. **Expect response to be slow at the start and to grow over time.** Don't expect an immediate groundswell. Some of the 100 will be people who know you, your organization, and/or the issue very well and, therefore, will be moved to respond. Many will simply read the letter passively and be informed, never taking the initiative to respond. Those who do call, email, or write you will expect to be heard and will want to take the conversation deeper. Be prepared to respond and to make that a priority. These are your top 100 organizational relationships.
6. **Over time, comment on issues resolved.** Everyone wants to feel a sense of achievement, a sense of having had impact. Therefore, over time, letters can also include some comment about how an issue was resolved--whether or not resulting from advice received. Across the arc of this conversation, these people begin to understand and care for the mission and impact of your organization. They want to see you succeed. But be careful, the letter must never become promotional or self-congratulatory (which is more typical of newsletter, quarterly magazines, annual reports, and website copy).

Benefits you will derive from employing this communication tool:

- CEO frames and articulates strategic issues for influential and interested constituents
- CEO advances and manages relationships with key constituents
- Time invested is nominal
- Feedback and advice brings solutions or new opportunities to your table
- Recipients feel special, receiving thoughtful letters from the CEO
- Recipients often self-identify their interests, leading to deeper involvement and investment

Got a better idea? Let me know what communication strategies work best for you? Call me or send me an email. Thanks.

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