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Accountability of communication policy

Abstract

The approach of the 'Balanced scorecard' of Kaplan and Norton (1) nowadays is quite well-known in business environments. A balanced scorecard is a measurement and improvement system. We searched for advantages of this approach in communication management and what the conditions for such a system would be. Looking at the structure of the balanced scorecard of Kaplan & Norton we came up with a similar structure consisting of four domains: concern communication, internal communication, marketing communication and organisation of the communication function. We opted for five dimensions of quality and transformed these into indicators specifically for each domain. We then looked into the process necessary to implement such a system of quality control.

Keywords

Accountability, communication quality, balanced scorecard, communication management.

Introduction

Many organisations use the balanced scorecard to organise a system of quality control. Yet although the approach has been used for functional areas as human resources (2) and ICT, for communication management such an application is not yet available.

Using a balanced scorecard to measure and improve an organisation's communication has many advantages. Making quality indicators explicit stimulates research in practice and stimulates the dialogue between practitioners and scientists. It also facilitates the dialogue between communication professionals and managers about quality standards for the profession.

Often quality gets attention only at the level of a communication means or project. This tool calls for a vision on quality at the level of the communication policy. It gives opportunities to continuously renew and innovate the communication practice. Also it connects the communication policy to the organisational policy.

A reason behind our investigations was the conviction that communication management at this stage needs an instrument to further the process of professionalizing it. This involves accountability, being able to show how communication contributes to the organisational objectives, taking responsibility for policy decisions related to communication and monitoring results. Accountability is hardly possible without quality control. The instrument should facilitate quality control as well as support accountability.

Years ago practitioners mainly had to promote communication as a policy instrument. Now they are so often called upon to assist others in the organisation that the main problem seems to be being able to prioritise and do what mostly needs to be done. It is not enough to follow the demands from within the organisation; these do not always indicate the main problems or chances that need communication expertise. A tool like this might help practitioners to be pro-active.

Moreover, in our efforts to improve quality we developed many specialisations within communication management. Now it is difficult to have an overall view of the entire field which is necessary for an integrated approach and to set priorities. Also the practitioners have different backgrounds which make them prone to focussing on certain topics (e.g. press relations or marketing communication) rather than to have an overall view of the field as a whole and to assess the needs of the organisation. The tool should stimulate an integral overview of the profession.

Methods for quality control

Some organisations have already adopted a method of quality control for the organisation as a whole. This might be the method of the European Foundation for Quality Management. This method asks for a detailed description of processes and procedures among other things. It requires information about leadership, personnel management, policy and strategy, management of means, and management of processes. Next to that it takes into account the results and appreciation of personnel, clients, and society (3).

The balanced scorecard of Kaplan and Norton is more action-oriented. This means less-detailed descriptions and more facts and figures. Some organisations use a combination of both methods and in that case the balanced scorecard might be called the 'dashboard', facilitating setting targets and

steering towards outcomes. The balanced scorecard is a system for assessing and improving quality, which aims at converting strategy into specific actions (4). Kaplan and Norton (5) present four areas that explain the performance of an organisation: finances, customers, internal business processes, and learning and growth.

We chose to follow the four areas in the structure of the balanced scorecard while diving deeper when processes or preconditions needed attention. Also we were inspired by EFQM when it comes to the actual process of assessing quality, using senior experts as auditors.

We considered that at this stage in the development of the profession the quality process should not be too time consuming to start with. Which was one of the reasons we focused more on the balanced scorecard approach and less on EFQM. Another reason was that this approach is more related to outcomes and action. It should be inviting to begin the quality control cycle, whereas later on a more detailed measurement might be developed gradually.

The department or a broader approach

When quality control is adopted at the level of the organisation as a whole, usually a certain method is prescribed by the management and all departments should implement it in a similar way. The department of communication e.g. is the focus and for instance the leadership of that department is measured, and the satisfaction of internal clients that ask the department to assist them. The measurement in those cases is not about how the organisation communicates, but how the department of communication operates. When the subject is motivation, it is about the employees of the department only. It is not the motivational function of the internal communication means for all employees that is reflected on.

We alternatively investigated the possibilities for a tool that primarily assesses the communication by the organisation. This would help to prioritise what is most needed. The next question would be who needs to do what in order to improve that particular issue. This might not only include the communication department. We wanted to look at the functional area of communication; this might be broader than the implementation tasks of the department of communication. But we do feel that it is within the boundaries of the advice tasks of the communication practitioners. In fact, we think this way the tool is more useful in the dialogue between communication professionals and managers.

We use the balanced scorecard philosophy to describe and optimise the contribution of communication to organisations. A balanced scorecard can be utilised to assess organisational policy as a whole, or at division level, but also to define and optimise the contribution to the organisation of a specific area of expertise (6). We wanted to do this for communication as an area of expertise.

Working with a balanced scorecard

Many organisations have already put the insights of Kaplan and Norton into practice. Managers translate its business strategy into specific strategic goals. After defining financial goals and sales targets, they determine the goals of internal business operations. Finally, they decide the goals for investment in staff training, information systems and procedural improvements (7). The objective is identifying performance drivers and deciding how to assess these in a way that suits that particular business operation.

The management compares the results of the assessment with their targets and then initiates improvements. The balanced scorecard is a system that contributes to consensus about goals by relaying information about assessment. Through this, goals become clearer.

The balanced scorecard for communication management that we want to develop is a prototype that will need customising. This way, preparatory work has been done, but usually more is needed to customise the tool. Balanced scorecards can be used in both large and small organisations and at the level of the organisation as a whole or at division level. This is an advantage but it does entail that the tool must be customised. The way this tool is used must match the level of ambition required of it. This depends on the size of the organisation and the professionalism of the communication expertise. The way the indicators are formulated must also suit the nature of the organisation.

We do not attempt to create a benchmark, because customising is more important to a balanced scorecard than comparing the results of different organisations.

The prototype that we want to develop is a type of audit, a measurement that can be used to investigate and assess situations (8). Many communication audits are designed to assess certain

parts of communication. For example, there are audits that are specifically designed to investigate internal communication. Various research methods are used for this, for example written questionnaires, interviews and panel groups. This tool, however, is used for a broad audit of communication policies, to assess the contribution of communication to organisational objectives. Within this audit, an overview of communication policies is given. This includes checking whether research is used on the level of communication projects. So the tool encourages communication research and in itself also is a research method.

Criteria

Fleisher and Burton formulated the following criteria for measuring performance (9).

- The management must support the assessment;
- The assessment must be an integral part of the communication function;
- The process of assessing must be a team activity and those responsible for implementing improvements must be part of this team;
- The assessment must be well-prepared and well-organised;
- Before commencing with the assessment, those concerned should have clear insight into the organisation's communication activities.

Measuring performance should not be seen as extra work but rather as part of normal business operations (10). The assessment must be more than a picture of a given moment in time. It should present opportunities for a continuous process of assessment and improvement. In this sense, it can be seen as a strategic feedback system (11).

As far as the actual assessment structure is concerned, Fleisher and Mahaffy emphasise that the relationship of the tool to organisational policy is important. The indicators that assess performance must aim at core processes and critical variables so that opportunities for improvement can be identified (12).

Experiences with a similar tool

The tool developed still needs field testing. But some experiences with a similar tool for governmental communication (Vos, BledCom 2003) can be reported at this point. Government organisations in the Netherlands were quite interested to help in the construction of the tool. After the first publication the reactions were again positive. As a result the tool was slightly adjusted and an additional guide how to use the tool was published since more explanation was needed.

The tool was presented for different purposes. The first way to use it was as a tool for team reflection about communication quality. This was attempted in practice by many governmental organisations and it involved a team discussion about which indicators the team feels need more attention, e.g. as inspiration for a new policy plan. A second way to use the instrument is as a quick scan. This way the tool was again used by several organisations. It involved using a questionnaire for the assessment and a team meeting to discuss the results. Also the questionnaire was used to stimulate a dialogue with managers about communication. This (young) tool is not yet repeatedly used in a quality control cycle.

The results so far need further investigation, but the tool quite positively seems to facilitate team discussions about indicators which point to tasks that received increased attention in previous years and of which the good quality needs to be maintained, versus (often relatively new) tasks that need special attention now. Although reflection and dialogue are stimulated, there is not enough evidence yet that the tool supports setting priorities. For that purpose the tool should be integrated in a regular policy and quality control cycle.

The tool wants to stimulate the use of other forms of communication research, but the fact that it is a form of research in itself might be a disadvantage when departments are reluctant to spend time and money on research. The same holds for working in a structural way. The tool stimulates this, but it also requires a relatively stable situation and a basis of structural working to be able to use it for more than just a team discussion or a quick scan.

For a trend research of governmental organisations in the Netherlands among other things a study of policy plans was done in April 2004 (not yet published). One of the findings is that seldom references were made to what was realised in a previous period; departments may become interested to work in a structural way, but so far the young profession and changes in personnel as well as management

made this difficult. The need for such a tool might be great, but at the same time the preconditions might not yet be met in some organisations.

Implementing the quality cycle

We propose that the balanced scorecard is implemented in phases. The first phase is an orientation phase with a start meeting and preparation in the team, which is followed by a phase of preparation and implementation, and then action and evaluation (see Figure 1). After that a new cycle starts. Each time the tool is better tuned to the characteristics and requirements of the organisation concerned.

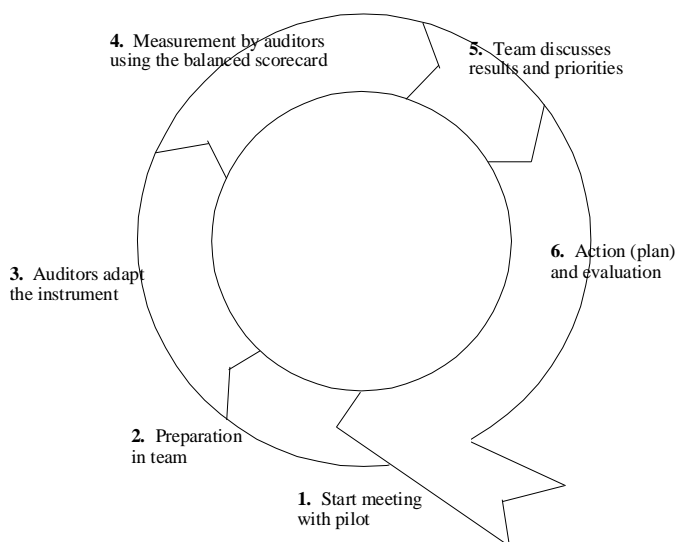


Figure 1. Quality processes

The structure of the tool

Kaplan and Norton have identified four areas of focus for companies (13):

- 1 In the case of *finance* the question is: how attractive do we have to be to investors to ensure financial success? This also involves the general public's opinion of the organisation's success and the organisation's ability to attract good staff. In the case of non-profit organisations, fund raising is a relevant issue. Here we are talking about *input*.
- 2 In the case of *customers* the question is: how attractive do we need to be to customers to realise our goals? This involves the organisation's *output* in the form of products and services for specific markets, or ideal goals for non-profit organisations.
- 3 In the case of *internal business processes* the question is: how must we excel internally so that customers and shareholders are satisfied? This involves *throughput*. This concerns internal procedures, the co-operation that is necessary for production or to provide a service. It also concerns the processes of change within the organisation.
- 4 In the case of *learning and growth* the question is: how do we maintain a state of permanent change and improvement so that we can realise our goals? And: How do we encourage innovation? This concerns putting together systems for quality control and various research methods that give feedback so that improvement is an ongoing process. This is about organising processes.

Kaplan and Norton's areas of focus apply to organisational policy as a whole. For our purposes, we are particularly interested in the contribution of communication to the functioning of the organisation. We must apply the four areas of focus for organisational quality to communication. This takes us to the following four areas of focus for communication: concern communication (supports input), marketing communication (supports output), internal communication (supports throughput). Our fourth area of focus is organisation of communication (see Figure 2). We refer to a previous publication (14) for background information about our vision on communication management.

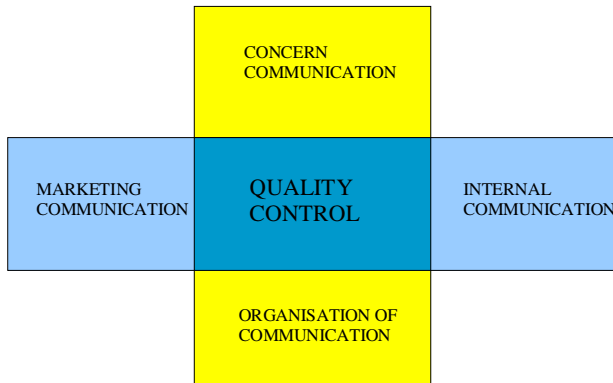


Figure 2. Four areas of focus for communication quality

Concern communication concentrates on the reputation of the organisation and promotes corporate image (the image of the organisation as a whole). Internal communication promotes internal co-operation and change management. Marketing communication promotes sales and distribution and awareness of products or services.

The fourth area of focus differs from the rest. Organisation of communication involves communication vision, the incorporation of the functional area of communication within the organisation, the coherence of communication activities and the way in which innovation in communication is promoted. These are the four domains.

Per focus area, Kaplan and Norton distinguish 'performance drivers' that promote quality. These are known here as indicators for communication quality. These indicators apply to the four domains. When classifying these indicators, we searched for dimensions of communication quality that may differ according to the area of focus, but that at the same time have a common denominator.

Quality dimensions

By communication quality we mean: the degree in which communication contributes to the effectiveness of organisational policy and strengthens relations with parties upon which the organisation depends in order to be able to function well.

In explorative interviews with communication professionals certain criteria were often mentioned in connection with good quality communication. We constructed the following dimensions of communication quality:

- Clarity: clear profile, distinctive, accessible and in a clear language.
- Environment orientation: taking into account the internal and external environment, networking, and media contacts.
- Consistency: the communication is coherent, has a thread that connects the activities over time, and fits the project or organisational policy.
- Responsiveness: detect changes through monitoring and use feedback for improvement.
- Effectiveness and efficiency: a result- and goal-oriented communication effort, defining priorities by using planning, research, and cost-efficient operations.

The dimensions are the pillars of communication quality in our method. One dimension cannot be seen in isolation from the others. Clarity and consistency reinforce each other, just as environment orientation and responsiveness do. None of this will work unless the communication is also effective and efficient. In each of the communication domains the dimensions are assessed using indicators appropriate to each domain.

Quality Indicators

In each domain the communication dimensions need to get their own interpretation. This means that there are five indicators per domain. According to the balanced scorecard method, these indicators should reveal explicit results that can then be used to optimise the contribution of communication. An overview of the composition of the dimensions by domain is given in figure 3.

	A. Concern communication	B. Marketing communication	C. Internal communication	D. Organisation of communication
1. Clarity	clear positioning of the organisation	clear positioning of brands	information to staff is clear	communication vision is clearly defined
2. Environment oriented	maintain networks for the organisation's reputation	maintain networks for distribution and sales	communication reinforces commitment and supports change management	communication function is well embedded in the organisation
3. Consistency	coherence with other functions and with other communication domains	coherence marketing mix, with R&D and with other communication domains	coherence with HR and with other communication domains	common starting points for communication besides room for organisational units and/or communication domains
4. Responsiveness	monitoring and action based on issue management	monitoring and action based on market research, consumer trends and customer complaints	communication contributes to internal views on external changes and communication skills encourage internal responsiveness	feedback is used for innovation of communication
5. Effectiveness and efficiency	assess corporate image, cost efficient methods	assess brand images, cost efficient methods	internal communication audits, cost efficient methods	assess communication quality, time management

Figure 3. Overview of the composition of the dimensions by domain

The indicators can be measured when split-up into distinct aspects. We intend to give these the form of statements that auditors can agree with more or less by using a five-point scale. The auditors can refer to facts and figures when available and use interviews.

The results can be added up for each indicator. The interpretation of the dimensions differs per domain. This makes the assessment indicator-specific, while allowing scores to be added up give total scores for a dimension. This helps in the analysis of the results. Some of the total scores for domains or dimensions might be better or lower than average. The results of the audit assessment may be compared to previously defined targets or to results from a previous year.

Conclusion

A balanced scorecard constructed to measure and improve communication quality can be a powerful tool to further professionalize communication in practise and in particular enhance accountability of communication for organisations. The tool needs field testing in various organisations and sectors. The topics of accountability and communication quality require further scientific research. We intend to give details of the method in a later publication. This will include a description of the aspects of the indicators that need to be assessed by the auditors.

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See also:

Vos, M. & H. Schoemaker (2004), *Accountability of communication management; a balanced scorecard for communication quality*, BoomOnderwijs/ Lemma, Amsterdam.