

The H.R. Mixtape: Hosted by Shari Simpson with Guest Alejandra Ramirez, Internal Communication Strategist at Ready Cultures

Announcer:

You're listening to the H.R. Mixtape. Your podcast with the perfect mix of practical advice, thought-provoking interviews, and stories that just hit different so that work doesn't have to feel, well, like work. Now, your host, Shari Simpson.

Shari Simpson:

Joining me today is Alejandra Ramirez, internal communication strategist at Ready Cultures. Alejandra is a veteran culture builder with nearly two decades of experience transforming organizations through strategic communication, which builds trust, boosts productivity, and creates sustainable cultural change. Alejandra, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me today.

Alejandra Ramirez:

Thank you for having me. I'm excited to chat.

Shari Simpson:

So I think this is such an important conversation around communication, especially internal communication. I know that we who sit in HR often have to sit in this role if we don't have a comms team to help us out. So let's start with you and your title, internal communications strategist. What does that mean to you in today's workplace?

Alejandra Ramirez:

To me, it means making sure that internal communication is a strategic pillar of a business's strategy. I think very often businesses are all about, okay,

what's our strategy? What's our mission? How are we going to, what are our values or what are we trying to accomplish? And forget that communication is kind of the tool or the essential piece to getting that information out. And so I see myself as someone who can help build that strategy into whatever other initiatives a company might be doing. I recently actually have also been called a chief dot connector. And I started using it because I found that so many problems I was solving weren't about missing info, but really about people not knowing how it all fit together. And so, you know, I've had conversations where people say, I didn't know that was happening. And so that's another sort of element of what I do. It's connecting those dots and communicating them in a way that translates to sort of their understanding of it.

Shari Simpson:

Well, and that's so important because you're right, not everybody in the organization has the same vantage point. So having somebody that can connect those dots, like you said, can really help bring that to life. As you've thought about the role of internal communications, you know, I know that it's more than just sending messages or company updates. It's more complex than that. How would you define it?

Alejandra Ramirez:

I define it as the bridge between strategy and action, meaning if you have a goal that you're trying to accomplish, whether it's something like rolling out a new tool or system at a company, maybe it's a new HR, you know, hiring platform or whatever it may be, the internal comms piece bridges that so that the employees or that the people involved in making that project a success know exactly what they're doing, why it matters, and how it affects them directly. And so to me, updates don't, you know, updates are, it's not just about information flow, it's about creating alignment. Right. And so when it's done well, it shapes that behavior, it builds trust, and it supports execution of whatever that initiative might be.

Shari Simpson:

How do you find that alignment across departments? And the reason I ask is because if you're in a larger organization, right, you might have many people

who feel like they should have their hands involved in internal communications. Everybody from your HR team to your marketing team to maybe some of your business leaders or even your finance department if it's something that's really linked to a strategic initiative that they have. How are you navigating that and making sure that you are connecting those dots, bringing in those inputs, but also really still owning what that communication looks like?

Alejandra Ramirez:

Yeah, that's a really great question. I feel like, so I will say internal or just communication generally is everyone's responsibility at a company, right? Because communication is how everyone interacts on a given day. It's not just an email. It's the actions you take. It's all those different touch points. And so it certainly is everyone's responsibility. But to your point, you know, how does someone in internal comms or how does someone who's owning that element of it, kind of keep it moving forward and avoid any confusion? And where I see communication breakdown most often is between teams or departments is in those gray areas where ownership is really unclear, or everyone assumes someone else has shared the message. And so for internal comms by acting as a translator and a connector across those groups and bringing it back to what are the goals and the outcomes that we're solving for so that we can work towards that as a team and not make it about, well, I have to do this or this is not my job or whatever it is and helping keep that messaging human, helping keep it clear to how it solves whatever goal they're trying to accomplish is a really important piece of that.

Shari Simpson:

All right, let's talk strategy and execution for a second. As you sit down to work on an internal comms document, email, whatever you're putting together, walk me through kind of your process for somebody who maybe who's never done this before, taking a strategic approach to internal comms compared to, you know, somebody who's just like, I gotta get it out the door. Walk me through what you do and how you connect those dots.

Alejandra Ramirez:

Yeah, so what is the most essential elements of what I do is answering what seem like basic questions but often people forget to answer is understanding what it is we're communicating, why it's important, and how it's going to be handled by the people that you're communicating it with, right? And so I have this framework I call the 3-H framework, head, heart, hands, right? So logically, does it make sense? You know, emotionally, does it connect? From an action perspective, does it give clarity around what's expected of those individuals receiving the message? So that's the initial piece that I always try to answer. So when I'm working with leaders in HR, or maybe across an organization, CEOs even sometimes, those are my first questions to them. Because if they can't answer that, we don't have a clear piece or strategy to execute on. The other piece I look at is the channels through which the information is being communicated because you can have the world's best strategy and the world's best message, but if you don't have channels that touch your different audiences in a way that reaches them, it's going to go nowhere. So assuming that just sending an email is going to get you the action and reaction that you need is not going to work. And so what works at one company may not work at another. So understanding the individual employees and how they receive information best is really, really important. Which brings me to the next point is I look at, assuming it's available because many companies don't do this, and that's where I can also help sort of solve for that, is looking at any feedback from prior communications and looking at the engagement, which people in HR are very familiar with the importance of engagement and internal comms play such a big part in that because understanding the engagement and how employees are receiving messages and providing feedback helps with any future messages and adjusting and tailoring to make sure that it's landing. Maybe it's a video and a text instead of an email, or maybe there's a Slack channel that gets created. So I look at sort of that holistic ecosystem as opposed to just the message to make sure that it all lands and works together for that alignment and clarity.

Shari Simpson:

You mentioned measuring the impact. How do you go about that? I mean, obviously, we have things like engagement surveys and those types of things.

And we can ask questions around communication methods. But you yourself, as you think about highlighting your work and showing your own metrics and bringing your data to the conversation. What are some of the key metrics that you are paying attention to or that you're watching to adjust as you move forward based on what those metrics are telling you?

Alejandra Ramirez:

That's a really great question and it's, I would say there's qualitative and quantitative things I look at. So seeing if people are even replying to the messages, right? So if an email goes out, are people responding with more questions than, hey, this was great? That's something we might want to address and say, okay, maybe we need to send a clarification email because we're getting a lot of questions about this one point. Looking at metrics, what are the open rates of an email, but are they also clicking on the link that we sent that's really important to click on? Or are people downloading the materials that we've sent? Looking at attendance, right? A big part of internal comms is helping communicate any upcoming webinars or trainings for whatever the tool is that's being rolled out. That's the example I keep falling back on. Attendance rates, are people attending town halls? And again, having an infrastructure in place that receives and allows for people to submit feedback on an ongoing basis helps you look at it over the long term and see are people engaging or are they not? And working closely with HR on this is really important because, you know, internal comms and employee engagement work very well together. They rely on each other and looking at those key metrics that give you a sense for how the engagement is and where the sort of questions arise are really, really important to help and guide any future communication or adjusting existing ones.

Shari Simpson:

What do you say to the smaller team or the smaller HR department even who is handling this all on their own? Maybe they don't have the tools that you mentioned where they can track things like open rates and downloads. What are some of the qualitative stuff that they should just kind of be aware of and start to watch as they evolve their internal comms teams and approaches if they don't have access to those tools?

Alejandra Ramirez:

So I've actually come across this issue. I have come across it when I worked in house at certain companies and then also just working with clients. And I would say, you know, to the extent possible, if there is an opportunity to make a case and build a budget for a tool that helps with that. I would say at least start to try to build that business case. But until you have a tool like that, I would recommend just familiarizing yourself with the different groups that you're communicating with, right? Have regular check-ins and say, hey, you know, how is, what have you heard on your team about this thing that we're rolling out? Is there anything that maybe doesn't make sense? Really understanding the different people that, that the stakeholders that are sort of affected by this, and building that trust is really helpful because it creates that open avenue of communication. So it's not a one-way communication, but that two-way that is so essential. And I would say really prioritize that because those are those areas moments where you get the most insight without them even realizing it. Because you may say, hey, let's grab a coffee this month. How have you been? What's going on? And that's where people drop those little nuggets that help you connect the dots and sort of solve for those pain points that maybe you otherwise wouldn't be able to know about if you don't have those tools to help measure things.

Shari Simpson:

As you've worked with clients and in your own role over the years, what are some big mistakes and or things to avoid that you see or you keep encountering that you're like, man, I wish people wouldn't do this or I learned from this because I did it the wrong way one time as we think about these communication channels?

Alejandra Ramirez:

I would say assuming that people can read your mind is a big mistake people make. It's easy to be in your own head and see things from your perspective. And when you're so in it, you know everything and so you assume everyone else does. And so what I find is the biggest mistake people make is just, yeah, assuming that people are going to read your mind and looking at it from the perspective of someone who is very knowledgeable on the topic, which goes

back to that framework I use and why I use it as part of my strategy, which is you know, answer these questions because these are the baseline questions people are going to ask and make sure that if you can address those clearly, then you're in a good place. And if you can't, then, you know, also consider addressing it with smaller groups. And that's actually another mistake people make. I find that sometimes they will, you know, plan some big communication and just blast it out however they blast it out. Instead of testing it, right, start with a smaller group. Maybe run it by a few colleagues and say, hey, does this make sense? And that helps with that idea of, you know, when you work in a silo, it's easy to miss those gaps in knowledge.

Shari Simpson:

Do you take any approaches when you're physically writing the communications that are some of the things that I've learned over the years? For example, make sure that your communication is written at a fifth grade level. Do you take any of those approaches?

Alejandra Ramirez:

Yes, corporate communication is a little different than, you know, hey, I'm putting out a blog post or something like that. I'm big on keeping the messaging human, right? And you want to translate for sort of the largest group, right? And having a background in working with law firms, right? Law firms, they have a lot of jargon and legalese. And so, you know, the same happens if you're working with engineers, right? And so as a communications person, it's really important, A, to understand the business and what it is you're trying to communicate. And B, taking that language and translating it so that everyone else can understand it, and vice versa. And that's why one communication doesn't, it's not a one size fits all. Because if you're communicating to the engineers who are much more, you know, structured in how they communicate, that message may need to be delivered differently than a message that goes to the HR team or to the operations team. And so understanding that it's not a one size fits all, it's really, really essential.

Shari Simpson:

And you just touched on something that I think is really important in that when

we think about communications, when you're taking that, when you're not taking a peanut butter approach to it, it gives you the opportunity to craft things that are going to be more impactful for each. So I think about when you're rolling out performance management for the year, right? You can create internal comms that are geared towards employees and to managers and to director level. And you can think about how each one of those groups might need a little bit of tweak on the information. How do you map that out? I'm curious from a process perspective, how do you look at that and decide, hey, I need maybe five communication templates for this one piece of content compared to, yeah, this one message will be enough for everybody.

Alejandra Ramirez:

Yeah, leaning into curiosity and asking questions usually helps yield that sort of those answers. Because if you put yourself in the shoes of the people you're communicating with and saying, well, why is this the case? Or how is this the case? And understanding those different nuances in the questions based on the different levels or groups that you're communicating with helps. And remembering also, I mean, and this does vary by size of company, right? You know, if you have 200 employees versus 1000 employees or more, you know, it's going to vary. Relying on your managers, right, is really important, because that relationship between the manager and the employee is a huge make or break. And so asking the managers directly, like what are the things that your teams always, you know, are feeling frustrated about or, you know, how do you find that your teams communicate is really helpful. And I would say, you know, build on it every time. So anytime you have a new communication, look back on, well, what worked or didn't work the last time. And that's why those, that feedback and the stats that we talked about is so important because looking at past examples and iterating and growing and evolving it is always going to be really useful.

Shari Simpson:

So if you were stepping into an internal comms role for the very first time, you've never done it before, what's the advice that you give that person for them to be successful their first 90 days?

Alejandra Ramirez:

Do a lot of listening. Don't assume and really try to reach out to as many people as you can to just kind of put your name out there and say, Hey, I really want to understand what you do. You know, why is this important? And try to really then take that information and try to find those overlaps between teams and try to find where those breakpoints are and then create an initial strategy, you know, through an audit, right? So as part of your listening, you want to create an audit that sort of understands, okay, what are the types of communications that the company I just joined already sends out, and almost do essentially your own mini audit and inventory of, okay, we know that the CEO sends a monthly email about this topic. And we know that there's five newsletters that go out on these different topics. And we know, and understanding that landscape is essential to then either adjusting or, you know, continuing to advance that. So first 90 days are so essential to listen, to get that feedback and to understand the landscape. And then after that, that's where you can start to act and give suggestions and recommendations.

Shari Simpson:

I love the audit suggestion. I've mentioned this on the podcast before. Many years ago, we did a project where we re-looked at our onboarding, our new hire orientation point in time. And we came to find out that, you know, our candidates were getting about 25 emails in the two weeks before they started. And all good intended, right? They all had important information in them. You know, some were from the system, some were from manager, the recruiter, you know, the HR department. And it was just, we were unaware that this person or these candidates were getting inundated with this type of just barrage of communication and no one source of truth to know, like, hey, it's the day before I start, which email do I need to go back to? Because we know you're prepping, right? You want to go back and look at that information. So completely agree. I think that's a fantastic way to approach it. And it's going to give you that visibility that you talked about, because you're going in kind of with this mindset of I'm gathering information, which I think can disarm people. If they're not familiar with you, you know, if you say, hey, I want to listen, I want to understand, I'm going to take some notes so that I can wrap my head around it. So, such good advice there. You know, as we kind of wrap

our conversation, what's one habit or mindset shift that you really think if people that are sitting in this space can make that it will help them be able to collaborate better and really create those communications more effectively?

Alejandra Ramirez:

That's a really great question. So many things come to mind. So I would say a really good habit and mindset to have is to go in with an open mind and be willing to learn from others and not assume that you know everything. People want to help you. Your role isn't to just tell people what to do. It's to understand what they're trying to accomplish and then take that and turn it into that final message that helps turn that goal into actionable strategies. So really having that mindset of how can I help you? What is it you're trying to solve for? And learning as opposed to just telling is really important.

Shari Simpson:

I love that level up idea. And if you can come to your management team and they see you as somebody who's helping them execute in an excellent way, you're definitely going to win in this space. So such good advice. Thank you for sitting down and taking a few minutes of your day to chat with me. I hope you enjoyed today's episode. You can find show notes and links at TheHRMixtape.com. Come back often and please subscribe, rate, and review.