

“Maintaining Hope and Inspiration”: Using Social Media to Encourage Internal Stakeholders

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Abstract

Teach For America's (TFA) internal communicators are tasked with keeping TFA's more than 2,400 staff members inspired and connected even though they are spread across the nation and sometimes isolated in offices of one. The team has used social media to communicate with stakeholders around the organization: Yammer has opened up opportunities for the CEOs and the staff to communicate directly and for the effectiveness of communication efforts to be measured, while YouTube videos have knitted the internal community together and encouraged them about the importance of their behind-the-scenes tasks. Using video for the staff has been instrumental in a culture change; many were reinspired. This case study of Teach For America provides an example for other organizations on how social media can help them communicate with their internal stakeholders.

Keywords: nonprofit; internal communication; social media; Yammer; education; video; YouTube; live streaming

Introduction

When Justin Fong arrived at Teach For America (TFA) in 2010, there was a monthly newsletter that was pages upon pages long. Few read it because

To cite this article

Kinsky, E. S., Bruce, K., Scarbrough, K., & French, A. (2016). "Maintaining hope and inspiration": Using social media to encourage internal stakeholders. *Case Studies in Strategic Communication*, 5, 38-67. Available online: <http://cssc.uscannenberg.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/v5art3.pdf>



it was steeped in overly complex language, and it was not a way to rally staff together. Internal communication was uninteresting and infrequent. The former internal communication vice president saw the need for the organization to loosen up some in an effort to change the communication format. Fong's initial charge was to figure out at least a few ways to improve culture by breaking down barriers between leadership and staff and bridging the gap of communication among staff themselves. In 2010, staff communication lacked the passion, connectivity, and enjoyment needed to make day-to-day work inspiring and sustainable. In essence, TFA internal communicators needed to fix the fact that staff felt like they had no idea what was going on, and they needed to be able to connect staff with information easily. In addition, it had to have an element of candidness and fun. The products that began coming out of the internal communications team were good, but the process lacked rigor and planning. It was much more fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants, and the quality could be increased by having more foresight and developing processes and guidelines for the deliverables they created.

Because of the increasing growth of social media and their use for internal audiences, the purpose of this case study of TFA is to provide an example for other organizations, nonprofits in particular, on how social media can help them communicate and build community with their internal stakeholders. The reason this community building is so important is explained by Welch (2011):

Internal communication underpins organisational effectiveness since it contributes to positive internal relationships by enabling communication between senior managers and employees. Successful internal communication can promote employee awareness of opportunities and threats, and develop employee understanding of their organisation's changing priorities. It can contribute to organisational commitment and play a part in developing a positive sense of employee identification. (p. 246)

Friedl and Verčič (2011) also point to why incorporating social media into internal, community-building communication efforts is now essential: "It is important to think about ways of adapting internal communication and its channels to the digital age, since this group of employees [digital natives] is the future innovative potential of any company" (p. 84). TFA's internal

communication team recognized this need for improved communication efforts including social media, and they set about making changes.

Background

TFA, a nonprofit focused on providing high quality education to all U.S. students, was founded by Wendy Kopp in 1989. The organization is based in New York City. In addition to approximately 11,000 corps members (also known as teachers) on the ground working with students, the organization has more than 2,400 staff members spread around the country to support those teachers. TFA finds and develops people to be successful teachers in high-need classrooms, and more than 60% of the organization's alumni corps members continue to work in education. The staff is focused on recruiting, supporting, and connecting those teachers in 51 U.S. regions through programs like independent pre-work for new teachers, summer training, student teaching, and one-on-one coaching ("Choose More. Teach," n.d.). TFA's mission is that "One day, all children in this nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education" ("About Us," n.d.). According to TFA's 2015 annual report, more than 10 million children have been reached through TFA's efforts (Teach for America, 2016).

With such a large organization, it is especially important for TFA staff members to feel like they are part of the same community, pursuing the same goals. According to Kline and Alex-Brown (2013), "Implementing social media and forming communities of practice will increase the value of the connections within the organization. . . . The intersection of community formation and social media outcomes translates into formation of deep and lasting social connections" (p. 289). The use of social media to help connect internal stakeholders is rising. Zielinski (2012) noted "a joint 2010 survey by the American Society for Training & Development and the Institute for Corporate Productivity found managers in 80 percent of 3,800 global businesses planned to increase their use of social media for employee learning during the next three years" (p. 49). In addition to general social media usage for internal communication, there has been an increase in the use of video sharing within organizations. According to Zielinski (2012), "Video has gained traction as an employee learning tool, fueled by the growth of smart phones with high-definition video and broadband networks. As a result, more organizations are

creating YouTube-like repositories on enterprise networks where employees post videos created for knowledge-sharing purposes” (p. 52). TFA has made use of both social media and video to engage internal stakeholders. Besides the positive feeling of being connected to one’s co-workers, that sense of community can be an encouragement when crises hit.

The Mission

The mission for the internal communicators has been to inform, engage and inspire the TFA staff community by:

- telling inspiring stories through various media forms;
- uniformly distributing organizational news across multiple channels;
- connecting people to the mission, to each other and to senior leadership;
- providing opportunities to explore broader education issues; and
- fostering a sense of unity and pride.

The internal communication staff includes Aaron French, managing director, Kirk Scarbrough, director, and Alison Knowlton, manager. This team has made use of social media and video to communicate with stakeholders around the organization. With so many TFA staff members spread across 51 regions, the team has had to be creative to reach them and inspire them to continue when the road gets difficult. Because of the team’s efforts, TFA has been recognized for using emerging communication tools like Yammer to connect its internal audience (Gohring, 2014). For four straight years, TFA has been named one of *Fortune’s* “100 Best Companies to Work For,” so the current tools appear to be working well (“FORTUNE Names,” 2014).

Research

When Fong began his role on the internal communication team, he conducted a listening tour. A letter from the alphabet was selected and then all staff members in TFA whose last name started with that particular letter were called and asked for their thoughts about content as well as gauging their vision. Fong interviewed “about 100 individuals across the organization to gather input and identify opportunities” (personal communication, June 24, 2015). Fong said this effort “precipitated many of the ideas that followed.” Research led to major changes in the strategies and tactics the team used to communicate with the staff.

Strategy and Tactics

In order to unite the staff and better communicate timely announcements, the growing internal communication team expanded the use of video and added an important social media channel, Yammer. Much like Facebook, Yammer allows for status updates and the creation of smaller groups within the network; however, unlike Facebook, Yammer access is limited to employees within individual organizations using it. According to Brito (2014), “Yammer is probably the most well-known internal collaboration platform for small to medium-sized businesses” (p. 212).

The internal communication team also increased its focus on planning. French originally joined the team to bring more rigor to that entire process. Besides project planning, French oversees Yammer and the Education on Tap podcast. Scarbrough manages the video strategy and execution, and Knowlton covers graphic design and written content. The TFA external marketing team’s job is to bring people into the TFA family; the internal communication team’s job is to keep them there and engaged. The team started producing almost all of the content with that in mind.

Flagship Initiatives

The internal communication team has several flagship initiatives to achieve its mission (see Table 1). The Monday Minute is a weekly all-staff bulletin that shares fresh news and information in a concise email. One of

Table 1. Summary of flagship internal communication initiatives.

Initiative	Type of Outreach	Frequency
Monday Minute	all-staff bulletin	weekly
Weekly Tie-Up	video recap	weekly
Education on Tap	podcast about general education issues	bi-weekly
The Blank Show	video show highlighting various TFA locations	every six weeks
The Chat	conference call with CEOs	as needed
Live-Streamed Broadcasts	special events	as needed
TFA Hub	internal website	available 24/7
Yammer	internal social media	available 24/7

the newest initiatives is the Weekly Tie-Up, which is a weekly video recapping the latest events in only one minute. Education On Tap is also a newer venture, a bi-weekly podcast focusing on issues in education. The Blank Show highlights stories from across the TFA community in a 30-minute video that is broadcast about once every six weeks. Besides the

recorded programs above, there are live video broadcast events from time to time. These generally feature TFA leaders and seek to prompt discussion and excitement. The Chat, a conference call hosted by the co-CEOs, is done monthly and focuses discussion on one organizationally relevant topic. In addition, Yammer is used as an internal social community with a focus on collaboration, information sharing and celebration. TFA also has an internal website with resources for staff called TFA Hub. Often these tools are used simultaneously. For example, staff members might watch one of the videos and chat about it on Yammer as it is broadcast.

Key Internal Communication Tools

The three key internal communication tools for TFA are Yammer, YouTube, and the Monday Minute email blast.

Yammer. Yammer has opened up opportunities for the CEOs and the staff to communicate directly and for the effectiveness of communication efforts to be measured (see Figures 1 and 2). According to Fong, Yammer is used at TFA to ask for help, for inspiration, to make announcements, to share relevant articles, to have “critical conversations,” and for collaboration (personal communication, April 2014). Yammer has helped build community. For some staff members who work from home or far away from others, they do not have daily contact with their teams and, thus, have less of a sense of community. Yammer has helped fill those gaps and connected everyone. Not only has it connected them professionally, but they have been able to connect on a personal level by creating sub-groups on personal interests.

YouTube/Video. In addition to French’s work with Yammer, Scarbrough has made use of YouTube to communicate with the TFA community. Using video for the staff has been instrumental, allowing many staffers to be re-inspired. For example, TFA employee Tara Sumrall said when The Blank Show featured a region where she worked as a corps member it “made me feel fired up and re-invigorated about the work we do” (personal communication, December 22, 2014).

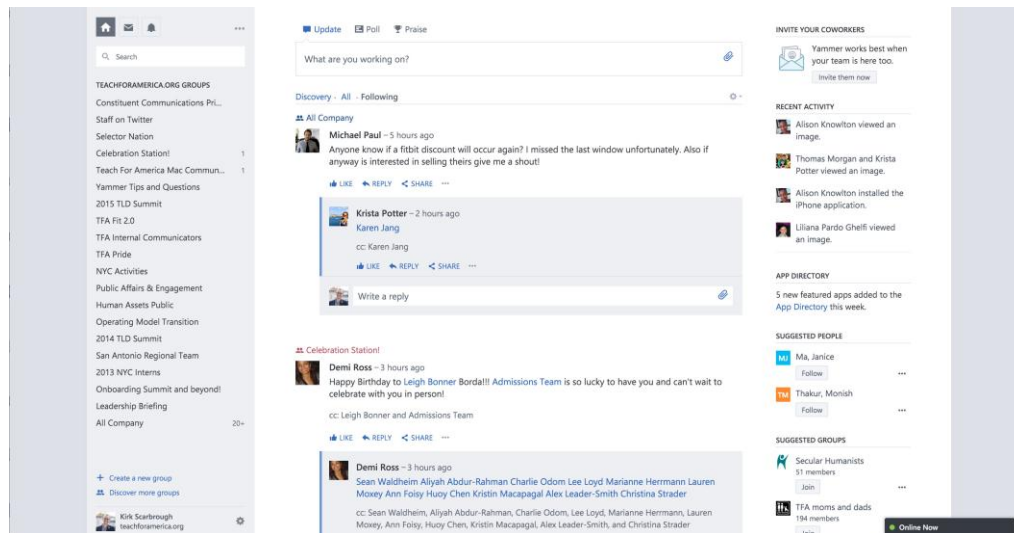


Figure 1. Example of the TFA Yammer interface.

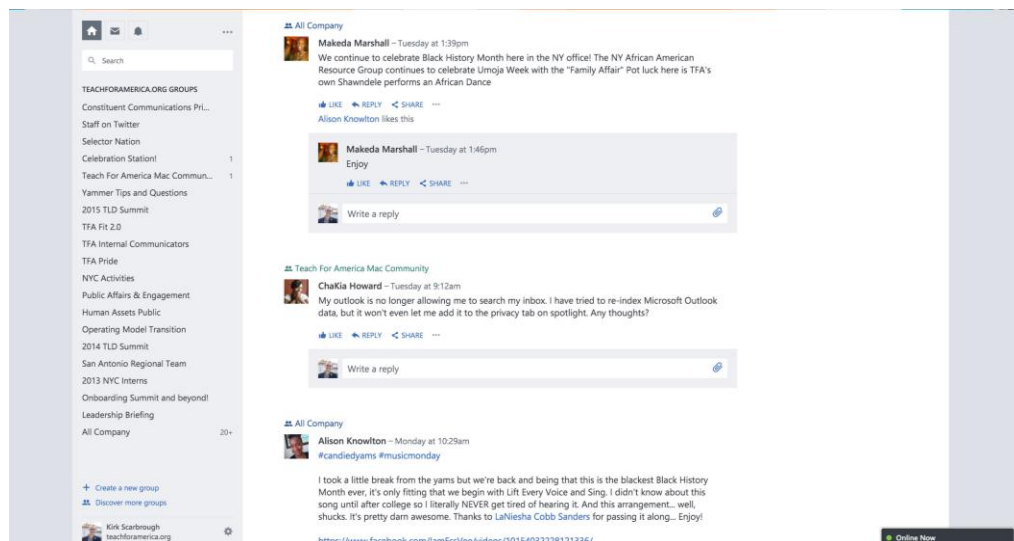


Figure 2. Another example of the TFA Yammer interface, showing its use for a mix of announcements, technical requests, and questions.

The previous main channel of communication for staff news was a long, overly complex monthly newsletter. The team realized changes were needed, which led to The Blank Show's first iteration. It eliminated that newsletter entirely, was in a format that Millennials are known to enjoy, and put faces and names with initiatives and emotions. The Blank Show was proposed as "a monthly live event for all of us" (J. Fong, personal communication, March 2014). It was designed to be an hour-long talk show that would cover both regional and national information and allow for live questions from the audience (see Figures 3 and 4). The live aspect was seen as a benefit by Fong because of the "minimal production time," lack of a script, interactivity, and the excitement it would prompt (personal communication, March 2014). Fong posed these questions: "How do we connect people with our mission? Create a sense of unity? Tell a compelling story? Evolve our internal brand?" His strategies were to be "honest about what wasn't working, [get] buy-in from senior leadership, and [appeal] to the masses" (J. Fong, personal communication, March 2014). The Blank Show began and immediately received positive feedback. For example, staff members said, "it was a beautiful mix of information and connection," and it "brought tears to my eyes and gave me the chills" (J. Fong, personal communication, March 2014). Fong said The Blank Show "creates excitement about our work, liberates people to laugh more and broadens understanding of our work" (personal communication, March 2014). To create the program was a "big risk" that led to a "big reward" (J. Fong, personal communication, March 2014). Not everything worked perfectly, but they learned from it. One of the key lessons was that authenticity was the "draw" (J. Fong, personal communication, March 2014). Fong saw an impact on culture: "a more engaged staff, a more invested staff" (personal communication, March 2014). People were excited to be getting information live, asking questions and calling in online.

Regional staff members support teachers directly, so they have a better sense of the daily mission in action; however, the national staff members are distant from the teachers and students who are benefitting from their work. They do not see the TFA mission being lived out every day, so The Blank Show gives them a glimpse.



Figure 3. The June 2014 edition of The Blank Show featuring a profile of an award-winning program founded by a former TFA corps member that provides eyeglasses to students. Click the screen shot to [view the video on YouTube](#).

The Blank Show has evolved over time; “our first show looks drastically different from today’s” (J. Fong, personal communication, April 2014). It has shifted from a live production to a recorded version; the live version ran into technical issues such as slow Internet speed in remote locations causing buffering. The team now sacrifices the live element for a higher quality production. Most of the organization still watches the program at the same time, though, as it is released on a certain date and time so everyone could watch it together. The show is live streamed when it is released, so the team is able to monitor how many live views are happening at the same time. Residual views trickle in after the live show via the video link. Links are shared internally first and then externally.

The Blank Show also shifted from an hour-long program to a 30-minute show. Scarbrough is never at a shortage of stories to share on the show. After each Blank Show, he receives numerous emails with suggestions and also hears ideas at TFA conferences. The Blank Show has a holiday

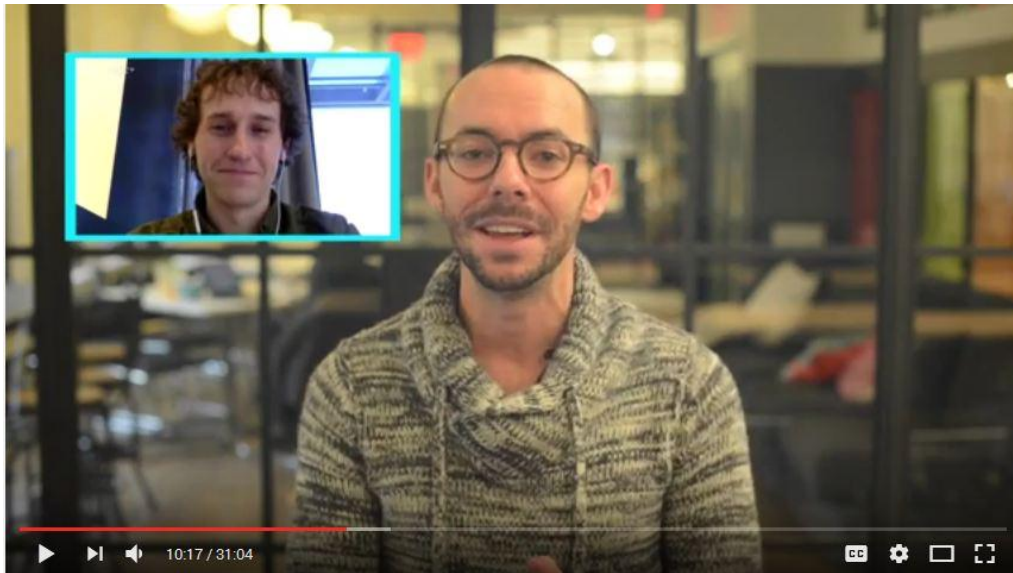


Figure 4. The February 2015 edition of The Blank Show. Kirk Scarbrough (main screen) introduces Aaron French (inset) for a segment on the role of TFA's ombudsperson. Click the screen shot to [view the video on YouTube](#).

version, too, that is made from user-submitted content. This edition of The Blank Show has one of the highest viewing rates because people love to see themselves, and it is a good time for staff to come together and be reminded of why they are here at the end of the year.

Another video element, the Weekly Tie-Up is a news update shared on Fridays. If it were not for The Blank Show, the Weekly Tie-Up would not have been born. The staff found that the emotional stories shared on The Blank Show were not meeting the craving for news. The internal communication team wanted to feed the news crave they were seeing, and thus, the Friday video news update was created with Scarbrough wearing his signature bowtie.

Scarbrough uses Google Alerts set for TFA-related terms. He looks for stories related to corps members, staff, and relevant events and issues via Google and Yammer. He sorts these by date to be sure he is sharing fresh news from the most recent week. He looks through Twitter, too, and often


finds news shared on regional TFA accounts. He also provided a Google form for people to submit news for him to include in the Weekly Tie-Up.

Video is also used for conferences and holiday greetings from the CEOs. Video and phone conferences with the CEOs give them an authentic voice. When challenging times hit, the CEOs have spoken to the staff via live broadcast. It means a lot to these internal communicators that the leadership is tapping into the communication team's skills to share the message, calm the nerves, and help get questions answered.

Monday Minute. In the Monday Minute, announcements are kept brief along the lines of Twitter, but with a 180-character limit in the hopes that everyone can read it in one minute. The purpose of this weekly email blast is to keep everyone from working in silos. Because not everyone can send emails across the entire organization, the Monday Minute serves as the best way to reach all of the staff. The Monday Minute has become a regular routine for many employees. There is a certain cadence and tradition to getting it every week. The Monday Minute, which is sent each Monday at 9 a.m., includes links to the previous week's video content. Because of the inclusion of the links, it serves as an anchor that connects all of them together (see Figures 5 and 6). Viewership of the Weekly Tie-Up (from Fridays) increases on Mondays because the link is also included in the Monday Minute.

Evaluation

Current employees were interviewed about the use of social media within the organization. These employees were recruited using a snowball sample starting with Scarbrough and French, which aimed for maximum variation in the type and location of these employees. Interviews were conducted by phone and email. Staff members were asked which communication tools were part of their routine, why the tools were seen as valuable, how they used them individually, as well as how they are used by their co-workers and by the larger organization. They were also asked to explain why certain communication tools/channels were not part of their routine.



MONDAY MINUTE

BROUGHT TO YOU BY CONSTITUENT COMMUNICATIONS

NOVEMBER 23, 2015

**“LANGUAGE PRESERVATION
AND REVITALIZATION IS URGENT
TO OUR CULTURAL SURVIVAL.”**

GOOD STUFF: Read this [powerful article](#) from Robert Cook as he celebrates Native Heritage Month and the 5-year anniversary of the Native Alliance Initiative.

UPCOMING EVENTS

**Early Timesheet
Submission**

**Native Alliance
Initiative Book Club**

11/23: Submit your timesheet for the week of 11/16 by COB today. Payroll will be processed early due to Thanksgiving. You will still receive your paycheck on 12/4. [Read more.](#)

11/30: [Join](#) Robert Cook and the NAI at 4pm ET to discuss [A Good Day to Die](#), a movie about the early life of American Indian Movement founder, Dennis Banks.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Weekly Tie-Up

Holiday Central


**Procurement Vendor
Survey**

Last week, the [Tie-Up](#) celebrated great things that are happening in Missouri & spread the word about awarding educators.

Holiday cards and email headers are now available! Visit the [Marketing Portal](#) for details and order your cards by 12/11.

Help out the Procurement team by filling out [the survey](#) on Cliqbook, Enterprise/National, WB Mason, and Fedex by 12/4. They'll use your feedback in their meetings next month.


Figure 5. The November 23, 2015, edition of the Monday Minute.



MONDAY MINUTE

BRING OUT TO YOU BY CONSTITUENT COMMUNICATIONS

JANUARY 25, 2016



memories of our lives,
of our works and our deeds
will continue in others.

ROSA PARKS ♥

FEBRUARY 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29

GOOD STUFF: "Memories of our lives, of our works and our deeds will continue in others." ~Rosa Parks. Get ready for February with the new [Desktop Background](#).

UPCOMING EVENTS

TFA Talks: Exploring Teacher Leadership	1/26: There are currently 15,000 corps members & alumni leading this work as classroom teachers. Join this teacher panel to explore the many ways to lead from the classroom.
Staff Breakfasts	2/5: Staff members at the Summit can have breakfast with others who share their intersectional identities. Sign up for your group of choice now!
Updated Amex Approval Deadline	2/9: We are extending the Amex approval deadline to accommodate 25th Anniversary summit travel. New deadline for January Amex report approvals is Tuesday, February 9th.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Weekly Tie-Up	Last week on the Tie-Up , regions celebrated MLK Day, an alumni had a powerful discussion with Colbert, and Education Week highlighted our work in a special feature.
Staff Birthdays	Age is just a number. False . View birthdays by team and by date and remind your teammates that age is just a word.
New Alumni Board Members	The National Board is thrilled to announce the addition of two alumni, Kaya Henderson (DC '92) and Kevin Huffman (DC '92).

Figure 6. The January 25, 2016, edition of the Monday Minute.

Ten staff members from across the country shared their thoughts on communication tools within TFA. They work in Appalachia-Kentucky, Maryland, Montana, New Mexico, New York, Ohio and Texas. Five were women and five were men. Five were regional staff and five were national staff. First, they were asked how the various internal communication tools served them.

What Internal Communication Efforts Do for Employees

Several participants spoke generally about how internal communication efforts help them. Crystal Kinser, who works in Appalachia, said:

I feel more informed about and more connected to the broader education conversation. As a team, it allows us to know what's going on in other parts of the country—it's so easy for us to work in a vacuum but these tools provide the broader context that we can then use when we talk to community members, teachers, school leaders, etc. (personal communication, January 8, 2015)

For Tara Sumrall, who works in New Mexico, internal communication tools allow her to stay in contact with people she has worked with across the organization (personal communication, December 22, 2014). Regional staff member Alan Brauer, who works in Baltimore, said:

It's really important to me to feel a sense of connection to our broader movement, and the communications nationwide help make this happen. We become so focused on our day-to-day work and what is directly related to where we stand in the movement (and rightfully so because we have so much to accomplish for our students). The communication resources provide the birds eye view [sic] of our collective work that I need to ground me. (personal communication, January 7, 2015)

Kyle Krym, who is part of the national staff, said, on an individual level, "TFA communication tools allow me to disseminate information easily and creatively, receive concise information painlessly, and build stronger relationships" (personal communication, January 7, 2015). He added, "For the organization it helps build a community that allow different teams to interact with each other, helping eradicate the various silos of information that may otherwise exist" (personal communication, January 7, 2015).

Shannon Steffes, who also works on the national staff, said that most of her team is in New York, while she works from multiple sites. Steffes said it is:

important to remember there are lots of people out there working on our shared purpose. It also helps us to step back and learn about the education issues and efforts in our local regional offices that we (the national team) may not otherwise have an avenue to learn about. (personal communication, December 19, 2014)

For Sumrall, internal communication helps lift up the voice of the voiceless. She works with TFA's Native American Initiative. She began as a corps member in South Dakota and now works in New Mexico.

Working in a Native region, I sometimes feel like we get a little bit forgotten; the structures often help to feel like the voices of the Native people I work alongside are elevated . . . and help me feel more connected to other communities within TFA that I might not directly work with or be a part of. (personal communication, December 22, 2014)

According to Sumrall, "Maintaining hope and inspiration, and feeling connected to other people—these things matter a lot, and the structures [in TFA internal communication] absolutely do this for me" (personal communication, December 22, 2014).

Respondents also explained how they use specific communication tools, including Yammer, The Blank Show, and the Monday Minute.

Yammer. Jamie Lonie, who works in Houston, likes how Yammer can be used alongside other communication tools. Lonie said, "Yammer can be used to engage with events in real time like The Chat and other live events online. You can ask questions and post comments to the thread" (personal communication, December 23, 2014).

Steffes explained that Yammer is the most useful communication tool for her:

We are a large organization (in the number of staff and in the geography we cover). It isn't always easy to know what is

happening. For example, I was able to find out that between two of our teams we were doubling over work with different vendors for the same work purpose. (personal communication, December 19, 2014)

Ron Jacobs,¹ who works in the national office in New York City, also shared how “invaluable” a resource Yammer can be:

When I had a question about our updated policy around travel receipts, I couldn’t find the answer on our TFA Hub site, but I posted to Yammer, and got the answer I needed within a couple of hours. When I’ve been looking to connect with other staff members of similar background and beliefs, Yammer has provided a forum for connection and discussion. During some of the other communications (The Chat, live-streamed broadcasts), Yammer provides an opportunity for real-time interaction with people across the country who are listening to the same broadcasts. (personal communication, December 23, 2014)

However, Jacobs also pointed out some downsides to this internal social media tool:

The main drawback with Yammer is, as with a lot of social media, the volume. When we first started using Yammer at TFA, there were not a lot of people on it, and it was easy to keep up with what was going on. Now there are dozens of messages every day, and even if I wanted to participate at a high level, I don’t have the time to weed through all the posts and find the ones that are relevant or interesting to me. (personal communication, December 23, 2014)

Peter Clark said, “Yammer is a space where people can connect and gain energy to do difficult work” (personal communication, December 22, 2014). Like Clark, Krym sees Yammer as a way to connect on a different level: “it represents a slightly less formal medium in which to communicate. This doesn’t mean that the information conferred there is any less important, but that it can be presented slightly more creatively, often with a touch of humor” (personal communication, January 7, 2015). Krym said TFA colleagues “no longer view us as just names, but rather as

¹ This name has been changed at the request of the participant.

fully-formed people just like them. . . I [also] get to pair faces and, more importantly, personalities with some of the names of people I am supporting” (personal communication, January 7, 2015). Krym explained the importance of this connection: “As soon as relationships are built and the work becomes more personal, we stop simply understanding *what* we do, but also *why* we do what we do.” National staff member Ursa Scherer said, “Beyond the feeling of connection, and that it allows me to use a more casual tone than email always does. I find it can genuinely reduce email traffic when used well. That’s my favorite part of it” (personal communication, December 19, 2014).

Krym said within his role in technical support, he sees Yammer as a helpful resource for TFA staff to ask questions. “I also imagine that there are some questions people feel more comfortable asking on social media rather than creating a formal support ticket regarding. Operationally, as soon as anyone asks a question that is technical in nature, somebody else will tag me so that I can respond” (K. Krym, personal communication, January 7, 2015).

Monday Minute. Many respondents said the Monday Minute is a crucial channel to read each week. According to Steffes:

Monday Minute is a great way to hold the staff accountable for knowing exactly what is going on in the org. There is accountability in it, but also the freedom to quickly scan the items and determine which apply to you so that you aren’t wasting time on unimportant announcements. I think this helps keep people reading the items. It’s efficient. (personal communication, December 19, 2014)

Jacobs also sang the praises of the Monday Minute. Jacobs said, “I appreciate having high priority items brought to my attention each week. I make it a point to go through this on Monday morning, so that I’m sure I’m up to date on any important happenings” (personal communication December 23, 2014).

Lonie also appreciates the brevity of the Monday Minute and its valuable links. According to Lonie, “It’s short and sweet and has direct links to information. Over the past year and a half since it began, there are less mass emails from random departments. People have started to funnel

information through the Monday Minute” (personal communication, December 23, 2014). Lonie said, “I like waking up on Monday morning and know what I need to do. It may not all be action items; it may just have interesting information, things we need to know for the week.”

The Blank Show. According to Clark, The Blank Show is a key element in the internal communication toolbox:

The Blank Show provides a space for people to connect on a higher level in the work that we do. While it is easy for people to get brought down in the details of their work and what they do, The Blank Show provides a space for different teams to showcase things they’re doing and for the people watching, a place to see what the impact we are making as a whole organization. (personal communication, December 22, 2014)

For Jacobs, the usefulness of The Blank Show depends on the topics shared. He watches every episode, but if content is not as relevant to him, he multi-tasks. Jacobs explained the value of the program:

I work on a support team, and have no direct interaction with any of our students, our teachers, or even with the people who work directly with our teachers. So this gives me an opportunity to learn more about our communities and the people in them. (personal communication, December 23, 2014)

The Chat. Similar to other live broadcasts, attention to The Chat varies by topic. According to Jacobs:

It’s great to hear from the CEOs about topics of interest to the organization, and I really appreciate that they encourage participation from listeners. However, much like The Blank Show, sometimes the topics just don’t grab me very much, and I feel I have better things to do with my time. When I do listen, though, I usually come away from it with a better understanding of and [appreciation] for the issue being discussed. And on occasions when there has been something very internal to the organization discussed . . . I’ve gotten very engrossed in it, and sometimes even motivated to further action. (personal communication, December 23, 2014)

Weekly Tie-Up. Clark pointed to the efficiency of the Weekly Tie-Up. He said, “I watch The Weekly Tie-Up every week. It is helpful to watch this and see what is going on with the org as a whole. I also put links to this in our weekly staff emails” (P. Clark, personal communication, December 22, 2014). Lonie appreciates having the link inside the Monday Minute. Lonie said, “I don’t actually watch it on Friday. It’s a nice, feel-good overview of what’s happening across the nation. It helps us to keep in touch nationally and with other regions as the organization becomes more autonomous” (personal communication, December 23, 2014).

Tools in Their Routine

In addition to hearing what particular tools do for them, the participants were asked how internal communications were incorporated into their routine. Each of the communication tools was mentioned as part of someone’s routine. Yammer was mentioned the most often.

Yammer. Steffes said Yammer was the biggest part of her daily schedule: “I check it at least twice a day. I admin 5 groups. I’d say I ask or answer a question or respond to a post 3-4 times a week. I try to like something every day” (personal communication, December 19, 2014). Steffes has made it such a central part of her routine because of the immediacy of the feedback. Scherer also checks Yammer multiple times a day (personal communication, December 19, 2014). Krym, who works in technical support, said he uses Yammer “to communicate with the rest of the organization regarding upcoming maintenance windows, security threats, tech projects, best practices, and general well wishes” (personal communication, January 7, 2015). Lonie receives “automated highlights from my feed each morning. I might read some of them more in depth. I use it occasionally with The Chat. I might post comments [during the broadcast]. It’s a neat way to see what others are thinking” (personal communication, December 23, 2014).

Monday Minute. Most of the respondents mentioned reading each Monday Minute. Steffes said, “I read the Monday Minute every time it comes out as soon as I can. I leave it in my inbox until I’ve read and addressed all the items that apply to me” (personal communication, December 19, 2014). Brauer said the Monday Minute is a valuable part of

his routine to “help me stay informed of both internal and external communications” (personal communication, January 7, 2015).

Live-streamed broadcasts. Sumrall said, “If there’s a live-streamed broadcast I definitely watch it” (personal communication, December 22, 2014). Clark also pointed to the importance of these broadcasts: “When the Live-stream Broadcasts are important issues for the entire org, we come together as a team and watch these” (personal communication, December 22, 2014). Sumrall said live-streamed broadcasts usually involve “some big decision or announcement has to be made, and I really appreciate that our leadership takes the time to tell us in a way that feels inclusive, clear, and personal” (personal communication, December 22, 2014). The live-streamed conversations are some of the most valuable communications to Lonie. Lonie said, “If I’m not at the office, I watch at home. It’s really cool. . . . The videos are accessible through the TFA Hub. You just click and there it is, easy to access both live or a recording” (personal communication, December 23, 2014). He said the openness and honesty expressed by the CEOs during these broadcasts “means a lot to people that they’re taking the time” and “listening to feedback” (J. Lonie, personal communication, December 23, 2014). Lonie said, “At another organization where I worked, I didn’t feel the same transparency. It’s an interesting way to leverage that technology to put a real face to the leaders of the organization” (personal communication, December 23, 2014).

Weekly Tie-Up. This new communication channel has grabbed staff members’ attention. Sumrall said she “almost always click[s] to watch the Weekly Tie-Up” (personal communication, December 22, 2014). Steffes said she likes “seeing what bowtie Kirk is rocking that week . . . and to quickly see what else is going on” (personal communication, December 19, 2014).

The Blank Show. Steffes regularly watches The Blank Show because it helps increase her knowledge about the regions. Steffes said, “Our team is supposed to service all regions and understanding their unique contexts is a must for the success of our work” (personal communication, December 19, 2014). Sumrall also said, “I LOVE the holiday Blank Show; it feels a little bit like looking at a yearbook.”

Education on Tap. Although most participants had not made Education on Tap part of their routine yet, Kinser said:

Education on Tap connects me to experts *outside* of our organization. An easy mistake to make is to keep recycling information and ideas within our org. But we're not experts and doing so limits us. Ed on Tap pushes us in the right direction. (personal communication, January 8, 2015)

The Chat. Most participants said The Chat was part of their routine. Steffes said it was valuable "hearing about what is happening at levels WAY above me and also with our external partners" (personal communication, December 19, 2014). According to Sumrall:

Some of the most emotionally charged moments at TFA have had a Chat associated with them, and I think that's important. It helps me know and trust our leadership, which reinforces my belief that this is the right place for me. (personal communication, December 22, 2014)

Clark said, "it is good to hear about issues that are affecting our organization and hearing different perspectives to push my thinking forward" (personal communication, December 22, 2014).

Why Some Tools are Not Adopted by Employees

Participants were also asked why particular tools had not been chosen for their own routines. Several themes emerged as to why they used or did not use certain tools.

Role. The tools used depend on each staff member's role and location. Steffes works on the national team and uses all of the communication channels/tools, while her husband, who is on a regional team, uses almost none because he "is in the field, traveling, visiting schools, etc." (personal communication, December 22, 2014).

Time. Krym explained that some tools, which may be very valuable, are not part of his routine because "I suffer from a severe shortage of time. In an ideal world I would have time for all of the various sources of communication and information, but my work keeps me too busy to rise

above the bare minimum” (personal communication, January 7, 2015). Sumrall echoed those thoughts saying, “I just have a limited amount of time, and Education on Tap isn’t the most important thing to me. I have a couple of news and policy oriented friends, so I just look for what they post or look things up on my own” (personal communication, December 22, 2014). Clark also mentioned Education on Tap as a tool that is not in his routine because of time: “While I know that I could probably listen to it while other things are going on, it feels hard to put any more of my time towards something when I have a lot on my plate to begin with” (personal communication, December 22, 2014). Scherer also mentioned a lack of time to use the tools she wanted to use; “I only look at the Weekly Tie-Up once in a while—I always like it when I do, but I’m often trying to get too many other things done when I see it released” (personal communication, December 19, 2014).

Topic. Lonie said, “The Blank Show varies on the content of the show. If I knew someone [that was] going to be in it, I would watch” (personal communication, December 23, 2014). According to Kinser, “I listen to The Chat when it’s something I really care to hear about. The guests are always worth hearing about and I wish I had time for everyone, but it’s easy to prioritize doing something else instead” (personal communication, January 8, 2015).

Not live. Lonie said he does not always watch The Blank Show any more because there’s less urgency now that it is recorded and not live (personal communication, December 23, 2014). Scherer communicated the same feeling; she watched The Blank Show “when it was a live broadcast—once it became a recording it felt less compelling to tune in. While we might have been watching it at the same time . . . it just lost a little magic when it wasn’t live” (personal communication, December 19, 2014). Kinser also said she stopped watching The Blank Show because of changes: “I’m confused on what it is anymore. I knew what it used to be and enjoyed it then. But the format got old, the team knew it, and changed it. But to what? I don’t know” (personal communication, January 8, 2015).

Outgrown. Kinser explained that she used to employ Yammer regularly, but it is no longer part of her routine: “As I’ve gotten more experienced in my role, I stopped using Yammer as a help tool and instead reached out

directly to people I knew had the answers I needed” (personal communication, January 8, 2015).

Ignorance. Several participants were not familiar with Education on Tap, so it is not part of their routine yet. While most participants use Yammer heavily, Brauer said, “I REALLY REALLY want to become a much better user of Yammer! I simply don’t know what is ‘Yammer worthy’ and I have a hard time throwing something out to the entire organization without more clarification around some best practices” (personal communication, January 7, 2015).

Not yet a habit. Kinser said of the Weekly Tie-Up, “I’ve watched it a couple times and I like it a lot! It’s short! I get the big headlines! I just haven’t made a habit of checking it” (personal communication, January 8, 2015).

Preference. Jacobs said he would rather read the updates than watch them in a video (i.e., Weekly Tie-Up, live-streamed broadcasts). Jacobs said, “I think that some of these things could be handled with email communication instead of live-stream broadcasts, especially when they start diving into details and numbers” (personal communication, December 23, 2014).

Internal Data

The TFA internal communication team has also evaluated their changes by looking at various data. The team tracks metrics in several formats for each channel. For the Monday Minute email, they monitor open rates and click-through rates. For Yammer, they monitor likes, comments, and shares. For The Blank Show, they keep track of views. For The Chat, they look at listener numbers. For Education on Tap, they watch the number of streams/downloads. They also continue to seek qualitative feedback by asking people what they think, what they love, and what the team can do better.

French saw an increase in Yammer engagement in the first year with more people signing up and more power users coming out of the woodwork. Many employees attended Yammer 101 sessions early on to learn best practices. In addition to numbers for Yammer, Monday Minute open rates

have been steady, but recently saw an uptick. TFA's Monday Minute has a 50% open rate, so the team is pleased. The Chat is up and down as far as engagement goes and really depends on the topic. Education on Tap, which is a new podcast designed to be informal and informative related to education issues, saw a great launch. Between August 2014 and June 2015, the podcast had more than 16,000 unique streams or downloads. The team has seen engagement from both inside and outside of TFA, with listenership not only in the United States, but across the globe. Thanks to TFA's partners in Australia, India, and many other countries, the podcast has reached a wider audience than it initially anticipated.

The Blank Show, which has garnered more than 20,000 staff views during the past four years, has shown an increase in the past year due to a shortened run-time and more sharable segments. The last episode had more than 500 views, which represents more than 500 people as it is often viewed in office watch parties. Lately Scarbrough has begun separating pieces of The Blank Show into smaller video clips to prompt sharing. For example, he recently posted a two-minute clip about teachers in New Mexico taken from an episode of The Blank Show. This segmentation allows for more hits. Several of these shortened segments had between 1,000 and 5,000 views apart from the show's run. Although these videos have been created for an internal audience, their presence on YouTube has allowed for external sharing as staff members tweet the links or post them on other social media. The fact that stories are constantly submitted to Scarbrough also suggests the value of The Blank Show to organization members. Regions are excited about being involved.

The Weekly Tie-Up, which is also new, is getting nice reviews and has a good number of loyal followers. Data on the Weekly Tie-Up shows it to be one of the top clicked items within the Monday Minute. Each episode averages between 250 and 300 views. This consistency has pleased the team because they feared weekly content had the potential of quick burnout. The team hopes to continue to bump those numbers up even more as they go into the Tie-Up's second year of existence.

Just as staff members often use two channels at once, the internal communication staff also uses multiple channels at the same time. The CEOs did a live broadcast for all members in April 2014. Designed

somewhat like a press conference, the social media team read the speeches beforehand. Then, they used the hashtags #TeachForAmerica and #WontBackDown during the speeches, and both became trending nationwide topics on Twitter. This was a first for TFA. The design also helped prepare the CEOs for questions from staff members.

Analysis and Discussion

Nonprofit work is gritty and exhausting. People work a lot of overtime for no overtime pay, which points to the great need to communicate well within the walls. Without a sense of being part of something worthwhile, staff members will become discouraged, and it is important to keep in mind that staff satisfaction helps public perception. Thus, the role of internal communicator is pivotal.

The respondent interviews point to several reasons staff utilize these tools. Most mentioned how internal communication tools built and maintained community. Because of these channels/tools, they felt a connection to the larger organization and its mission. They felt informed, connected, motivated, included and reminded of their shared purpose. They referred to internal communication tools as efficient. They saw internal communication channels providing a forum for discussion and a chance for interaction. Because of internal communication efforts, they saw the impact of their work. To repeat Sumrall's description, she saw internal communication "maintaining hope and inspiration" (personal communication, December 22, 2014).

In contrast, the reasons for not using a specific channel included a lack of time, a lack of interest in a topic, changes made to the tool, changes in employee needs, challenges due to their role at TFA, preference for a different format, and ignorance of the tool/channel.

Lessons Learned

The big thing the team has learned is that before you communicate, you have to listen. You cannot go into internal communication with a pre-conceived idea of what internal stakeholders need. Second, they have also learned you do not have to have a big budget to make a big impact because there are tools now that make your work faster, cheaper, and easier. For

video, they have learned that it is all about the stories people want to hear. Thus, effective video can be created without fancy equipment or expensive editing programs. Employees are forgiving of how it looks and sounds if you are providing them with the information they want or need. Finally, it is important to connect your communication to the mission. Nonprofits are not always glamorous, but employees are there for a reason. It can be fun to personalize that for your community and remind them of why they are doing what they are doing. One of the rewarding parts of working in internal communications is helping employees love their job.

The numbers, as well as the reported feelings of employees, point to the effectiveness of the strategies and tactics used by the internal communication team. Constantin and Baiaş (2015) affirm “internal communication is important because it is the building block of the organizational culture” (p. 976). Their concern for employee culture is what inspired TFA internal communicators to shift methods. Constantin and Baiaş (2015) point to the importance of “employee voice” and explain that “a permanent dialogue with the employees contributes to a proper understanding of the company mission” (pp. 977-978). As mission is central to TFA’s existence, this voice is imperative. With Yammer and The Blank Show, in particular, employees were given a voice within TFA.

In their research on internal communication’s impact on employee engagement, Karanges, Johnston, Beatson, and Lings (2015) found “internal communication facilitates interactions between an organization, supervisors, and employees which create workplace relationships based on meaning and worth,” thus, “it is important for public relations scholars to examine and re-examine internal communication strategies, and employee engagement for deeper theoretical and practical insights” (p. 130). Theoretically, this points to the need for engaging tools, such as Yammer, as discussed earlier. Karanges et al. (2015) assert that “senior leaders and supervisors can achieve more optimal levels of engagement through communication that ensures employees feel part of the organization’s internal community” (p. 130), which resonates with the findings of this study. Karanges et al. (2015) explain that their results point to social exchange theory, “which asserts that when organizations and supervisors provide resources, namely internal communication, in a way that is perceived to be beneficial, employees will consider the

relationship favorably and reciprocate with positive and beneficial cognitions, emotions, and behaviors, namely engagement” (p. 130).

The positive internal response Karanges et al. (2015) describe as a “social exchange” is evident in The Blank Show, Yammer, and The Weekly Tie-Up. The overall appreciative employee reaction has prompted the team to consider how those resources can be used to inspire and connect even more of the TFA community. The efforts of the internal communication team will continue to evolve based on results seen from their audience research.

Discussion Questions

1. What tools did TFA initially use to communicate with its employees?
2. What makes communication among staff members within TFA complex?
3. What was Fong’s initial charge from leadership about communication in 2010?
4. How do the communication challenges at TFA relate to other organizations you know?
5. Note the more formalized goals under the section “The Mission.” How do these fit the mission of TFA and its communication team?
6. What tools did the TFA communication team employ in the reinvention?
7. What tool or activity most interested you? Why?
8. What should the team focus its energy on now, given what you now know about its successes and failures? How could the team continue to evolve its strategy?

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Acknowledgments

A previous version of this paper was presented at the 2015 meeting of the International Public Relations Research Conference in Miami, Florida.

Editorial history

Received June 25, 2015

Revised March 31, 2016

Accepted May 17, 2016

Published August 2, 2016

Handled by editor; no conflicts of interest