

## SUMMARY

# 100% Consistent the impact of implicit communication

What happens if your company makes a pledge to sustainability, but your leaders keep driving big lease cars? If promise and proof are not consistent, if explicit and implicit signals do not align, credibility and trustworthiness are at stake. In an increasingly critical society (in)consistency may well mean the difference between success and failure. Here, we introduce four elements that help you check the consistency of your organisation in its promises and actions.

*When the CEO of an organisation always talks about sustainability but drives an enormous SUV at the same time, his words and actions do not match. He does not practice what he preaches. Discrepancies like this hurt organisations because employees attach greater value to implicit messages than to official company statements. Therefore, the concept of implicit communication helps us to understand what employees and other stakeholders actually perceive about organisations but often neglect to mention.*

Most communication specialists and top managers pick up on signals or manifestations of what we classify as implicit communication but don't have a structured approach to deal with them. Authors Ilse van Ravenstein and Bas van Glabbeek from Involve, a specialised communication and change agency, and Mark van Vuuren, Associate Professor to the University of Twente, worked to gain insight in implicit communication and consistency in what organisations say and do by researching the implicit communication in sixteen organisations in the Netherlands. Their findings as well as experience with implicit communication in organisations are the subject of their book *100% Consistent, the impact of implicit communication* (available in print in Dutch and as e-book in English). The book includes a practical checklist to tackle inconsistencies in organisations. A summary of the book is provided below.

## Communication without words

The authors describe *explicit* communication as written or spoken messages, captured in either words or visuals. This is a broad definition covering all types of media but also all verbal communication.

*Implicit* communication is defined as anything an organisation communicates without using written or spoken words or visuals. This definition refers to everything organisations do on a daily basis.

Organisations can communicate implicitly in four ways;

- by personal actions
- by its physical environment
- by providing (or not providing) resources
- by its organisational structure and governance

All these elements are influenced by history. The past also communicates. For instance via the layout of the office, the allocation of resources, the current organisational structure and the method of management. These are all consequences of previously made choices, choices that cannot be quickly nor easily altered.



## Examples of inconsistency

### Personal actions

- A manager proclaims: 'My door is always open!' Except, of course, today...
- A new way of working is promoted: employees are to use flexible workplaces. The manager of the new way of working project, however, has an office to himself.

### Physical Environment

- Management is stressing the crucial importance of collaboration between specific departments but there are four floors between these and there is no meeting room the employees involved can use.
- An organisation has to make severe budget cuts. The annual staff outing is canceled and salary increases may not be possible. At the same time, C-suite floors are being renovated and luxuriously upgraded while the company will move offices within two years.

### Available resources (processes & systems, budget and capacity)

- A consultancy firm shouts about its personal development options in its labor market communication. However, there is no time for peer-to-peer coaching, colleagues are not keen to educate each other and any training courses have to be taken after working hours, because everyone has to spend 90% of their time on billable activities.
- An educational institution positions itself as having a high-tech approach to teaching. In the meantime, teachers are carrying around overhead projectors and the Wi-Fi cannot cope with the latest e-learning modules.

### Structure and governance

- Agents in a call centre fully understand that customer service is the most important brand value. At the same time, team managers monitor the length of the incoming call queue and the telephone system does not allow them to call back customers. The current system does not enable them to offer the desired customer service.
- A company positions itself as international and is keen to attract staff from abroad, while its employees are far from fluent in English.

What do we demonstrate (implicitly)?

What do we promise (explicitly)?



## 100% consistent?

If explicit and implicit messages do not align, organisations can be perceived as inconsistent in what they say and what they do. If they want to achieve consistent communication, they need to make sure the overlap between implicit and explicit communication as represented by the circles above is as large as possible.

How can consistency in implicit and explicit communication be achieved? Is it possible to be a 100% consistent in all communications, or is this a tall order? We think it is feasible. Although complete consistency is an illusion, consciously paying attention to choices made – now and in the past - and to behaviour, will help to take an initial step towards consistency. Organisations can build on that step and, continuing to pay attention to consistency, enhance their credibility.

## 100% consistent!

But where to start? How to tackle inconsistencies? The authors developed the Consistency Check for that. It enables (communication) professionals to survey the extent in which organisations are consistent in what they say and do. For instance In how they implement new ways of working or in their latest labor market campaigns. The check can be used to keep monitoring whether or not organisations are consistent in words

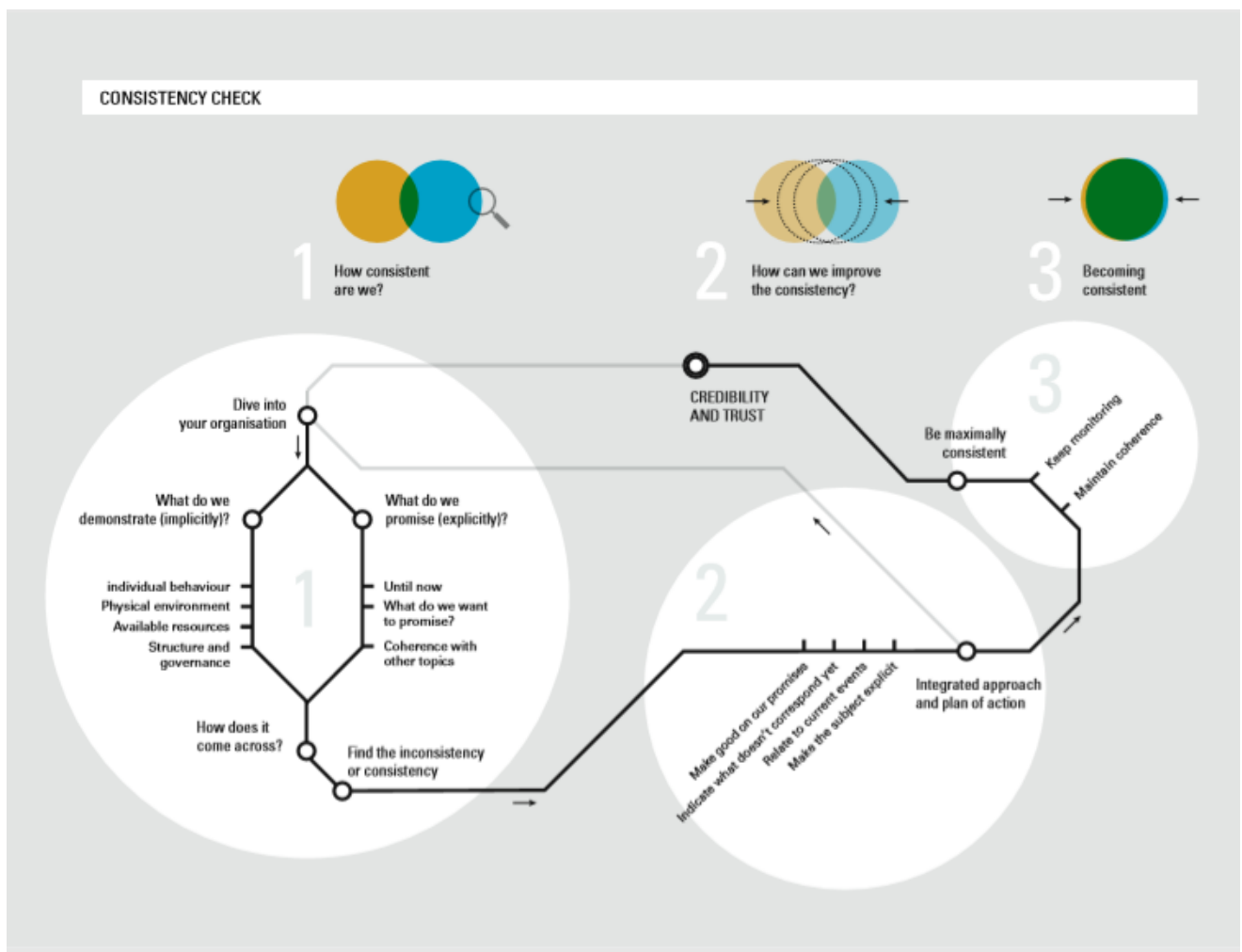
and actions. The approach the authors propose will lead to discussions but also, eventually, to credible organisations in which employees (and other stakeholders) put their trust. It is preferable to do the check together with HRM and IT departments or Facility Management. Together the overall picture of consistency can be drawn.

# The Consistency Check

The Consistency Check helps to make implicit communication explicit. It is based on three key questions:

1. How consistent in what we say and do are we?  
The first question demands comparing explicit communication to related implicit signals and how staff can perceive them.
2. How can we improve consistency? Based on the analysis, a plan can be developed and concrete actions defined that will consistently support an the topic at hand and match any explicit promises made.
3. How do we become consistent? Safeguarding consistency is a recurring process demanding timing the required actions and monitoring their effects to adjust either the explicit or implicit communication when needed.

There is a dynamic aspect to the Consistency Check. The analysis is followed by planning and execution in a linear way. However, if new developments arise while developing a plan, it will be necessary to take a step back and analyse the situation again. If signals of inconsistency come up while executing the plan, it may be necessary to go back to the drawing board and re-examine the analysis or the approach chosen.



## Using the Consistency Check

Each step of the Consistency Check entail answering a number of key questions. The answers help design an approach to the theme or topic you want to be consistent in by reinforcing the overlap in implicit and explicit communication, and therefore enhancing the credibility of the organisation in relation to the subject. Employees will be more likely to trust the organisation – and act accordingly. We will now go into the key questions and how to answer them.

### Step 1: How consistent are we?

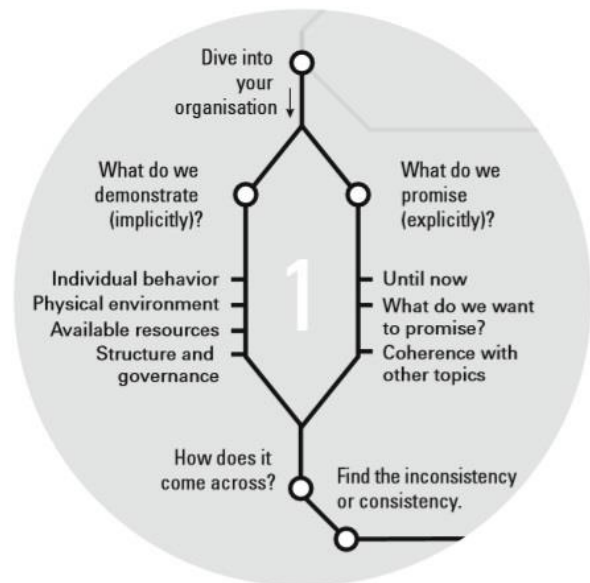
This is the most extensive step in the Consistency Check, centering on consciously assessing how a specific theme is communicated implicitly and explicitly – a deep dive into organisations to discover the consistencies and inconsistencies. This exploration focusses on three major questions:

- What do we promise explicitly?
- What do we do implicitly?
- How do staff perceive the explicit and implicit communications?

#### What do we promise explicitly?

To assess the explicit promises, look at the three elements that make up promises of organisations:

- Until now: What has been explicitly communicated on the topic of the promise up to now?
- What do we want to promise? Formulate what the organisation wants to say about the theme.
- Is the promise coherent with other topics? How does the organisation explain how the topic is related to other themes in the business?



#### What do we demonstrate implicitly?

Another major part of the analysis, the question deals with possibly implicit signals in the organisation that relate to the current theme. Gathering and analyzing implicit signals takes more time than analyzing explicit promises. Explicit messages are clear by their nature, while implicit signals can be considerably diverse. Answering this question means assessing whether the four ways of communicating implicitly about a specific theme as described earlier are perceivable in the organisation.

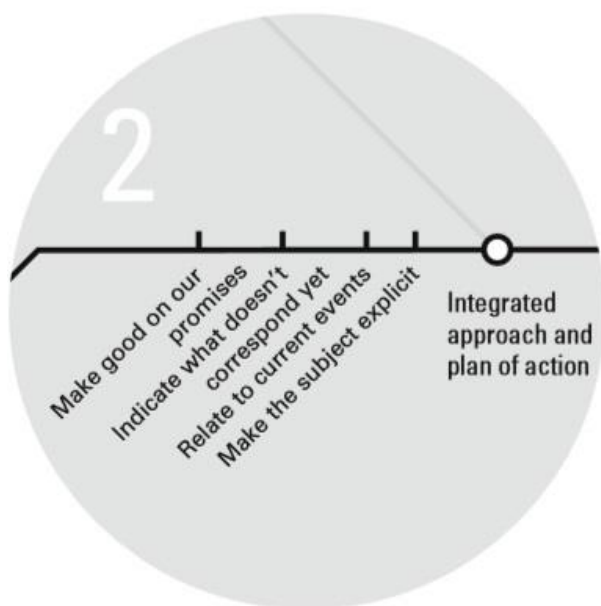
#### How does it come across?

We all interpret situations in our own way. And you cannot be sure about the interpretations of another person. The intention to be consistent is not enough: whether an organisation is consistent or not regarding a specific theme is hard to measure as everyone has their own individual way of determining the level of consistency. In addition, groups have shared perceptions about it, that have been shaped over time by experiences and knowledge. Therefore it is important to answer the following question: *How is all implicit and explicit communication perceived by the organisation or by certain groups that are involved in the topic and to what extent do they feel things do not add up?*

### Find the consistency or inconsistency

After the deep dive into the organisation and gathering all input related to what the organisation promises, what it actually done and how the two are perceived, the last question to answer is: *Do the implicit and explicit communication related to a topic reinforce or negate each other?*

Using the output gathered in the previous steps of the analysis helps to answer the question. Having described the explicit communication and categorised the implicit communication, the question now is to what degree are they consistent with each other? And how does that relate to what people experience? Based on the answers, conclusions can be drawn about whether the implicit and explicit communication about a topic reinforce or negate each other. Now adjustments of the implicit or explicit communications can be defined, which can be used as input for step 2.



### **Step 2: How can consistency be improved?**

Now the approach for achieving consistent communication on a specific theme is to be mapped out.

#### What can we do to make good on our promises?

Here, each aspect of implicit communication has to be examined to decide on what has to be stopped, started or improved in order to demonstrate the organisation's promises.

#### Indicate where explicit and implicit communication do not match yet

To make organisations aware that some implicit and explicit communications are not matching yet, identify and discuss them and (continue to) work towards rectifying them.

#### Link adjustments to other topics

How can adjusting the explicit and implicit communications about a theme be incorporated into projects and activities? If a theme needs attending to, bear in mind that organisations are occupied with a lot of topics simultaneously. Determine to what extent your theme can be made part of the explicit and implicit communication around other current topics or how it can be made part of employees' daily working life.

#### Communicate explicitly about the subject

After the earlier steps, explicit communication about the theme can be created, including:

- Description/Image: visualize the message: reinforce wording with visuals.
- Communicators: It is important that communicators (people that play a key role or are capable in getting the message across) consciously and visibly adjust their behaviour so their implicit communications matches the explicit communication on the topic.



- Supporting materials: the message can be communicated in different ways depending on who communicates it and the setting.
- Personal interventions: a theme often requires personal interaction in various settings such as meetings, town-halls and personal discussion.
- Communicating progress: many organisations pay a great deal of attention to the introduction of a project at first and then remain silent about it for a long period until the next milestone is reached. It is important to maintain regular communication about proof points of progress.

#### Integrated approach and planning

The approach chosen is based on choices made while analyzing implicit and explicit communications relating to a specific topic. Consequently, the approach taken will include both implicit and explicit communications.

Most organisations start planning the explicit communications on a topic, often resulting in promising things that may not be visible yet. An integrated approach including starting to communicate explicitly after initial implicit communications have taken place is more impactful: staff will experience that the organisation is seriously working on the topic and that the explicit communications about it match the related actions.

#### **Step 3: Becoming Consistent**

Sticking to the plan is essential if organisations truly want to enhance their credibility. Therefore, maintaining coherence and continuous monitoring are essential elements of the entire exercise.

#### Maintaining coherence

Making a plan with implicit and explicit elements and executing it does not mean that you are done. It is important to keep an eye on the consistency and timing of the overall communication. Otherwise, the implicit and explicit signals may no longer match over time or may not be executed correctly.

#### Continuous monitoring

Even if you have a nicely balanced plan and the execution is being monitored by a dedicated team, this will be no guarantee that the combined communication measures and interventions will have the desired effect. It is therefore necessary to monitor people's interpretation. This can be done by re-executing part of the measurement in step 1.





## More information and intellectual property

This summary of the Consistency Check is developed and owned by Involve. The summary is based on the book '100% Consistent; the impact of implicit communication'. The contents and all illustrations of the book are copyrighted and protected by Dutch law.

100% consistent is written by Ilse van Ravenstein (founder and director of Involve), Bas van Glabbeek (senior consultant at Involve) and Mark van Vuuren (Associate Professor at the University of Twente). The book provides an extensive, in-depth analysis of implicit communication, an elaborate description of the Consistency Check, many practical tips and examples, chapters specifically written for leaders, change- and projectmanagers and business and communication advisors. The book also contains a detailed description of two business cases of using the Consistency Check.

The book is available in print (in Dutch) for €30,95. More information can be found [on the Involve webpage](#).

**An English e-book is available at a reduced cost. If you are interested in the English e-book, please get in touch with us via [info@involve.eu](mailto:info@involve.eu). The e-book is available for €14,95.**

## About Involve

Involve is the only Dutch agency specialised in internal communication and change. We work for organisations that know how to anticipate developments in their markets or in society and are aiming to transform accordingly. Engaged employees help organisations be successful in this, as they want to contribute to shared goals on a daily basis.

For 25 years, we have been helping organisations in transformation by offering pragmatic communication and change strategies that focus on interaction, leadership and involving people. Every day, our 20 passionate communication and change professionals use their expertise and experience to help clients generate momentum, ignite engagement and inspire action. And off course be consistent – with lasting effect.

*For more information please get in touch with us:*

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