



Best Practices in Change Communications



INTRODUCTION

The truth is, nothing can change without communications.

As change has become business as usual, there is a sharp rise in organizations' requirements for specialized support in change communications. This is emerging as an exciting and meaningful opportunity for communicators to add unique value, as communications is an essential enabler of any transformation or change initiative.

The discipline of change communication differs significantly from other forms of communication, and as such requires a particular set of principles and best practices.

PRINCIPLES

Effective change communication is based on the following core principles:

Not communicating is communicating something. The first casualty of change is often communication. Keep in mind that in the absence of information, employees will fill the void – this will put the change initiative in a deficit situation in terms of communication, as you will first be forced to dig out of a hole of mis-information, and then establish messaging. As a rule of thumb, a one week delay in communication during a time of change will cost an organization a month of weak employee engagement.

Change is about energy, and energy is emotion. A unique characteristic of effective change communication is that it must reach employees at an emotional, rather than an intellectual level. Consider opportunities to shape the experience of the change, ensuring that the form and content of communication appeals positively on an emotional plane. It's vital to understand the key drivers of employees' intrinsic motivation and shape communication messages and activities to appeal on that level.

Communicate through words, symbols and behaviours. Change communication must go beyond mere information and words – employees can be reached more powerfully through symbols, and by watching behaviours around them. Consider change communication activities that go beyond words and that appeal at the emotional, experiential level through symbols (think: logos, visual cues, posters) and behaviours (think: making executives accessible, modelling desired actions, breaking down silos between departments).

Conversation is the smallest unit of change. The organizational change process happens through conversations, most of which take place informally. A change communications initiative should focus on maximizing opportunities for conversations to happen through both structured meetings like Dialogue Sessions and more spontaneous exchanges that happen day-to-day, particularly between managers and their staff.

Communication is the drumbeat of change. Through a tumultuous period of transformation, communication should be established as the drumbeat of change – a regular, predictable and reassuring touch point for employees. It's important for the communications drumbeat to keep the pace of change, speeding up or slowing down according to the phases of transformation.

Trust is the currency of change. A successful change initiative requires careful consideration of trust as an essential asset. Change leaders and agents must ensure that they nurture trust through authentic, honest and transparent communication. Should gaps in trust emerge as a result of mis-information, immediate corrective steps must be taken – which may mean accepting the vulnerability of acknowledging an error and committing to restoring confidence.

BEST PRACTICES

Best practices for change communications flow from sound change management practices.

#1: Start with the “Why”.

The biggest pitfall in change communication is a failure to establish the “why” behind the change. This should be expressed as the “felt need” for change, and it is the essential first building block in any change initiative.

According to Prosci's 2014 international benchmarking study Best Practices in Change Management, the number one cause of resistance is a lack of understanding of the “why”. This is a critical foundation, particularly to build the resiliency required for employees to withstand the inevitable bumps along the road that come with change.

If an organization has a weak sense of the “why” behind a change, or if teams have varying understandings of this critical element, a change initiative's probability of success will be severely eroded. For communicators, that path leads to a perpetual game of “catch up” in which the pain of the lack of shared understanding of the “why” becomes more acute over time, as the organization shifts into the “what” and “how” of the change.

#2. Simplify.

Communicators must be relentless in their efforts to wrestle complex, often nebulous information about change to the ground and create simple messages. Complexity is the enemy of change communication and engagement – and it is a very common problem, particularly with large-scale transformation.

A simple message about why we are changing and what it means is the essential foundation for a successful change initiative.

#3. Focus on Creating Shared Meaning.

Change communication must go beyond the basics of information dissemination and focus on the more creative exercise of creating shared meaning among employees. Because change is felt at an individual level, this work may require providing several different opportunities for employees to engage in dialogue to understand a change, what it means to the organization and what it means to the individual. Design the change communication tactical mix around this key goal of creating shared meaning through engagement – this may include dialogue sessions, interactive intranet exchanges, question and answer sessions and webinars. Where possible, invest in face-to-face communications as the centrepiece of the change communications model.

#4. Provide Line of Sight.

The change communication system should be designed to provide employees with a direct line of sight to the change – why it’s happening, what it means, and how it will affect them. The manager community is vital in this approach, as studies show that employees prefer to get information about how a change will affect them from their immediate manager.

Ensure that managers are equipped with clear messages and with the required training to be positioned as effective change agents in their critical role of “connecting the dots” for employees, and bringing the line of sight to life.

#5. Favour Authenticity and Transparency.

Executives often fall into the trap of becoming “cheerleaders” for change. This is dangerous, because change sponsors who appear to be blindly selling a change often have a polarizing effect on employees – resistant staff become even more entrenched in their resistance as a negative reaction to being “sold”.

Successful change leadership must be based on a very authentic approach to messages – leaders will cultivate trust to the extent that they are honest and realistic about some of the downsides of change.

Employees have increasing expectations for transparency in a time of change – change agents and leaders should commit to communicating as much as they can, as soon as they can.

#6. If You Can’t Give Content Give Context.

Context is king when it comes to change communications. The key to helping employees develop shared meaning about a change is to focus on establishing context. This is a very useful communication approach as it helps employees shape a more nuanced understanding of a change and how it relates to their own experience. Focusing on context is also an important strategy in communicating to employees during highly stressful periods of transformation – while specific information about roles, restructuring or relocation may not be available, organizations can help contribute to staff engagement by investing in communicating about context. This may include explaining the business, competitive or regulatory drivers behind a specific organizational change.

#7. Leverage Social Capital.

Humans are social beings and are profoundly influenced by the social cues around them – things like which kinds of behaviours are celebrated, the language that has currency, and the actions that can lead to rejection. Make sure that your communications model effectively taps into your organization’s social capital – those naturally occurring systems and relationships that make ideas and behaviours spread. Tapping into social capital is the most effective way of ensuring that your change takes root and thrives in the long term.

#8. Measure, Learn, Refine.

Communicators need quick access to real-time information on how change communication is being received during a transformation process. This is critical in order to understand what messages and tactics are effective, what sources of information are trusted, and the nature and scale of employee concerns.

A commitment to evaluation is particularly important because a changing organization is a learning organization – public signals of working toward continuous improvement through measurement can help reinforce a shift in culture.

Consider quarterly “Pulse Check” online surveys of employees in order to gain information on the change communication activity, and enable course corrections as needed.

Get More

[Contact us](#) for more information on how these best practices can be leveraged to meet your organization’s communications and change objectives.

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