

Change Communications: Tips for Leaders

The following Do's and Don'ts summarize the top tips for leaders communicating change to maximize impact and minimize risk exposure:

Do's

Focus on respect.

Change communication is fundamentally about treating employees with respect. Providing them with the information, context and transparency they deserve and require to perform.

Simplify.

Work at creating a crisp, brief message of the intent behind your change and communicate it relentlessly.

Emphasize opportunities to create shared meaning by discussing key concepts of the change in depth and using examples to ensure that they are consistently understood.

Pace communication by topics or themes to give employees a chance to metabolize the information and build understanding over time.

Build solidarity of intent.

It is paramount that all leaders be united in their shared understanding and commitment to the change. Take the time to enroll your direct reports in conversations to assess and build alignment.

Communicate as much as you can, as soon as you can.

Change communication is iterative by nature.

Commit to a regular schedule of providing updates on your change and ensure that you stick to it.

Use each opportunity for communication to reinforce the intent of the change. As challenges inevitably surface, demonstrate how they are being addressed in service to advancing the ultimate North Star of the change intent.

Set realistic expectations.

The best way to protect your credibility and trust equity is to be very realistic about your change. If there are gaps in the solution or if delays are expected, say so.

If you can't give content, provide context.

During certain changes, such as restructuring, there are times when information must be kept confidential. In such cases, focus on communicating the *context* for the change – the intent, expected process and guiding principles.

Plan for resistance.

Resistance is a natural part of any change – look at it as a source of useful information and an opportunity to build engagement and minimize anxiety through candid conversations.

Don'ts

Play "Father Knows Best."

Beware of the tendency for a parochial approach to communication to creep in. This is a frequent pattern that shows up through information hoarding, spin and hiding the truth.

Overcomplicate.

Change projects are complex, but their communications shouldn't be.

Be wary of change communications products that are text-heavy, overwhelming or convoluted – this will merely serve to exacerbate the team's anxiety.

Tolerate leaders going rogue.

Leaders' reactions to change are being watched carefully. An eye roll, angry arm crossing or cynical remark can be toxic to building employee engagement for the change.

Wait for all information to be perfect.

You can be sure that by the time each detail of your change is fully confirmed it will be too late to communicate with staff.

The task is to focus on transparency and trust, which will almost certainly mean working with imperfect or incomplete information.

Remember: perfect is the enemy of the good.

Be a cheerleader.

Over-selling your change as the all-singing, all-dancing solution is a recipe for failure. The "tell and sell" stance of promotion is erosive to trust and credibility.

Go dark.

Hiding from difficult news is bound to backfire. Do not allow a black hole effect to take hold, which will have you waging battle with underground resistance and a rampant rumour mill.

Shut down negative feedback.

Intolerance to critical input about the change is dangerous. It may cost you vital insights from front-line staff that your leadership doesn't have. Hostility to criticism will breakdown the psychological safety and sense of community your change initiative requires to succeed.¹

1 It's normal and healthy to wrestle with negative feedback or concerns about change. But once the change is confirmed and the intent is clear, employees and leaders have to either decide to get on board, or gracefully exit.