Primer on Change Communications

1. Start with the why

The biggest pitfall in change communication is a failure to establish the "why" behind the change. As the embodiment of the change's "felt need", it is the essential first step in any change initiative. According to the international benchmarking study *Best Practices in Change Management* (Prosci), 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 there is a lack of a common understanding of this critical element, the likelihood of a change initiative being successful is severely compromised. Organizations then find themselves mired in a perpetual game of "catch up", where the pain of not understanding the "why" of the change becomes more acute over time, as the project shifts into the "what" and "how".

2. Simplify

Change communication must be relentless in its efforts to wrestle complex, often nebulous information 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. Wherever possible, focus on a visual approach to communication – for example, consider an infographic or video presenting the "before" and "after" of the change, or a visual timeline of the project's key milestones.

3. Focus on creating shared meaning

To be truly effective, change communication must go beyond the basics of information dissemination and focus on the more creative exercise of building shared meaning among employees. Because change is felt at an individual level, this will require providing multiple opportunities for dialogue and engagement. The focus is on helping employees understand the change, what it means to the organization, what it means to the individual and of equal importance, helping them to understand what things are not changing. These opportunities for engagement and conversation could include the following techniques:

- Coffee chats
- Dialogue sessions
- Communities of practice
- Change sponsor sessions (e.g., CEO Breakfasts or Ask Me Anything)
- Meeting in a box (for cascades)
- Assemblies
- Capacity building
- Road show
- Yammer, LinkedIn, Facebook
- Myth busters sessions
- Video/webinar

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 most importantly, how it will affect them. The manager community is vital in this approach and should play a priority role in the system, translating the strategic vision of the change into reality, role modelling desired behaviours, showcasing success and managing consequences.

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 transformation 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 – it's not just about information dissemination, but about sense-making. Focusing on context when communicating during the often stressful periods of transformation, is even more important when specific information about roles, restructuring or relocation may not be available. This context 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, what type of language has currency, and which actions can lead to rejection. Make sure that your communications model effectively taps into your organization's social capital – those naturally occurring, socially contagious 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. Consider ways that you can create "social proof" – that is, establish ways for teams to demonstrate that the change is working for them, and can also have success among peer groups.

8. Measure, learn, refine

A hallmark to successful change communication is the ability to quickly access real-time information on how 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.