

Primer on Change Communications



The truth is, nothing can change without communications.

As change becomes business as usual within the organization, a deliberate focus on change communications is critical. Ultimately, managing change is about managing perception – and change communications is the essential fuel to effectively making that happen.

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

Core Principles

Not communicating is communicating something. The first casualty of change is 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's worth of weak employee engagement.

Change is about energy, and energy is emotion. A unique characteristic of change communication is that it must reach employees at both an emotional and an intellectual level – it is at this intersection between emotion and intellect, when truly effective change communications happens. 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. Consider getting employees involved in shaping the communications approach and messaging. For example, you could host a focus group to get a cross-section of employees to provide feedback on your change messaging. In this way, you not only validate your approach, but avoid the risk of communicating messages that don't resonate with your audience.

Communicate through words, symbols and behaviours. Change communication must go beyond mere information and words – employees can be reached more powerfully through visual 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: infographics, 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, ensuring there are multiple onramps to engage in dialogue and create shared meaning. These can include both structured meetings (e.g. dialogue sessions, coffee talks) 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 cadence of connection for employees. It's important for the communications 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 the careful consideration of trust as an essential asset and as a necessary pre-cursor to effective communication. 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

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 2014 Edition*, 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.