RESULTS MAP®

Primer on Change Communications

Every change has a rhythm, whether anyone sets it or not. Left to itself, the tempo is set by rumour, by the long silences between announcements and by whichever version of events travels fastest. The central work of change communication is to set a better one: a drumbeat steady enough that people can keep their footing while everything around them moves.

That work is harder than it used to be, because change itself is harder to see. Most of the playbook was written for planned change: one initiative at a time, a start and a finish, a tidy before and after. What organizations absorb now is emergent. It arrives in waves, several at once, overlapping and unfinished, and the people living through it are rarely asking what the project is. They are asking what is happening to them, how the pieces fit together, and whether anyone at the front is steady.

So the first task is rarely to explain the change. It is to establish a shared understanding of what is changing in the first place, and where that level setting is skipped, everything built on top of it wobbles. Communication stops being the announcement at the end of a decision and becomes the beat that carries people through all of it.

The precondition: trust

Everything that follows rests on trust. Without it nothing gets through, however well crafted. Leaders in a hurry routinely lose sight of a basic truth: you can only move at the speed of trust.

Information plus respect equals trust. Respect here is not niceties. It is clarity, accuracy and straight dealing: telling people what you know, being forthright about what you do not, and explaining why.

This is where transparency becomes strategic. Transparency is not sharing everything. It is naming the boundaries. When information is genuinely confidential, do not sidestep the gap. Illuminate it. Explain what the container is, why it exists and when it might change. Balance empathy with accountability throughout. The pull is to be nice; the discipline is to be kind, which means telling the truth with care.

Part one: what goes wrong

Four failure patterns show up in organizations of every size, sector and geography. Most change communication problems turn out to be one of these four horsemen under another name.

Spin. The tell-and-sell approach to communicating change, and a one-way ticket to cynicism. Leaders fall into a cheerleader stance, especially when the change involves technology that is supposed to solve everyone's problems. The same instinct produces the scripted answer to "what's in it for me", drafted on employees' behalf by people several levels removed from the work. People do not want platitudes or pixie dust. They want to be treated as intelligent adults who know that any change comes with limitations and losses. Done well, change communication is an act of respect.

Spin is the most common of the four because it is structurally encouraged. Change communication sits in direct tension with the gravitational pull of corporate communications, which is oriented toward promotion. That pull has to be resisted deliberately.

Sterility. Communication that lives in the head and never reaches the heart. This is the carefully worded, wordy memo that checks every corporate box and lands with a thud. The tone is professional, the message is packaged, and none of it is human. Change is felt at the gut level before it is understood at

the intellectual one, so the sanitized version fails on arrival. It is also why no email is ever going to solve a change communication problem.

Static. Over-explaining, over-describing and overwhelming instead of sending a clear signal. The instinct under pressure is to say more, and more is precisely what nobody has room for. If the executive team cannot state the essential intent of a change clearly and consistently, the initiative will fail.

Silos. Presenting a change disconnected from the context it lives in. HR rolls out a reorganization with no line drawn to the strategy. IT launches a platform in an information vacuum. From where employees sit this produces confusion and overwhelm. When nobody understands how the various changes fit together, people set their own priorities and retreat into their own information cocoons.

Part two: what to do about it

Four moves, one for each horseman. They work as a set, and any one of them applied on its own will be swallowed by the other three.

1. Establish context before content

The antidote to silos. We used to say content is king. In conditions of chaos and ambiguity, context is queen. The hard part is rarely communicating the thing. It is communicating how the thing relates to the other things. Assume low context in every audience and be explicit about the connective tissue between the initiatives people are living through.

Coherence is the goal. People are living through several changes at once and are constantly checking whether the pieces fit together. A new emphasis on collaboration lands alongside a restructure that fragments teams. A call for efficiency arrives with a process that adds three approvals. The contradiction registers long before anyone says it out loud, and it carries real risk, because an unexplained contradiction reads as evidence that nobody is holding the whole. Disengagement and cynicism take root there, faster than bad news would produce them. Where a contradiction is real and unavoidable, name it and explain the trade-off. Where it is only apparent, draw the line between the two changes explicitly.

This matters most when specifics are unavailable. Roles, structures, timing and outcomes are often unknowable early, and that is exactly when silence does the most damage. Context is what you have: the business, competitive, political or regulatory drivers behind the change. If you cannot give content, give context.

2. Move from information dissemination to sense-making

The antidote to sterility. The essential task is helping people make sense of what is happening, which is a different job from distributing information. People understand change emotionally first and intellectually second, so messages built entirely of facts and milestones will not do it.

Start with a crisp, muscular statement of intent. If you cannot say what the change is for in a sentence people can repeat back, nothing downstream will work. Build shared meaning from there through storytelling, concrete examples and sticky metaphors, and be as clear about what is not changing as about what is.

This is also the part a leader cannot hand off. Meaning cannot be delegated. Messaging can. Drafting the announcement, the deck and the questions and answers can and should go to people who do that work well. What cannot be handed over is naming what is happening, saying why, connecting it to everything else under way, and standing in front of people while they react. When executives pass the whole file to

communications or to a project team, they have delegated the packaging and kept none of the meaning, which is precisely why nothing lands.

3. Treat conversation as the smallest unit of change

The antidote to spin. People often ask which channel works best. It is the wrong question. We make sense of change over time, and we do it through conversation. Conversation, not dictation or broadcasting, belongs at the centre of the tactical model, which means deliberately building multiple on-ramps for exchange:

- Interactive town halls and round table discussions
- Listening tours and road shows
- Team meetings and bilateral check-ins
- Coaching conversations

This is also where the reflex to answer "what's in it for me" should be retired. Scripting benefits on behalf of employees makes a confident claim about other people's motivations from a considerable distance, and it casts them as consumers of change waiting to be convinced. The stronger move is to ask the question rather than answer it. What would make this change worth it? What are the concerns? What would people need in order to succeed? The answers are more specific and more useful than anything drafted in advance, and people are far more committed to conclusions they reach themselves. Inquiry costs time and a measure of control. It buys relevance and trust, and it treats employees as producers of change rather than consumers of it.

The essence of conversation is listening and exchange, not a better-delivered monologue. And remember that what communicates loudest is behaviour. What leaders attend to, tolerate and spend their time on is read as the real message, whatever the presentation says.

4. Choose signal over noise

The antidote to static. Employee attention is the organization's most valuable asset and it deserves ruthless protection. Under pressure, organizations tumble into a vortex of complexification: information swirls, words pile up, approval cycles generate more words, and at the end of it nothing has been communicated. To communicate everything is to communicate nothing.

- Cut words, and cut channels. Retire outdated ones to create white space in the communication landscape.
- Make meetings a last resort. Eliminate, shorten or redesign the standing ones to release trapped time and energy.
- Lead with visuals. We process images far faster than words, and a simple diagram connecting the dots does more work than three paragraphs trying to.
- Apply the first rule of organizational communication: do no harm. Protect people's attention from clutter rather than competing for it.

AI belongs in this move, because static is its failure mode. It makes words cheap, and cheap words are exactly what nobody has room for. Used well it handles the routine work: summarizing consultation notes and survey comments, producing a first draft intended for substantial revision, translating, tightening, keeping documentation current.

What it cannot supply is discernment. AI output is fluent, confident and indifferent to whether it is true, timely or appropriate to say. Someone still has to decide what people are ready to hear, what should be held until it can be said honestly, and what would read as spin coming from this organization this week. That judgment sits with a person, as does the accountability for it, and the time saved is better spent there.

Part three: make it a system

None of this survives as a campaign. Campaigns are loud and brief, and change outlasts them: launches fade, conditions keep shifting, and the horsemen return the moment attention moves elsewhere. What holds is a system, and a system has three requirements.

A steady drumbeat

Communication is the drumbeat of change: a regular, predictable and reassuring cadence of connection that people can count on through the turbulence. Think of the drummer in a band. The audience rarely watches the drummer, but everyone on stage is keeping time with them, and the moment the beat falters the song starts to come apart. A predictable rhythm is itself a stabilizing message. It tells people the organization is being run by someone who is paying attention.

The drumbeat also keeps pace with the change. It quickens when decisions are landing and uncertainty runs high, and settles into a steadier pulse once people are absorbing and adjusting. What it never does is stop. In a context of uncertainty, establish certainty anchors: decide the rhythm and hold it, even when there is little news. The monthly executive note, the weekly team huddle, the standing check-in. “Nothing has moved since last week, here is what we are working on” is a message, and a reassuring one. Silence is also a message, and people fill it with the worst story available.

Clear roles

Write down who does what. Leaders own meaning. Communicators own messaging. Managers own translation, which is the daily work of connecting the change to what actually happens on a team. That middle layer is where line of sight is created or lost, so equip it properly: give managers the context before their teams get the announcement, and the standing to answer honestly rather than recite. Change leadership cannot be outsourced to a junior team or a distant function.

Sturdy leadership

A system with no steady hand at its centre is just a publishing schedule. In conditions like these, people are not looking for bravado, slogans or a five-step framework. Organizations are aching for sturdy leadership. Sturdiness is not charisma and it is not certainty. It is the visible discipline of telling the truth, holding the rhythm and staying steady when things are hard. It is what trust looks like in practice, repeated until people believe it.

Communication in a volatile environment is not a broadcast function. It is a stabilizing one, and it either builds the trust balance or draws it down. Every clear message, named boundary and kept commitment adds to it. Every piece of spin, every silence, every avoidable pile of noise takes from it.

Leaders are not watching the disruption from a safe distance. They are living inside it, carrying the same uncertainty and fatigue as everyone else, with more responsibility and fewer places to put it. You do not need to see the whole path ahead. You need enough orientation to keep moving, and enough steadiness that people are willing to stay with you.

Part of the Results Map® System, which codifies strategic communications and change: proven tools, frameworks and approaches drawn from the trenches, not the textbook.

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