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# The medium and the message: communicating effectively during a major change initiative

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**ABSTRACT** *The way in which organizations communicate with their employees during a change programme has been shown to have significant effects on the success of change initiatives, in particular on individual commitment, morale and retention. However, there have been few prior studies that have explored how organizations develop and deploy communication strategies in support of major change initiatives. In this article, we contribute to this discussion by showing how two organizations used a variety of communication strategies when implementing their change programmes and the effects these strategies had on their employees. The findings show that both the process and the content of the communication strategy are significant. In particular, the timing of change messages, matching communication strategies to the employee profile, the use of appropriate media, flexibility and the minimisation of uncertainty were especially significant. Based on our findings, we present a model of effective internal communication during the management of change programmes.*

**KEY WORDS:** Change management, communication

## Introduction

It has long been recognized that effective and appropriate communication is a vital ingredient in the success of change programmes (Lewin, 1951; Goodstein and Warner-Burke, 1991; Kotter, 1996). In particular, at the individual level, appropriate communication has been identified as a significant factor in helping employees understand both the need for change, and the personal effects of the proposed change. These have been regarded as especially important prerequisites for achieving change programme objectives, as they may help induce ‘readiness for change’ at a personal level (Armenakis and Harris, 2002; Balogun and Hope-Hailey, 2003). In addition, communication can be used to reduce resistance, minimize uncertainty, and gain involvement and commitment as the change

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progresses which may, in turn, improve morale and retention rates (Klein, 1996). At the organizational level, communication has been found to play an important role in enabling change managers to challenge embedded cultural and structural norms (Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Lok and Crawford, 1999; Pinnington and Edwards, 2000). Conversely, it has also been shown that ineffective internal communication is a major contributor to the failure of change initiatives (Coulson-Thomas, 1997).

Despite the importance accorded to effective communication, there has been relatively little prior research into the precise mechanisms that managers can use to communicate effectively with employees during a change programme. The evidence available does, however, suggest that communication needs to be context specific in order to be effective; what works well in one organization under one set of circumstances cannot necessarily be successfully applied in another (Balogun and Hope-Hailey, 2003).

Although communication has been highlighted as being of critical importance, Harkness (2000) shows that employee satisfaction with internal communication has been on a downward slope since reaching a peak of 50% in 1987. What we can surmise from this is that selecting the appropriate *method* for communication, and deciding what the *content* of that communication should be, are at the same time both extremely important and highly complex issues for change managers to address.

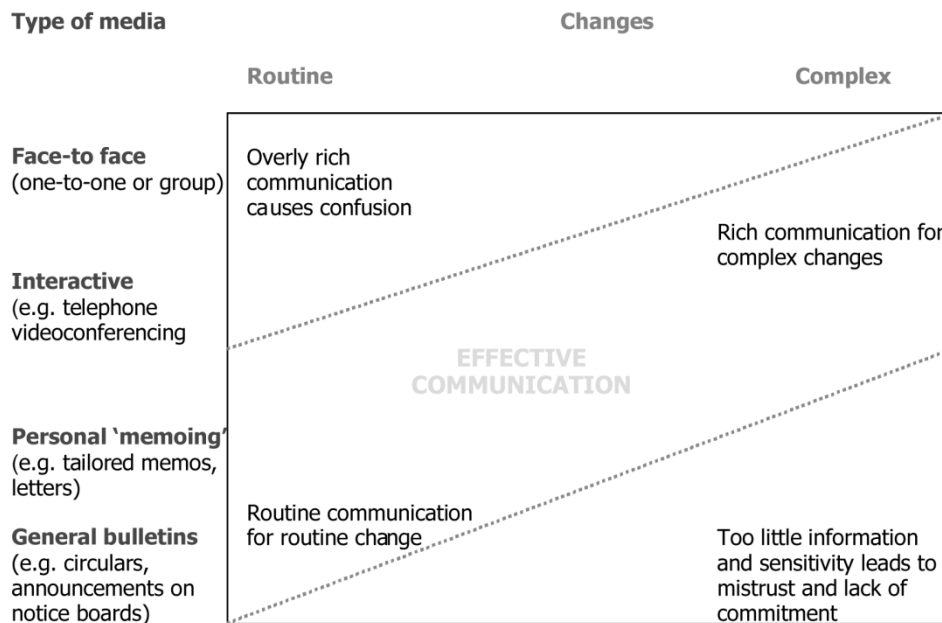
### Communication methods

Methods of communication include issues of both *timing* and *media*. In terms of timing, Klein (1996) argues that both the content and the media of communication will need to be flexed as the change programme moves through Lewin's three stages of unfreeze, move and refreeze/sustain (Lewin, 1951; Balogun and Hope-Hailey, 2003). A static communication strategy developed at the outset of a major change programme is therefore likely to become increasingly inappropriate over time. Armenakis and Harris (2002) argue that there are three communication strategies that can be used to generate readiness for change, persuasive communication, active communication and managing, or sharing information about the change. The way in which these are deployed needs to be varied according to the context of the change programme.

Concerning media, a number of choices are open to managers, including verbal, written and electronic (Klein, 1996; Pitt *et al.*, 2001). Balogun and Hope-Hailey (2003) argue that the choice of media should fit the significance and complexity of the message as well as the stage in the change process (Fig. 1).

Whichever channels are chosen, the importance of regarding communication as a two-way process has also been highlighted. Theories of communication make it clear that effective communication depends on the receiver hearing the message as intended by the sender, and the feedback loop enables both sender and receiver to check understanding (Klein, 1996; Johnson and Scholes, 2002). The role of line managers and opinion leaders as lynchpins in the communication chain has also been recognized (Klein, 1996).

In addition to the formal media available to change managers, research has also highlighted the importance of *informal communication networks* during change



**Figure 1.** Effective and non-effective communication of change [Adapted from Balogun & Hope Hailey (2003)]

programmes (Kitchen and Daly, 2002). These can develop through work-based teams or through online communication (Lok and Crawford, 1999). While social network analysis can be used in attempts to harness these groups as a communication channel, this may meet with mixed success due to the informal and spontaneous nature of such groupings (Cross *et al.*, 2002).

### Communication content

The content of communication concerns what information is conveyed *to* employees before, during and after the change initiative, as well as what information is sought *from* employees. Kitchen and Daly (2002) have identified three types of information that affect employees during change: first, what employees must know, including job-specific information; second, what employees should know, including desirable information about the organization and, finally, what employees could know, including relatively unimportant office gossip. Klein (1996) has argued that employees will want to know as much information as possible in order to minimize uncertainty.

The purpose of communication content in a change programme has variously been described as spreading a vision (Joffe and Glynn, 2002), involving employees by seeking their input into the process and content of the change (Kitchen and Daly, 2002), minimizing uncertainty (Klein, 1996), overcoming

barriers to change (Carnall, 1997), gaining employee commitment (Kotter, 1996) and challenging the status quo (Balogun and Hope-Hailey, 2003).

### **Case studies**

Previous literature on communication during a change programme has presented us with a complex and, on occasion, contradictory picture of how communication strategies may be deployed in support of a major change initiative. Our research involved case studies in two organizations that were undergoing major change, in order to gain further insight into this issue. In particular, we wanted to find out how these organizations went about communicating with their employees through the various stages of the change programme, and how effective these strategies were. We also wanted to uncover some general principles, based both on our findings and on previous research, which would be useful for managers tasked with developing communication strategies. Our research was complicated by the fact that, as Harkness (2000) has indicated, we lack appropriate and rigorous tools to measure the effectiveness of communication during change programmes, and so our approach was essentially exploratory.

Two companies were involved in the study and were chosen because they had recently been through a major change, and were willing to allow access for the research. The first, PubCo, employs around 100 people and is a public sector, non-profit organization that produces daily reports of parliamentary proceedings. Since 1997, it has experienced major change brought about by the modernization of parliament and the introduction of electronic production methods. These have been coupled with changes in the senior management team and the relocation of half the staff to a different site. Following the change programmes, staff turnover has been high, at a rate of around 20–25% pa, and turnover doubled in the six months after the change in top management in 1997. The specific change that is the focus of this study is the introduction of new working hours, which impact on employee pay and conditions, for instance, by the loss of overtime pay ('night fees'), which had formed a substantial proportion of employees' total take-home pay.

The second organization, OilCo, is an oil exploration consultancy whose business is project focused and whose staff are regularly dispersed around client sites offshore and abroad. The company is pursuing a growth strategy, and has grown by 50% by revenue in the past three years. The major change that is being investigated here is the proposed relocation of the company's London offices.

In each of the organizations, we used the following approach:

- the review of company documentation;
- unstructured interviews or electronic communication with a small number of staff (eight in PubCo and five in OilCo) to ascertain the principal issues in the change programme and to provide essential background information;
- three semi-structured interviews in each organization with senior managers to explore the design and purpose of the communication strategy;
- questionnaire of a random selection of two-thirds of employees in each organization, excluding senior management, to uncover reactions to the

change and communication strategies. Seventy questionnaires were distributed in PubCo and 31 returned, a response rate of 44%; 40 were distributed in OilCo and 15 returned, a response rate of 38%.

This level of access means that we were able to gain a good insight into the operation of the change programmes.

### **Context of change**

Both companies are niche organizations with around 100 employees. Both had been forced by external circumstances to implement a major change. In the case of PubCo, MPs had voted through new working hours, which had a knock-on effect on the staff working at the publication, without consulting departmental managers, such as the head of PubCo. In the case of OilCo, the relocation was driven by the expiry of a long lease.

Both were attempting to minimize any negative effects on productivity, efficiency, employee relations, morale and retention. Neither wished to downsize the organization as a result of the change. In this sense, they were both seeking to achieve the same goals through their change programmes, although the nature of the change programme and the characteristics of the employment settings were quite different. PubCo is a public sector, hierarchical organization, whereas OilCo operates a project-based matrix structure.

### **Communication during the change programmes**

#### *Managers' Perspectives*

At PubCo, the managers, who were all fairly new appointments, acknowledged that there was a communications deficit. They stressed that the changes had been imposed externally, that managers and staff had found out about them simultaneously, and that they had no input into the form or timing of the changes. One commented, 'everyone is reading [the report] and getting the information at the same time.' Internal communication channels were therefore used simply to inform staff that changes were imminent. The 30% of staff who would be affected financially were offered no compensation, as managers took a 'wait and see' approach. Consequently, managers had not been surprised by the negative reactions from staff, nor by the likelihood of increased turnover. The changes were announced in July 2002 and implemented in January 2003, but staff meetings were not arranged until October 2002. One manager commented, 'seeking people's reaction to change after it has occurred, while being vaguely courteous, isn't necessarily the most effective practice.'

Managers agreed that there was a lack of two-way communication during the change programme, but also felt that employees had been unresponsive to previous attempts at staff consultation. One commented, 'if people aren't involved, they shouldn't complain about the outcome.' Although the new hours would reduce pay and benefits for some staff, managers felt limited by the bureaucracy and offered no transitional arrangements: 'the change is here and we

have to implement it. The approach we will take during the transition period [is] business as usual, although with the loss of night fees, it's not business as usual.'

They felt that employees were not well informed about the changes, and further commented that teams were not explicitly recognized as a communication channel, but also argued that informal networks partially compensated for this.

There was no defined organizational strategy for communication—the three managers interviewed all favoured different media, for instance, with one preferring e-mail, another written memos and a third staff meetings and notice boards. One commented: 'there has not really been a design and we have done very little in terms of managing the change.' Another manager placed this comment in context by highlighting the relative powerlessness of PubCo senior staff in determining the content of the change: '[MP's] decisions are filtered through the management who have to implement them.' One of the reasons proffered by the managers who were interviewed for PubCo's lack of communication strategy was the company's experiences of change, prior to 1997, were so limited: 'communication is probably PubCo's greatest weakness . . . there has not really been a design and . . . [previous] change has been handled very badly.'

Managers at PubCo were aware that the changes would affect both recruitment and retention, but felt equally powerless to take steps to redress the issue. There was no evidence of a process being in place to reward or thank employees who had made a contribution to the effectiveness of the change. One concern that was expressed was that staff did not seem to realize that the managers were not able to take independent decisions on pay and benefits: 'staff feel that we are not telling them enough . . . we haven't properly conveyed the fact that we, too, don't know.'

At OilCo, on the other hand, all three managers were aware of a clear system of communication being in place. One said, 'the fact that there is a communication process . . . is extremely important.' This was felt to be necessary because of staff dispersal around client sites. One made the point that, 'management realise that the more they tell staff the more they will get out of them. An open approach stops scaremongering and people feeling insecure.' Although managers had no choice about the timing of the change, they were able to exercise discretion over the timing of communication about the change, and chose to inform staff early, two years in advance to allow time for adjustment.

A memo was sent to all staff explaining the reason for the relocation and the implications for the bonus pool of various options, and asking them for their preferences. External consultants were employed to discuss the needs of managers and staff. One senior manager commented, 'we wanted to get it right . . . the survey and consultation were like having an open forum.' The main medium used was face-to-face meetings, but also e-mail and surveys, all of which were interactive and designed to gain employees' input. A system was in place of rewarding staff whose suggestions contributed to profitability and efficiency, and individual success was celebrated. There were explicit attempts to link the richness of the communication medium to the message that was being delivered: 'there was a plan for the whole project . . . that included timely communication with staff.'

Managers felt that the proposed relocation of the head office would not adversely affect recruitment and retention, given the fact that so many key staff were not permanently located at the head office; other factors were more important to them,

such as the company's reputation. In this sense, OilCo were more fortunate in the nature of the change that they were implementing than were PubCo.

Overall, it was clear from the research that PubCo adopted a reactive and ad hoc approach using a variety of media, in contrast with OilCo who developed a more strategic approach, inviting employee involvement and consultation in a consistent manner across the organization, and incentivizing positive employee contributions.

### *Employees' Perspectives*

Most employees at PubCo had found out about the proposed change in working hours from the public Committee report, 84%, rather than directly from senior management, although 42% had heard about the change in staff meetings and 36% had heard in general emails or memos. Interestingly, 39% had heard from colleagues, which supports the comment made by one manager that the informal communication network operated effectively in PubCo.

At OilCo, employees had generally found out about the change through either staff meetings (40%) or general emails or memos (47%). 27% had heard about the change through colleagues, a significantly lower figure than at PubCo.

In terms of level of awareness of the effects of the change on personal pay, bonus and overtime, 77% of PubCo employees were not aware what these implications would be, compared with 40% at OilCo. While this high figure at PubCo was somewhat to be expected, it was, nevertheless, somewhat surprising that nearly half of OilCo employees were unaware, given the careful communication strategy that was in place.

Concerning employee consultation, only 16% of PubCo employees said that they had been consulted about the change, compared with 60% at OilCo. Again, while this low figure at PubCo was to be expected, the fact that 40% of OilCo staff did not feel they had been consulted was unexpected.

While 93% of OilCo employees said that they had been updated at different stages in the change programme, only 39% agreed at PubCo. At both OilCo and PubCo, the principal channel employees reported as having been used for updating was staff meetings—67% at OilCo and 29% at PubCo, followed by staff meetings (67% at OilCo and 40% at PubCo).

Respondents were asked whether they would like to be asked for their views on the impact of the change on their day-to-day activities: 90% at PubCo and 67% at OilCo agreed.

In the survey, we also asked employees which communication channels they would prefer (Fig. 2). At PubCo, the preferred medium was face-to-face communication in focus groups or teams, 68% (60% in OilCo); while at OilCo the preferred channel was face-to-face in staff meetings, 73%. The least preferred media in OilCo were memos, bulletins on notice boards and staff newsletters, which were mentioned by no respondents, and telephone and individual email. In PubCo, the least preferred medium was the telephone. In general, these data show that employees express a strong preference for face-to-face media in groups, rather than individual communication or written communication.

Concerning the timing of communication, 80% at OilCo and 71% at PubCo said that they had learned about changes after the event—a very surprising finding at



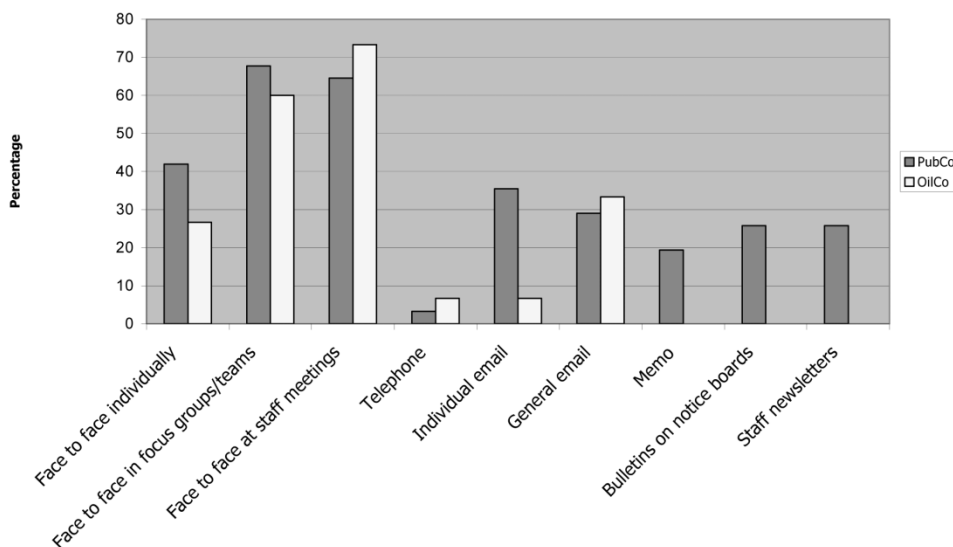


Figure 2. Preferred communication channels

OilCo. Only 23% at PubCo and 13% at OilCo reported receiving timely notification of change, and 32% at PubCo and 20% at OilCo said that they were the last to know but the first to be affected. Again, these findings were unexpected at OilCo.

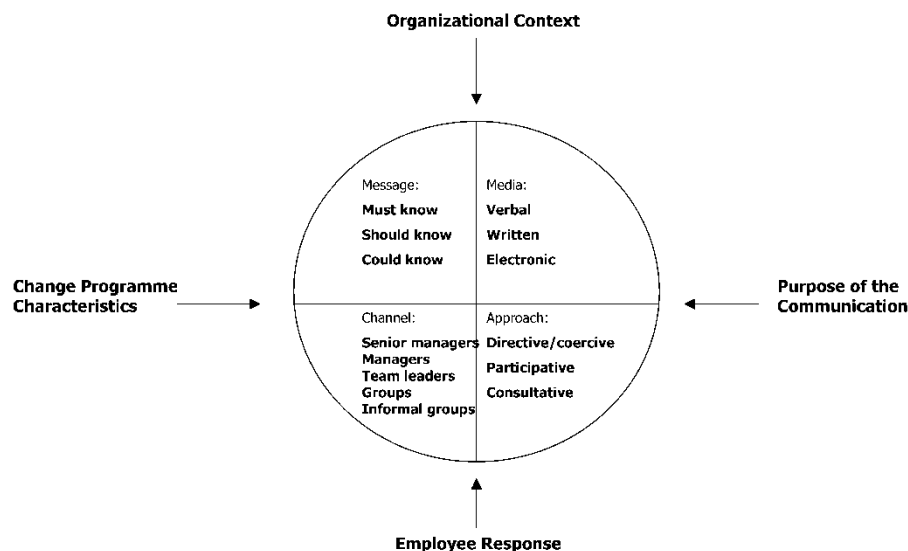
Employees were also asked to state the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a variety of statements concerning communication during the change programmes. It was interesting to note that only 26% of respondents at PubCo and 27% at OilCo felt that management were in touch with employee concerns, despite OilCo's careful communications strategy. However, 40% of OilCo respondents agreed that management always make the message clear, compared with only 10% at PubCo. Equally surprising were the responses to the statement 'others know more than I do about the changes under way,' with 65% of PubCo respondents and 80% of OilCo respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing. Only 20% at OilCo felt confident they understood how the change will affect them, compared with 39% at PubCo. Only 13% of PubCo respondents agreed that messages regarding the change and its effects on their work were clearly communicated to them, compared with 20% of OilCo employees. Only 13% at PubCo and 27% at OilCo felt the amount of communication from management about the change was adequate, and 26% at PubCo and 27% at OilCo agreed that the type of communication about the change was adequate.

## Discussion and conclusion

This research has uncovered negative views concerning communication on the part of employees in both organizations in a number of key areas, despite widely differing managerial communication strategies and policies. In general, employees in both organizations felt that they had been informed of changes *after*, rather than

before the event, that management were out of touch with employee concerns, that others were better informed than they were about the changes, and that they did not understand how the changes would affect them. Few felt that either the amount or type of communication were adequate. These findings lend support to the arguments put forward by Harkness (2000). In PubCo, these findings were perhaps not altogether surprising, given that no clear communication strategy was in place to support the change programme, and that management staff were as powerless as employees to influence the course of the change.

However, in OilCo, a clear communication strategy was in place, and there was evidence that management were sensitive to the importance of clear communication in order to ensure employee buy-in to the change. Efforts had been made to consult staff prior to the change, and a deliberate decision had been made to let staff know of the proposed change two years in advance. Reinforcement mechanisms, such as a rewards system, had been put in place to incentivize staff in relation to the change programme. This planning clearly bore fruit in four key areas, as OilCo employees reported largely positive responses to the questions on awareness of the personal effects of change; level of consultation; updating through the change programme; and clarity of the message. However, the level of negative response to the other aspects of change communication was surprising, and highlights the importance of feedback and iteration through a major change programme to ensure communication strategies are continually updated and refined to ensure maximum employee awareness and commitment. Had OilCo managers built evaluation mechanisms into their communication strategy, then they would have realised at an earlier stage that mis-communication was taking place (Klein, 1996). This was clearly reflected in the low numbers agreeing that the amount and type of



**Figure 3.** The change communication wheel

communication during the change were adequate and the high numbers saying they had learned about the change after the event.

What can managers learn from these experiences about effective communication during a change programme? In Figure 3, we present a model, the change communication wheel, which incorporates the implications of our findings from this study, together with the important elements of the literature. The wheel itself is divided into four quadrants, message, media, channel and approach. These are the four aspects of communication where change managers must make active decisions as to the best approach to adopt. This 'best approach' is dependent on four elements that are external to the wheel, the organizational context, the change programme characteristics, and the purpose of the communication and employee response. The inclusion of organizational context reflects the fact that what is appropriate in one context may well not be appropriate in another (Balogun and Hope-Hailey, 2003). This must therefore be taken into account in change programme communication design. Equally, the characteristics of the change programme itself will have significant effects on communication choices (Armenakis and Harris, 2002). In the case of OilCo, the change in question was relocation—this would require different communication strategies from a major cultural change programme. Employee response should affect the design of the communication strategy as the change progresses, allowing the approach to flex according to employee needs. OilCo did not appear to build feedback loops into their communication strategy, and therefore failed to take account of the ineffectiveness of their communications.

Finally, the purpose of the communication is a major factor. This purpose will vary over the duration of the change programme; as Klein (1996) has indicated, communication can be linked to Lewin's unfreeze-move-refreeze/sustain phases. It is therefore important for change managers to take account of the phase of the change programme in designing communication strategies. Examples of potential communication purposes include, to:

- Obtain individual buy-in.
- Obtain commitment to the change.
- Minimize resistance.
- Reduce personal anxiety.
- Ensure clarity of objectives.
- Share information/vision.
- Challenge the status quo.
- Obtain clarity.
- Minimize uncertainty.

Within the wheel itself, the first quadrant to be considered is the message. We draw on Kitchen and Daly (2002) and separate out what employees must know, should know and could know. Change managers need to be clear which pieces of information fall into which category when determining priorities. Media include written, verbal and electronic means. These media need to be considered alongside the channel that is chosen, which Klein (1996) has argued is particularly critical. Respondents in our two case study organizations favoured face-to-face verbal

communication for the main change messages, which lends support to Klein's notion of the significance of meetings at group level in communication change. However, multiple media are likely to be needed in a major change initiative (Klein, 1996). Finally, the approach has to be considered. This can vary from highly coercive to highly consultative (Balogun and Hope-Hailey, 2003). The four elements within the wheel need to be considered holistically. Perhaps one of the reasons the communication strategy adopted within OilCo only met with partial success was because of a mismatch between media and channel on the one hand, and message and approach on the other. While the media (verbal) and channel (managers, team leaders, groups) were appropriate, the approach was ultimately directive, as employees had little real choice in the matter of the relocation, and the message failed to supply employees with the information that they 'must know.'

Achieving an effective match between all four quadrants of the wheel, while taking account of the four contextual features, appears to be the main challenge facing those charged with designing change communication strategies.

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