# Communicating Change

Peter Richardson and D. Keith Denton

*Communicating organizational change is a difficult task. Many attempts at change end in failure, and many times the failure is due primarily to poor communication and lack of acceptance of the change by employees. This article examines (1) the process of communicating for change, (2) some major reasons for communication failure, and (3) a variety of successful techniques used in organizations. Empirical evidence about communicating for change is also incorporated. Finally, guidelines for managers, with particular relevance for human resource managers, to follow in effectively communicating for major changes are presented.* © 1996 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

## INTRODUCTION

It is one thing to plan for a change; it is quite another matter to implement it. In fact, more often than not, change fails. One important reason for these failures may surprise some. Larry Semeltzer (1991) highlighted the importance of communication and collaboration in his study of change in 43 organizations. The most commonly cited reason for failure of a change effort was the presence of inaccurate and negative rumors. Frequently the direct cause of these rumors was management's inability to provide timely and accurate information. The biggest reason for failure of change efforts was due to employees' learning of the change from outsiders. It seems management was more concerned with communicating with the public and with its stockholders than with its own people. Semeltzer's final reason for failure was management's reliance on "lean" channels of communications such as memos rather than using face-to-face techniques.

Glen H. Hiner, Chairman and CEO of Owens-Corning, may have put it best when he said the key to changing companies is "consistent, persistent, and repetitive communications" (1994). He went on to emphasize that when you have talked about change so many times you cannot stand to do it again, then you are probably about half way there!

Jerry Johnson, U.S. West's Vice President of network and technology services makes the point that if we are to be successful at implementing change, there must be full disclosure and honest discussion about the change. He feels it is essential to focus on collaboration and enlightened

*Human Resource Management*, Summer 1996, Vol. 35, Number 2, Pp. 203–216

CCC 0090-4848/96/020203-14

relationships (US Depts of Commerce & Labor, 1993). One reason that change requires both full disclosure and collaboration is fear. People fear change. Hiner (1994) believes it is human nature to fear change because we are comfortable with our old habits and the things we understand. What we do not understand is always more frightening that what we know. It is always that way no matter how difficult the current situation. When times are tough, the appeal to return to old ways is almost irresistible. To emphasize this point, Hiner refers to the trauma in the former Soviet Union. He feels it is the leader's responsibility to help people feel more confident, secure, and hopeful about the future. Gonring (1991) states that managers should be responsible not only for keeping their people informed but that they should be held formally accountable for that activity as one of their primary job responsibilities. He further cautions that one should never assume that employees automatically understand why a change is being made.

Organizational change can take many forms. It may involve restructuring the company, moving to more employee involvement, downsizing, being involved in a merger or an acquisition, modifying the corporate culture, or any combination of the above. Regardless of the specific change, there is always some ambiguity, doubt, anxiety, and fear associated with major changes.

## EXAMPLES OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGES AND COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES

In 1994, Delta Airlines began a major restructuring in order to better compete. It meant that a company which at one time had a policy of no furloughs, would now have to lay off several thousand people. The company leadership referred to the program as Leadership 7.5. Naturally, such a program generated enormous fear. Delta felt communication was the key to reducing fear. To combat this fear a special 800 number was established to accept comments and questions and provide current updates on the change. When the news was presented to employees, the company paper, The Delta Newsline, received more than 6,000 calls on the day of the announcement and more than 14,000 calls by the end of that week. Many of these comments were later printed in the company news magazine. Reducing fear and increasing the sense of security were important, so a special communication center was also established to handle information requests from managers and supervisors. Within hours of the initial announcement, the Senior Vice-President of Technical Operations was in a hangar responding to questions and providing information in an open forum. Within two days of the announcement there were other visits by senior management to the various Delta facilities across the country. Senior management conducted additional visits to other key facilities across the country in the following weeks. Delta also held a system-wide management conference in Atlanta on the day after the announcement to fully outline the restructuring and the programs that would be instituted. Company leaders then distributed a video presentation of the management conference to all personnel (Delta Airlines, 1994).

Tom Slocum Vice President of Corporate Communications, captured the Delta philosophy about change and communication by commenting that as the changes brought on by Leadership 7.5 and future programs develop, it will be even more important to provide employees with as much information as possible—quickly and accurately (Delta AirLines, 1994). Prompt communications are a huge challenge, especially in a company the size of Delta, but it is essential. If the organization is not successful at communicating the change, it is unlikely that the organization will be successful at implementing it. People must know what is happening and why before they can feel even somewhat confident, secure, and hopeful about the change and the future the change will bring.

In one of the few empirical investigations of the effect of communication on acceptance of change Schweiger and Denisi (1991) implemented a longitudinal field experiment with a company that was working its way through a merger. The researchers used an experimental plant where extensive communications were implemented and a control plant where typical announcements and memos were used for communicating the changes. They also were able to measure several factors at both plants at multiple time apertures: prior to anyone knowing about the change, immediately after the announcement of the change, while the change was going on, and several months after the change had occurred. Early on in the process the employees at both plants showed fairly similar patterns with high levels of uncertainty, a drop in job satisfaction, and less faith and trust in management. The major differences occurred *after* the change had happened. Three months after the announcement the group that had received extensive communication had begun to show significantly higher levels of job satisfaction, trust in management, and less uncertainty than did the control group which continued to show a decline in these factors. Communication had a long-term payoff.

The type of communications used for the experimental group was similar to what had been done at Delta Airlines. A merger newsletter was sent twice a month to every employee to update them on developments; a telephone hotline was established to answer employee questions directly; and the plant manager met weekly with the supervisor and employees of each unit to discuss issues and answer questions. The plant manager also met individually with employees when a decision was made that personally affected that employee.

Schweiger and Denisi (1991 also point out a basic irony that often faces management in change situations. During times of turmoil, when stability is being reduced, is when employees want a lot of questions answered. These are the conditions, however, under which management has the fewest answers. One cannot always predict what is going to happen, what its consequences may be, or what will develop next. In response, many managers prefer to say little so that they don't give employees erroneous information or make them feel they have been misled. The most effective strategy, would seem to be to tell employees what is known. Answer questions that can be answered and explain why others cannot be answered. Focus on areas that are especially important to the employees rather than on facts or figures that have little relevance to them. When dealing more with emotional concerns than with rational ones the communication process itself may be more important than the content of the process. The symbolic value of showing a genuine respect and caring for employee concerns and a willingness to share what is known with employees may far outweigh the fact that little substantive, factual information was really available.

Michael K. Morrison, Executive Director of Corporate Communication for Chrysler, talks about the importance of using the communication process to change corporate culture. When Chrysler went through its recent changes in culture, management felt it was important for people to focus on the common mission of the company, to use the tools of continuous improvement, and most importantly to enthusiastically embrace change. Getting people to enthusiastically embrace change is not an easy task and that is where the communication challenge enters the picture (Morrison, 1993). Like Glen Hiner, Morrison believes that change brings out fear in many people. Many see it as doing more with less. One of his employees reflected that while he didn't want to be the one to lose his job, he also didn't like being the one left behind to do all the extra work. Change is seen as a lose–lose situation. Morrison also astutely observed that most culture exists, not to embrace change, but to avoid it. Civilizations developed around families, clans, tribes, and nations. Each one creates stability and safety and functions mostly to protect against unwanted change.

Morrison believes that communicating corporate change is not the job of just the Executive Directors of Corporate Communication; the biggest responsibility rests with senior executives (Morrison, 1993). He feels people tend to emulate what the boss does. He humorously observed that it is amazing to see how many people have given up cigars at Chrysler since their former cigar-smoking CEO, Iacocca, retired. If senior management is not committed, and if that commitment is not obvious, then change will not occur. Robert Knorr (1993) agrees. He states that it is important to get a "critical mass" of people committed enough to the change to at least give it an honest chance. In the beginning this may involve as few as 20% of the total organizational population, but it must involve nearly 100% of top management. This is because top management controls the resources people will need to implement the change successfully and because they also serve as role models for the rest of the company.

Research tends to support Morrison and Knorr's opinions. Unless you walk the talk, nothing much will happen. Covin and Kilman (1990) surveyed 1,005 managers, consultants, and researchers and found that communication and widespread participation were critical to successful change. In particular, they found that it was essential for top management to demonstrate visible and consistent support for change—to model expected behavior. For instance, if the change efforts call for team building, then top managers should be the first group to try building teams.

Change requires not only that good decisions be made about how the change will affect profits, productivity, or quality, but also that these points be well communicated. Unfortunately, many executives are not good communicators. Robert Lefton, President of Psychological Associates, a consulting firm located in St. Louis, Missouri, estimates that only 10 percent of corporate chiefs are effective communicators (Rice, 1991). Other experts say that estimate is too low, but almost all agree that most executives can learn from the few who do it really well.

Lengle and Daft (1988) examined the skill of executives in choosing the appropriate communication medium for various kinds of messages. They claim many executives do not understand the relationship between the medium and communication effectiveness. Media can be considered along a continuum from lean to rich. Richness has to do with the ability to handle multiple information cues simultaneously, facilitating rapid feedback and establishing a personal focus. As one moves from impersonal notices and bulletins, to personal letters and memos, up through interactive media such as telephones and electronic mail and finally to face-to-face communications, one moves from learner to richer media. Face-to-face is by far the richest medium. Messages can be either routine or nonroutine depending upon the complexity, novelty, potential for misunderstanding, ambiguity, emotional content, and chance for surprises. Nonroutine messages have high levels of these attributes, and routine have low levels of them. Routine messages should be sent on relatively lean channels, or there is a data glut. Nonroutine messages should be sent on very rich channels, or there is data starvation. Large scale changes and implementation of company strategy are nonroutine and should be communicated through a rich medium, preferably face-to-face. Executives who were able to match their messages with the appropriate media were found to be more effective performers than were executives who mismatched their communications.

Another important point is brought out by Lengle and Daft (1988). When thinking about two-way communication it is important to consider not only what top management is communicating to employees but also what employees are communicating to top management. In a rich medium, such as face-to-face, executives have a chance to get many sensory cues about how employees are reacting and what they think. Sterile reports, statistics, and summaries of surveys tend to isolate management from realities and may give the impression that things are much more rational and under control than they really are. Lean media tend to disguise or suppress information that may require attention.

There are many ways to combine rich communication media with modeling of the behavior that management wants to encourage. Mike Walsh, CEO of Union Pacific Railroads, makes good use of interpersonal communication as a tool for change (Rice, 1991). He used communication tools to help transform Union Pacific from a fat, sluggish, hierarchical company to one that is lean and progressive. The culture was changed. Before Walsh arrived, employees routinely addressed each other as Mr. or Ms; there was very little teamwork. Now not only do people address each other on a first-name basis, but work teams are a common activity among the 29,000 employees. Walsh has strong interpersonal skills. He has been known to stand up in a town meeting format and hold the stage for up to 5½ hours while employees from 24 sites fired questions at him via satellite. With candor he answers questions ranging from job security to workplace safety.

Jaguar Automotive has had middle managers listen to taped interviews with unhappy customers about problems, poor service, etc. and then worked one-on-one with managers in techniques to implement changes. Procter and Gamble distributed a 30-minute tape of toll-free calls that came into its complaint line for its managers to listen to and share (Lengle & Daft, 1988). Such approaches have much more impact and get the message across much better than showing or talking about survey results that are so far removed from the context. Deere-Hatachi and USG Corporation held rather informal meetings over breakfast or lunch between small groups of employees and the CEO (Gonring, 1991). Mattel's CEO, John Amerman, once used a rap routine backed by a group of secretaries called the Rappettes to announce quarterly results (Rice, 1991). While verbal showmanship is not necessary, sincere devices to expand and call attention to full communication are.

James F. Orr III, CEO of UNUM Corporation invited all 5,500 employees to sound off to him via their electronic mail system. He then sat down at night with the day's messages and often answered them with a personal phone call the next day (Rice, 1991). The one thing Walsh, Amerman, and Orr have in common is an interest in communication and an ability to carry it through. Walsh says a CEO must be visible, vulnerable, and willing to put himself on the line (Rice, 1991). Care must be taken to make sure that the message is being heard.

"I've learned that just because you think it, write it, or say it, doesn't mean employees hear it or believe it," says J. Stark Thompson, CEO of Life Technologies (Rice, 1991, p. 112). Employees believe what they see, not what is said. If there is little trust, no amount of talking is going to help. It is not really that difficult; it just requires forethought and respect.

## INVOLVING ALL LEVELS OF MANAGEMENT IN COMMUNICATION

Michael Morrison says when Chrysler implemented its changes, the importance of simple principles such as "tell your people first." were learned. Semeltzer states that the biggest reason for failure of change was employees learning of the change from outsiders. Members of Chrysler's management team knows the importance of keeping their people informed so they regularly use broadcast fax and computer networks to get the news to the plant floor before it shows up in the local paper. Morrison (1993) emphasizes that it is really the effort and not the technique that matters. It is essential to make the effort to let your people know, even if the news is sometimes a little late. If employees see the company is making an effort that often is enough.

How much information an employee is privy to depends on the type of organization. Some organizations operate as a "you need to know this" type of organization while others are more of "it's a need to know—and you don't need to know it" organization. Certainly, it is wise to keep everyone informed of anticipated changes. This means changes in job requirements technology, methods, procedures, and so forth. Where possible it is also wise to include information as to what knowledge, skills, and abilities will be needed to meet these changes (Ackerman, 1991).

Who should provide employees with this type of information also varies, depending on what type of change is being implemented. At Chrysler, employees told management they would like to receive it from their supervisor. Once management realized that employees wanted to hear of changes from their supervisors rather than from someone else, it became a matter of determining what media to use to get the message to them. It also meant they would need to train their supervisors to know what to do and how to handle the feedback process.

Gonring (1991) reports similar experiences from other companies: Supervisors are the key link in the chain. Employees want interpersonal communication, and they expect most of it to come from their supervisors. Hewlett-Packard does rely on supervisors to be this important communication link. The company provides all employees with adequate baseline information, but they also give supervisors extra information and count on them to carry it to the employees in an interpersonal face-to-face fashion. Gonring reiterates the importance of educating and supporting supervisors and middle managers in their expanded communication role.

Studies by Porras and Hoffer (1986) have shown that certain behaviors are critical in organization change programs. They found that openly communicating (sharing intentions, listening) and collaborating (making decisions in teams) were the behaviors most related to success. If one listens to the stories of those who have gone through successful change, the same themes are heard time and again—communication and collaboration.

At Chrysler, senior executives including the chairman and president, hold regular town hall meetings (approximately two hours) with 200 or so employees at a time. The first ten minutes of the meeting time usually all reserved for management remarks; the remaining time is devoted to questions and answers; Morrison (1993) emphasizes that nothing is off-limits. These meetings began at Chrysler in 1989 because of the massive cost cutting that required employee cooperation and collaboration. In the beginning they were formally scheduled and coordinated through their Corporate Communications and Human Resources Departments. Today, management at Chrysler holds many such meetings, but they are less coordinated and less formal. Morrison sums it up by saying they happen all the time and are simply a part of the new culture.

The impetus of these meetings is to get the information to their people quickly. As noted earlier, Chrysler discovered its employees wanted to receive their information from their supervisors. Corporate earnings are now released to supervisors at the same time that they go to the media. That way supervisors can announce the company's earnings during employee break times. Morrison admits that employees were not waiting with bated breath for the news on corporate earnings. He feels, however, that information—any information—comes via their supervisor, that is the real message.

Receiving information through internal channels, rather than through the car radio, is not a trifling concern. Semeltzer's studies cited earlier show the major cause of failure of change was employees learning of it through external sources. The car radio and the external media are, however, only symptoms of a problem, not the cause of poor communication. Some companies even use the external media in their change efforts. Real communication comes from deeds, not messages. The organization has to show change, not just describe it. It's as simple as ABB.

## SUCCESSFUL CHANGE—A CASE STUDY

ABB stands for ASEA Brown Boveria, a company truly global in nature with sales in Europe, Asia, Australia, and the Americas. It is a giant electrical engineering company whose business encompasses a wide range of products primarily related to the generation, transmission, distribution, and efficient use of electricity. The ABB Group was formed in 1988 through the merger of the Swedish ASEA and the Swiss BBC. The merged Company is made up of five business segments containing 50 business areas and over 200,000 employees. It has revenues of over $29 billion United States dollars. Its process of change began in the early 1980s. For several years it had had an ongoing comprehensive program of change that began in the Spring of 1990; it was called T50, referring to their time reduction goal. "T" is for time and "50" is for an average percentage reduction of lead times expected through their change efforts. The goal was to make enough improvements and change to reduce lead time and cycle times by 50 percent.

When the members of ABB management began the change, they made what some would call a controversial move. They decided to let the public know about their T50 program **before** it had achieved any results—a risky move but one they felt was worth taking. Unlike Chrysler, they felt that communication to employees through the external media sends a strong signal. It was seen as a strong motivating factor. Obviously, good communication depends as much on how something is said as well as what and who says it. In ABB's case, management felt it would show employees their resolve at making the program work, that if the announcement of the T50 program had come through internal channels it would not have had the impact it did when it came through external ones. It was a way for managers to put their reputations on the line. They also made sure they "walked the talk" by having each of their many companies assign one member of the Senior Management Team for T50 responsibilities. T50 is also a permanent item on the board meeting agenda.

Showing management commitment was only one of the reasons top managers decided to publicize their T50 process. The other was that they saw an opportunity to reach important parties such as their customers, suppliers, potential employees, shareholders, and the general public. Managers worked to create the impression that ABB was a vital, cutting-edge organization; their strategy from a PR standpoint seems to have worked. At last count, well over 200 major positive inserts have appeared in daily papers, business magazines, union press, radio, and television. A book has also been written about them.

Did the change work? By the end of 1993 on average a 50 percent reduction of all cycle times with Swedish ABB Group had been reached. Starting in 1994, the T50 program aimed to focus more on the traditional white collar and specialists work. Numerous examples of successful stories abound. At their ABB Coiltech location top managers used team management and training to reduce order cycle time; this has dropped from 22 days to 5 days. At another location, Cewe AB in Nyköping, Sweden, throughput times from order to delivery were reduced from 33 days to 5 days; productivity increased by 25 percent, and absence dropped from nearly 20 percent to 5 percent. To a large measure, T50 has been successful because management was able to communicate the need to change and to build support for it.

In June 1990, ABB Sweden arranged two "awareness meetings" that were attended by four hundred company executives and union representatives. At that meeting, then-President Bert-Olof Svanholm called the T50 effort probably their most important task of the decade. The support from upper management was unmistakable. Their first task at these meetings was to create a need for change. People had to become uncomfortable with the status quo. Management focused on threats to the company's survival such as increasing costs without corresponding increases in productivity. They talked about the high turnover of personnel, absenteeism problems, and the difficulties of recruiting young people to industrial work.

Threats alone are never enough to create change; there has to be a way to meet the challenges that are causing the threats. In the case of ABB the way to meet the challenges was T50. Their strategy was clear; they reasoned that by creating exacting time-oriented objectives the organization would be forced to examine the whole of its production processes. They believed that when focus is put on the time it takes to accomplish a task, process, etc., it forces simplification of routines and increases parallel activities. Fast responses, while retaining quality, can be achieved only if employees have the capability both to identify and to analyze problems. These same employees must be given the powers to decide on a solution. The rationale for the change and what it would take to do it were clearly thought out and explained at this meeting. They would then lay the foundation for change by building support for it.

Testimonials were provided to support their change efforts. One such case involved one of their companies, ABB Control, which assembles electrical push buttons. In 1988 the unit was suffering from productivity problems and had an average delivery time of 12 days. Turnover of personnel was 39 percent, and too many of the employees were physically worn out by monotonous work. They knew they needed to change. Although ABB Controls' change efforts were started before the T50 program was conceived, the methods used were the same as were anticipated for T50. By June of 1990, ABB Control had implemented these changes and was then looking back on one and one half years of success. The center of the change revolved around teams that had wide responsibility—starting from the time an order was placed and ending when the invoice was mailed to the customer. Teams handled the supply of materials, quality control, administration of time cards, and so on. As ABB Control gained experience with the change, the content of the work changed *and* the responsibility and power given to teams increased. As a result of these changes, cycle time was reduced from 12 days to 1 day; rejections fell from 15 to 1 percent; on-time deliveries increased from 10 to 98 percent; personnel turnover fell from 39 to 0 percent; absenteeism went from 14 to 8 percent; and productivity increased by 15 percent. Those results sent a strong message about change.

Management recognized the need to build on its successes and thus isolated several locations for pilot studies. These T50 pilot studies were initially important as trend setters, but their importance diminished as other ABB sectors started their own programs. After the initial awareness meetings were so successful, management decided to repeat them. Half-day seminars were conducted at five different locations. These meetings involved two thousand managers and supervisors. ABB also conducted orientations aimed at employees in Purchasing, Quality, Personal Sales, and other areas. They were showing change, not just describing it.

The T50 program was also a hot subject on the agenda of ABB's three-day-long Central Management Seminar which reached over 300 managers. It was a regular issue discussed at quarterly meetings with the Presidents of the various ABB companies. Employees were continuously informed about T50 through various corporate company publications. In December of 1990, a brochure describing the T50 program and a one page personnel policy related to the new program were mailed to all employees. The extensive communication effort of ABB was a key factor in making T50 so successful.

## THE GRAPEVINE

It would be hard to find another company that made such extensive use of formal and informal communication modes as did ABB. It was a smart move. Semeltzer (1991) showed that the most commonly cited reason for failure of change efforts was the presence of inaccurate and negative rumors. The grapevine has worked its destructive force on many a change. Schweiger and Denisi (1991) comment that if management denies rumors that have just a grain of truth to them, employees' faith in the honesty of management is severely compromised. Granted, the grapevine is always around, especially in times of change, but it does not have to be a negative force. Consider how Chrysler put it to good use.

Morrison (1993) points out that Chrysler used the standard communication vehicles—newspapers, bulletins, videos, and meetings—to communicate its change. But, managers also used one that a lot of companies have ignored. Chrysler management was convinced that rather than just telling people about change, they must discover it. In communicating change, *the grapevine* is the most important channel of all. The grapevine only reports actions; it transmits what it sees and hears. Morrison explains that the CEO, Bob Eaton, stopped in at the customer relations department one day, put on a headset, and fielded questions and complaints from their customers for almost an hour. Their customers did not know to whom they were talking, but the grapevine did. Soon it was all over the company that he had taken the time to sit and listen to complaints.

Eaton's vision was and is focused clearly on quality. He let it be known that quality is the only thing that matters. When he visited a plant involved in a launch of a new model he was given a presentation that began by reviewing cost, line speed, number of units produced, and so on. In the middle of it he suddenly stopped them. "I don't want to know any of that—all I want to talk about is quality." Morrison, in recalling the incident, said he learned of it from the grapevine, even though he is supposed to be the head of corporate communication.

The grapevine will tell you how you are doing in communicating your vision. It will tell you what is really being communicated because it communicates deeds, not messages. It shows what has changed and what is simply talk.

Formal communication assessments should also be made. Gonring (1991) suggests using some combination of communication audits, focus groups, interviews, and mail or telephone surveys to find out what is on employees' minds. They will help you find out what the concerns are, what is required to get employees involved, and what the barriers to participation might be. This information can then help drive the subsequent communication strategy. Knorr (1993) recommends using a survey or similar communication approach to establish a baseline of employees level of awareness, attitude toward the project, and reactions of anxiety and fear. These results can be used as a snapshot of position and what kind of communication needs to be done. A second survey can be implemented later to show progress and to help revise the communication strategy as needed. It is essential, especially with large-scale projects to have monitoring and tracking mechanisms in place to measure progress.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMAN RESOURCES

Extensive communication is essential to change efforts, but as we noted earlier, real communication comes from deeds, not from messages. The research by Covin and Kilman (1990) showed that the behavior essential for successful change is for top management to demonstrate visible and consistent support for it. Lengle and Daft (1988) and Knorr (1993) echo that sentiment. In ABB's case the leadership was trying to model the team management concept so they created a T50 oversight team that reported directly to an Executive Vice President. In fact, the Vice President personally spent about half of his time involved in the program. ABB pushed this support down through its organizations. At each of its companies a member of senior management was assigned to oversee the change. He or she was responsible as liaison officer between the company and its T50 teams.

If a change is to be permanent, it must touch all aspects of the organization. Strategic plans and budgets must reflect the cost of change. Revenue related to the change needs to be continuously assessed. It also takes a commitment to consistently, persistently, and repetitively apply the change. It is important to show what the change sounds like, looks like, and feels like. If the communication is not timely or accurate, there will be problems. If people feel left out, there will be problems. It requires much face-to-face communication. People have to feel confident, secure, and hopeful about the change. Only then can corporate cultures be changed. The behavior must be modeled—be it quality, team-building, or speed. People believe what they see, not what they hear.

The cases and studies reviewed in this article suggest a number of general guidelines that management should follow in effectively communicating for organizational changes. These carry particular relevance for human resources managers because of their heavy involvement in the implementation of change; they may often be responsible for the bulk of the communication effort. It may also be the responsibility of the human resources manager to convince top management of the need and importance of all the points listed below:

1. Show wholehearted and visible support for the change from all of top management.

2. Give employees as much information as possible as early as possible.

3. Continue the communication effort throughout and even after the change not just at the beginning.

4. Use "rich" communication media. The more face-to-face opportunities, the better. If this must be limited consider satellite hook-ups, teleconferences, or other interactive ways of staying in touch with your people.

5. Utilize supervisors and middle managers as key communication links. Encourage, train, and hold them accountable for keeping employees informed and providing a lot of interpersonal communication regarding the changes.

6. Recognize and be willing to deal with the emotional issues as well as the rational ones. Be prepared to deal with anxiety, fear, uncertainty, and mistrust. Openness, group meetings, toll-free telephone lines, and frequent newsletters can help. Do not let top management isolate itself from these nonrational aspects.

7. Involve employees in the change process and in decisions about change as much as is possible.

8. Use formal communication assessments to establish baselines, direct communication strategies, and monitor progress as the change unfolds.

9. Make sure that actions match words. The symbolic and behavioral communication of management is more important than is its rhetoric.

*Peter Richardson, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Management at Southwest Missouri State University and an Industrial/Organizational Psychologist. His areas of specialization are organizational behavior and human resources management. He has numerous publications and often serves as a consultant and trainer for regional organizations.*

*D. Keith Denton is professor and Distinguished Scholar of management at Southwest Missouri State University, a widely experienced business consultant, and the author of 12 books and over 100 articles dealing with subjects such as empowerment, the high-involvement workplace, redesigned work, and flat, flexible, fast organizations.*

## REFERENCES

Ackerman, L. (1991). Whose ox is being gored. *HR Magazine,* 96.

Covin, T. J., & Kilman, R. H. (1990). Participant perceptions of positive and negative influences on large scale change. *Group and Organizational Studies, 15,* 233–248.

Delta Air Lines. (1994, May 6). Communications pose special challenge. *Delta Air Lines News Digest, 9,* 11.

Gonring, M. P. (1991). Communication makes employee involvement work. *Public Relations Journal, 47*(40), 38–40.

Hiner, G. H. (1994, February 11). Corporate change to face the challenges of global competition. Presented at *'Cadena Del Exito 1994',* an Executive Meeting hosted by Vitro, S. A., Monterrey, Mexico, 4.

Knorr, R. D. (1993). A strategy for communicating change. *Journal of Business Strategy, 14,* 18–21.

Lengle, R. H., & Daft, R. L. (1988). The selection of communication media as an executive skill. *Academy of Management Executive, 2,* 225–232.

Morrison, M. K. (1993, December 10). Communicating total quality: solutions for operational effectiveness. *The Conference Board Communications Workshop* in Chicago, Illinois, 1–5.

Porras, J. I., & Hoffer, S. (1986). Common behavior changes in successful organization development effort. *Journal of Applied Behavior Science, 22,* 477–494.

Rice, F. (1991, June 3). Champions of communication. *Fortune,* 111–120.

Schweiger, D. M., & Denisi, A. S. (1991). Communicating with employees following a merger: a longitudinal field experiment. *Academy of Management Journal, 34,* 110–135.

Semeltzer, L. R. (1991). An analysis of strategies for announcing organization wide change. *Group and Organization Studies, 16,* 5–24.

U.S. Department of Commerce and U.S. Department of Labor (1993, July 26). *Workplace of the Future: A Report of the Conference of the Future of the American Workplace.*