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Abstract

Globalisation, "glocalisation", deregulation, privatisation, mergers, acquisitions and a movement of labour toward less expensive economic locations, coupled with revolutionary advances in technology and simultaneous empowering of consumers coupled with changes in demand – are among the revolutionary forces impacting organisations around the world. In this dynamic context, organisations need to re-evaluate their purpose and *raison d'être*. This evaluative process will help them to decide which changes: strategic or operational, will have to be made in order to perpetuate survival and growth. While, undoubtedly, organisations realise the importance of good communications, they often find it hard to forge the link between "what gets said" and "what gets done". Aims, initially therefore, to explore the nature of the link between change, change management and internal communications. Ultimately aims to explore how internal communications contribute to the "successful" implementation of change management programmes. Develops as a theoretical contribution in the domains mentioned. As such, the authors would welcome comments and debate from colleagues with an interest in the fields of internal communication and change management.

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Introduction

This paper explores the link between internal communication and the successful implementation of change management programmes. It aims to provide a significant theoretical foundation in preparation for a major empirical study in the associated areas to be conducted in 2001. As such, we invite questions, debate, and expressions from learned colleagues in cognate areas.

Twenty-first century organisations have high on their strategic and operational agendas a preoccupation with the concept of change. This is because of many issues which either have impacted or will impact on organisational performance. These include such issues as: globalisation, "glocalisation", deregulation, privatisation, mergers, acquisitions, the movement of labour toward less expensive economic locations, revolutionary advances in technology; and, empowering of consumers coupled with changes in demand patterns. These are all indicative of a new dynamic revolutionary business environment. Micklethwait (1999) reminds us that managers should: "start with the presumption that in business, even more than politics, the only constant is change". Today, the riskiest of all strategies is "inaction" (Wind and Main, 1999). Despite these well-articulated statements, however, the failure rate for management programmes intended to implement change can run as high as 70 per cent (Senge *et al.*, 1999; Patterson, 2000). To this Gilsdorf (1998) adds that "organisations, relying on human beings to create and deliver products and services, lose serious money and see productivity eroded when errors are made". Gilsdorf contends that many mistakes in change management programmes can be linked directly to, and have causal connections with, breakdowns in communication.

Factors such as – maintaining the status quo, success or failure, survival and growth, and many others, are all addressed in the management literature concerning change , as is the need for managers to understand what drives change and how change can successfully achieved. But, is it just as important to ask questions such as:

- Why do change management programmes frequently go wrong?
- How can failure be avoided?

- How can the risks associated with change be reduced?

It is within the context of these questions that the role of internal communication will be explored.

Identifying key factors involved in organisational survival and growth

Management of knowledge, employees and internal communication are all identified in current business management literature as being instrumental in terms of organisational survival and growth. With regard to the first of these factors, knowledge, Stewart (1997) comments "you would be hard pressed to find a single industry, a single company, a single organisation of any kind, that has not become more 'knowledge intensive', dependent on knowledge as a source of what attracts customers and clients". Drucker (1993) earlier had argued that in the new economy, knowledge is not just another resource alongside the traditional factors of production, i.e. land, labour and capital but is the only meaningful resource, "the knowledge worker is the single greatest asset". The link between knowledge and the employee was further expanded by Grant (1997) who claims that "if knowledge is the pre-eminent productive resource, and most knowledge is created by and stored within individuals, then employees are the primary stakeholders. The principle management challenge ... is establishing mechanisms by which co-operating individuals can co-ordinate their activity in order to integrate their knowledge into productive activities". This supports Porter's (1985) views that "human resource management affects competitive advantage ... and in some industries it holds the key to competitive advantage". Managing people successfully requires communication, and according to Hargie and Tourish (1993) the quality of communication between the people who make up an organisation is "a crucial variable determining organisational success". Some writers have even identified a positive link between the flow of information within an organisation and levels of absenteeism and productivity (Schweiger and Denisi, 1991). In essence, "internal communication is so entwined with the process of organising and with organisational structure, environment, power, and culture that many theorists of organisational communication argue that organisations would not exist without communication" (Grunig, 1992). Therefore , internal communication is not only a crucial variable in relation to achieving organisational success, it is also a precursor for organisational existence as well.

Understanding the concepts of change management and internal communication

In order to understand the interrelationship between change management and internal communication, it is important first to understand each topic in its own right. From such an analysis it can then be seen how both subjects interlink with each other.

Change management

According to Burnes (1992), "change management is not a distinct discipline with rigid clearly defined boundaries. Rather, the theory and practice of change management draws on a number of social science disciplines and traditions." A great deal has been written about change management, both from a theoretical and applied perspective. This is because, while change management is not a specific discipline, it acknowledges the reality that organisations operate in changing environments. Organisations and their staff also want to know how they can cope, with and capitalise on, change. But, ironically people "both fear and seek change" (Senge, 1990). So like a crisis, change presents both risk and opportunity. Also, change is endemic and according to Quirke (1995) "change" can be added to the other two certainties in life – taxes and death.

The study of organisational change is at the very core of management and organisational behaviour: it can "take many forms, it can be planned or unplanned, incremental or radical, and recurrent or unprecedented" (Cooper and Argyris, 1998). Whether change is continuous or discontinuous depends upon the business environment. Continuous change assumes gradual shifts in factors such as consumer demand, government legislation, or the general state of the economy. This allows organisations to strategise and plan in a "proactive purposeful" manner as described by Gaddis (1997). But discontinuous change is much more dramatic and can alter the nature of whole industries and economies beyond recognition. Examples of such change would include the transformation of the former Eastern European block countries to Western style democratic capitalism in the late 1980s (Clarke and Clegg, 1998). Such radical change requires a greater innovative responsiveness (Gaddis, 1997). Handy (1991) felt that change was becoming more discontinuous and may even transform the rules of competition and the utilisation of resources within any given business sector. Thus, it is evident that the "business environment has become less predictable, with more frequent unknowns that are less readily subject to rational interpretation" (Clarke and Clegg, 1998) The challenge for today's is not so much to plan for change but to learn to live with it, anticipate it, and where possible – capitalise on it.

At an organisational level, businesses have always been preoccupied with change as managers try to find ways of capitalising on opportunities created by economic and technological developments. Undoubtedly, all organisations are faced with change, but some are perceived to operate in more dynamic environments than others. For example, consider the business environments of the fledgling "dot.coms", enterprises who were displacing traditional bricks and mortar businesses from London's *FT* 100 share index in the early part of 2000, while having limited apparent asset values and non existent profits (*The Economist*, 2000a). There are also many examples of companies who became "blinded by success" and failed to notice that the market was changing around them (Cope, 2000; Heller, 1998, pp. 53-5; McDonald, 1998). Or, put another way strengths that helped build organisations subsequently become part of the reason for organisational decline. So, change management means much more than changing organisational charts, it means changing the very nature of organisations and the way(s) in which they do business (Murdoch, 1997). Change management implies an ongoing attempt to understand industry dynamics which businesses must operate in, as well as the organisation's own internal dynamics. Based on this understanding, management must proactively manage the resources it has in such a way as to satisfy market and organisational needs in the case of commercial enterprises. Managers must also recognise – and set up the data-gathering techniques and systems to spot the opportunities and constraints imposed upon the company by the business environment. So "change within an organisation takes place both in response to business and economic events and to processes of managerial perception, choice and actions" (Pettigrew, 1985).

Knowing what drives change and what impinges on organisational ability to manage change is also important. Gilgeous (1997) presents the following external and internal factors as reasons for the initiation of change programmes within organisations:

- *External factors*. New technology, changes in the marketplace, changing customer expectations, competitor activities, quality and standards, government legislation and prevailing political values and economic cycles.
- *Internal factors*. These relate to management philosophy, organisational structure, culture as well as the systems of internal power and control.

Gilgeous (1997) further argued that as the relations alter between these factors the organisation realises the need for change. But this, in itself does not illustrate the complexity of relationships between these factors or indeed their constant state of flux. Dawson (1994) reflects this to a certain degree when he suggests that external and internal triggers of change are, in fact, interdependent.

Matheson and Matheson (1998), in their research into effective organisations, summarised the factors that impede the successful implementation of change management programmes under the following headings:

- internal focus;
- lack of credibility;
- secrecy;
- lack of proper skills;
- lack of resources;
- lack of discipline;
- lack of strategy;
- metrics are misused;
- tendency to oversimplify;
- people are reluctant to change;
- power and politics.

However, many of these factors, highlight how pivotal employees are in relation to effective change management.

As Pfeffer (1978) notes, "organisations are political systems, coalitions of interest and rationality defined only with respect to unitary and consistent ordering of preferences". It is when the status quo or balance is upset by change or the prospect of change that politics within an organisational context can be deployed to frustrate the process. Mintzberg (1983) though took a more benign attitude to the organisational political process, maintaining that when political games are used in moderation, they can be healthy at keeping the entity on its toes.

The factors outlined by Matheson and Matheson (1998) essentially look at how information concerning change is disseminated within organisations and how that information may be interpreted by employees. For many organisations, however, this process is not a positive one with many corporate change programmes having a "distinct tilt" towards failure (Kotter, 1996). For Kotter, communicating to employees the need for change and how it can be achieved is critical to the successful management of change. Indeed employees or how they are engaged in the change process is often portrayed as the determining factor in whether organisational change is achieved or not (Peters and Waterman, 1982; Porter, 1985; Kanter, 1983; Heller, 1998; Clarke and Clegg, 1998). This is partly because "employees are among those groups that are crucial to an organisation. Depending on their perception of the organisation they will communicate positive or negative messages to other important members and coalitions inside and outside the firm as well. These external publics, constituencies or stakeholders may include community members, key influentials, financial groups, politicians, and consumer groups" (Kitchen, 1997). Argenti (1998) goes further by stating that "once a company has lost the faith and goodwill of its employees, it faces an uphill battle as it tries to correct its errors and rebuild credibility with the very people who hold the future of most corporations in their grasp". Heller (1998) also points out that regardless of what drives change within an organisation, managers must realise that "remedies won't work, unless the re-engineers [change programme managers] can re-engineer the most crucial element of all: themselves".

Given that organisations operate in environments which are in a state of dynamic flux, facing tomorrow's problems requires a fresh outlook or even "creative upside-down thinking". New ways of thinking about familiar things can release new energies and make all manner of things possible (Handy, 1991). So change is not just about how people act, but it is also about how they think as well. This forms a basis for the link between change management in organisations and internal communication with the people responsible for making those changes happen. "An organisation is, after all, a collection of people and what the organisation does is done by people" (March and Simon, 1958).

Internal communication

Interestingly, definitions and discussions concerning internal communication do not abound in either the academic or practitioner literature, but the function is widely discussed under the headings of employee communication (Argenti, 1998), organisational communication (Grunig, 1992) and corporate or business communication (Kitchen, 1997; Rawlins, 1993; Oliver, 1997). But the main thrust remains the same, in an ever-changing business environment, "as companies become more focussed on retaining a happy [effective] workforce with changing values ... they [organisations] have necessarily had to think more now than in the past about how they communicate with employees through what is also often called internal communication" (Argenti, 1998). But flatter organisational structures, permanent, temporary, contract and casual employees have meant that "identifying who belongs and who does not" is becoming more difficult (Daymon, 1999). This is further compounded by the fact that organisations have both formal and informal structures (Rosengren, 2000) through which information is disseminated. According to Pearson and Thomas (1997) effective communications means that managers must also take cognisance of what employees:

- *Must know*. Key job-specific information.
- *Should know*. Essential but desirable organisational information, e.g. changes in senior management.
- *Could know*. Relatively unimportant or office gossip.

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All of which makes the task of effective communication within organisations even more challenging.

Communication is regarded as a key issue in the successful implementation of change programmes because it is used as a tool for announcing, explaining or preparing people for change and preparing them for the positive and negative effects of the impending change (Spike and Lesser, 1995). Internal communication can also increase understanding of the commitment to change as well as reducing confusion and resistance to it (Lippitt, 1997). Grunig (1992) goes further by stating that "internal communication ... is the catalyst if not the key to organisational excellence and effectiveness".

Based on the fact that internal communication is recognised in literature as having a role in the implementation of change management programmes, it is now important to understand what factors impede or facilitate effective communication within an organisation.

Organisations require different approaches to internal communication and factors that need to be considered include: type of business, size of business, organisational culture, managerial style, financial resources, staff and the stability or volatility of the business environment (Kitchen, 1997). Also according to Harshman and Harshman (1999) communication within organisations is a key factor in influencing how well organisations perform. Hall (1980) goes further to state that "high on the diagnostic checklist of corporate health is communication". An observation which is backed up by Lyden and Klengale's (2000) research. They discovered that numerous symptoms of declining organisational health exist. The major symptoms are common:

- declining profits;
- decreasing productivity;
- increasing absenteeism;
- barriers to open communication;
- all decision making is at the top of the managerial pyramid;
- lack of employee commitment to the organisation;
- low levels of motivation and morale;
- the reputation of the organisation is ignored by employees;
- existence of unethical behaviour;
- lack of goal setting;
- lack of mentoring;
- lack of development and training programmes;
- lack of trust among employees.

To assess the prevalence of such "organisational health " problems, the authors recommend examining 11 separate but related dimensions, which are listed below, by asking employees about their perceptions pertaining to each dimension:

(1) internal communication;
(2) employee participation and involvement;
(3) employee loyalty and commitment;
(4) staff morale;
(5) institutional reputation;
(6) ethics;
(7) recognition of employees' contribution;
(8) alignment of corporate, department, team as well as individual goals;
(9) leadership;
(10) employee development opportunities;
(11) resource utilisation.

Answers to these issues will help identify difficulties within organisations that are employee centered – what they think, what they do, and where and how informal communication takes place.

DeGreene (1982) cites many difficulties which result in communication problems within organisations. These include transmission problems such as one-sided (especially downward) communication processes; suppression of information; mistakes in the facts being communicated; the grapevine and rumour mill, and purposeful distortion. He also states that receivers of information may misinterpret information given, purposefully, or they simply may not be listening. But these factors do not reflect the complexities of the environment that organisations work in and how they impact on the communication processes within organisations. Even the type of language used with different employees or groups of staff will impact on the efficacy of a company's internal communication. "In brief, words and the meanings they create and convey matter. They matter a great deal" (Marshak and Keenoy, 2000) But Alvesson *et al.*'s (2000) research into discourse analysis within the organisational context does highlight some research problems in this area. "The great majority of empirical studies treat language in a simplistic, uncritical and misleading way. Efforts to produce and check reliable measures rarely involve any deeper reflections on the nature of language" (Alvesson *et al.*, 2000).

Another issue of importance within the realm of employee communication is the rules used for communicating within a firm. Research by Gilsdorf (1998) highlighted that 20 per cent of specific types of communication problems "could have been prevented or solved by communication policy guidelines". Other issues raised in this study showed that participants believed that poor managerial oversight and the inappropriateness of cues from the corporate culture also created problems. These factors, at least in this study, had resulted in falls in profitability and decline in terms of organisational effectiveness.

Bratton and Gold (1999) outline what they see as imperatives for successful organisational communication in today's business world. They stress that:

- communicating is fundamental to the process of organising;
- understanding organisational communication provides insights into management strategies;
- there should be commitment from senior management to communication;
- effective leadership skills encompass communication skills;
- management should take responsibility for devising and maintaining the communication system;
- a combination of written and face-to-face channels is best;
- messages should be perceived to be relevant to employees;
- messages should be consistent with actions;
- training in communication skills increases the effectiveness of the system;
- the communication system should be monitored and evaluated.

The above observations highlight what essentially is a common sense approach to good internal communication. But Neher's (1997) model of organisational communication given in Table I looks more deeply at the factors that effect the efficacy of internal communication from five perspectives: context, shape and form, messages, methods and modalities of communication and then the resultant activities.

Table I A model of organisational communication

Context
Organisations exist in a context provided by:
Environment – history (time) – ecology
Culture
Technology
Material and economic conditions
Purposes and goals
People or members
Shape and form
These factors largely influence:
Organisational culture
Patterns of interaction
Relationships within the organisation
Networks for organisational communication
Communication within organisations is studied in terms of:
Messages
Content
Symbols
Codes (verbal and non verbal)
Methods and modalities of communication
Channels
Media and technologies of communication
Communication activities
Organising, co-ordinating, or controlling
Leading or motivating
Problem solving and decision making
Conflict managing, negotiating and bargaining
Influencing organisational change and development

These perspectives show just how multidimensional the issues of internal communication can be. For instance, the impact that culture (national and organisational) could have on the management of conflict, problem solving and decision making within an organisation is evident. Moreover, Table I also indicates how internal communication and factors that affect it can impinge on "influencing organisational change and development".

Discussion and conclusion

For many employees, organisational changes mean moving away from the established routines and systems toward an uncertain future – a future fraught with negative and potentially positive outcomes. Organisations and businesses of all types, therefore, need to inculcate positive attitudes toward change among employees. Burnes (1992) emphasised this when he stated that "communication is a way of avoiding the uncertainty that change can promote." But, he went on: "understanding and gaining commitment to a new direction is never an easy task, especially in large enterprises. Smart people make mistakes and outright failure is not uncommon, even in well-known firms". Meanwhile, Kotter (1996) noted that: "managers under-communicate, and often not by a small amount". For most organisations change is pervasive and employees are an integral part of the change process and how it is managed. But "employees can only work effectively if they can participate in the organisation and they can only participate if they are fully informed" (Kitchen, 1997).

Few enterprises are immune to change, understanding the need for change is important, but so is an understanding of how change will be achieved. If internal communication is a key issue with regard to how successful change management programmes are implemented, then understanding that link could prove crucial for all enterprises as they adjust not only to new circumstances at home, but also to the fierce inroads of aggressive international business.

Or to put this another way, change is not evolutionary but revolutionary. Competitive advantage which resided in capital in the 1980s, in technology in the 1990s, will reside in people in the new millennium (McRory, 1999). Thus, employee communication does not just have a role in the management of change, *it has the role* (Quirke, 1995, italics added).

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