A management communication strategy for change

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Introduction

Significant organizational changes often begin slowly, are incrementally implemented and are subject to change as information is gathered concerning the effectiveness of the process. Indeed that is the approach normally espoused by those who have extensive experience in planned organizational change. Such change processes may be non-inclusive at the start in that only a small fraction of the workforce is involved. Many organizational participants are only vaguely aware that changes are taking place and the ambiguity surrounding these changes provides a fertile ground for rumours, anxiety and ultimately resistance (Jick, 1993, pp. 192-201). This is true even though management has communicated its intent through specifically designed messages or even a carefully crafted communication strategy. Nonetheless by the time the change is dispersed throughout the organization, many organizational participants have developed attitudes different from those which management intended. When the attitudes are negative the success of the change may be affected adversely.

The author's experience, some years ago, as corporate manager of basic personnel research in a large multinational company serves as an example of what we mean. The company was in the process of implementing a system-wide organizational change in eight of its manufacturing plants. Before the change, the plant employees operated under the assumption that they were to provide a "fair day's work for a fair day's pay", and that motto was repeated throughout each of the plants. A "fair" day's work was based on past performance levels called "past actuals". A "fair" day's pay was determined by a percentage figure somewhat above the local prevailing wage for similar work job for job. The value of quality was widely accepted among manufacturing employees.

An industrial engineering firm was hired to study the production process. It was found that production was well below industrial norms. Management accepted the consultant's recommendation to institute a work measurement system using normative time and motion data as work standards.

The change was carefully planned. It began slowly and provisionally in areas of greatest probable success. All employees were informed through plant and company publications that a change was coming and the reasons for it. Plant

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management and supervision were informed directly through plant meetings. The message conveyed was that owing to increasing competition, production efficiencies were necessary and that through better operational methods, these efficiencies could be gained. "Work smarter, not harder" was the succinct slogan conveyed throughout the company.

The departments covered by the new process were monitored using production records on the one hand and attitude survey data on the other. The data showed production rising and job satisfaction falling, the latter precipitously in some cases.

Some in management suggested that the decline in job attitudes was due to poor communications. They felt that if the employees had really known and understood the reasons for the new system then they would have approved of it. Those of us responsible for the attitude studies felt that other factors were more significant causes of the decline in attitudes.

The two most prominent factors were responsiveness of supervision to employee complaints about work standards and the degree to which employees felt that they had influence over how they did their job and at what pace (Klein and Ritti, 1985). Accordingly, several relevant changes to the process were made. Our data indicated that the negative impact was reduced among those covered by the new programme and in some cases it was reversed. The issue of deficient communications as a major contributor to lower job satisfaction was put to rest, at least for a while.

We are convinced now that a different communications strategy could have helped for precisely the reasons offered by management at the time. We say this because the attitude slide, although not as pronounced among employees not covered by the work measurement process as among those who were, was plant wide in every instance. Most people did not fully comprehend the necessity for the change or how it ultimately might affect them. Rumours, mostly negative, abounded, despite the company's communication effort.

The received message was different from that which was intended. Instead of a well-understood new process that was designed to reduce costs through increased productivity and more efficient production methods, what the operators saw were "college boys nosing around the joint" (a direct quote from one of our interview protocols) who then went back to offices set well apart from the factory floor, put together some numbers from a seemingly incomprehensible book full of statistics, and issued new production standards against which the operators were measured.

The rumours and misconceptions generated considerable anxiety among the operators and their supervisors, both those directly covered by the process and those only hearing about it. Attitudes about the programme itself were universally negative, which set up a hard core preconception of negativism. The message of "work smarter not harder" was interpreted in just the opposite way by the plant workers. Only in the one plant, where the industrial engineers made themselves regularly available to answer questions and where they took

great pains to explain exactly what they were doing, why they were doing it, how it would directly affect the operators, and where they were regularly available to answer questions, was the negative impact of the process largely neutralized. Simply put, the management and staff of that plant followed good communication practices as they applied to successful organizational change.

Organizational communications: some key principles

There are several empirically founded communications principles that taken together can constitute a communications strategy. These are as follows:

- Message redundancy is related to message retention.
- The use of several media is more effective than the use of just one.
- Face-to-face communication is a preferred medium.
- The line hierarchy is the most effective organizationally sanctioned communication channel.
- Direct supervision is the expected and most effective source of organizationally sanctioned information.
- Opinion leaders are effective changers of attitudes and opinions.
- Personally relevant information is better retained than abstract, unfamiliar or general information.

Redundancy of message and medium

The data are clear on the related points that repetition of the message through more than one medium increases people's memory of the message (Bachrach and Aiken, 1977; Daft and Lengel, 1984; Dansereau and Markham, 1987). Still we have seen management delivering their message once or perhaps twice, usually via some written medium and letting it go at that. Then when employees complain about not getting the information, they are told "but we did send the message in the plant bulletin" or whatever. The fact that the message was neither received nor understood is blamed on the intended receiver for not "getting it" and not on the sender. Yet who was it who desired to communicate?

Face-to-face communication is most effective

Taken by itself, face-to-face communication has a greater impact than any other single medium (D'Aprix, 1982; Jablin, 1979; 1982). The impact of a face-to-face medium may be due to its immediacy but the interactive potential of it, if realized, is what works (Gioia and Sims, 1986). The two-way give and take encourages involvement in the process. It also clarifies ambiguities, and increases the probability that the sender and the receiver are connecting appropriately. It is the best way that feedback can be used to correct deficiencies immediately in the communication process (O'Connor, 1990).

One of the chief advantages of face-to-face communication is the ability of the participants to pick up non-verbal cues as the interaction unfolds. This adds

richness to the interpretation of the message as well as communicating the emotional aspects which otherwise might be hidden (Gioia and Simms, 1986).

Of particular relevance to the argument that we will make regarding a communication strategy is that face-to-face communication in a group context can be a powerful force in the service of a successful change. It provides the communicator with an opportunity to capitalize on the different perspectives and interpretations that are likely to result from a complex message in terms of providing explanations and clarifications relevant to likely variations of understanding (Weick, 1989).

Line authority is an effective communications channel

In this time of employee empowerment and decisions by consensus, the importance of the authority hierarchy is often overlooked. Yet there are few large organizations that do not rely on formal authority as the ultimate decision-making locus and the source of the necessary accountability that infuses well-managed command and control systems. Such structures permeate organizational life and are viewed as legitimate by most organizational participants. Quite clearly communiqués from those in authority carry both practical and symbolic weight (Klein *et al.*, 1974; Snyder and Morris, 1984; Young and Post, 1993).

Line management, because it carries more organizational muscle than staff positions, also has a greater communications impact. We also know that the credibility of a message is directly related to the status of the source of that message and higher status is normally accorded to the line hierarchy (Kiesler and Mirson, 1975).

In no way does the use of authority interfere with the more recently popular participative or consensus-based processes (Troy, 1989). Our experience suggests that it enhances the distribution of influence down through the hierarchy when each successively lower level is fully informed and is made a "communications partner" (Daft and Huber, 1986; Katz and Kahn, 1978).

The supervisor is a key communicator

The hierarchy of authority is linked through supervision at each level. People expect to hear important, officially sanctioned information from their immediate supervisor or boss. Supervisors are expected to be well informed and to be accurate transmitters of information.

Moving down through the ranks to the non-management level, supervision takes on an even more important characteristic. The most important actor and the primary company representative is the immediate supervisor (Jablin, 1979). Consequently the role of supervision as the last hierarchical communications link to the non-supervisory employees is an essential one.

Finally, because supervisors are normally in frequent contact with their supervisees, they can invoke the principles of redundancy and face-to-face communications. By keeping the first level supervision completely informed

about the rationale and progress of the organizational change, it is likely that lower levels are also well informed (Higgenson and Waxler, 1989; Smeltzer and Fann, 1989).

The use of opinion leaders

Those who have collegial authority have a disproportionate impact on others' opinions and attitudes. This principle comes from a vast literature on political processes and the formation of public opinion and is commonly invoked in political campaigns. However in our judgement it is wholly transferable to organizations (Cialdini *et al.*, 1981). Several times we have witnessed the opinion-forming power of informal leaders, especially those active in union affairs, though not part of the union hierarchy.

Personally relevant information is better retained

In a series of studies designed to understand the meaning and impact of effective communications to factory employees, we discovered that the most important content is associated with work standards of evaluation, work expectations, reinforcement of performance and technical work-related information (Klein, 1992). In other words, information that directly affects one's job territory is attended to and retained (Pincus, 1986). Surprisingly, information concerning the company, plant or other workers quickly tended to be forgotten, or was not even registered at the outset.

Organizational change and a communications strategy

A communications strategy should coincide with the general stages of a planned change and the relevant associated information requirements. For the purposes of this analysis we choose to use the Kurt Lewinian model incorporating three general stages of change: unfreezing, changing or moving, and refreezing (French and Bell, 1984; Kirkpatrick, 1985). We also make three assumptions that limit the application of the communications strategy proposed below. First, we assume that the change is a positive one that is designed for organizational improvement and can be touted as such. Second, we assume that the change will proceed provisionally, subject to evaluation and modification as warranted, and in keeping with the best practices of planned change. Third, we assume that the change is comprehensive. A change towards total quality management, meeting Baldrige or ISO 9000 criteria, or a comprehensive employee involvement process such as self-managed work teams, are examples.

Table I lists the stages of organizational change along with corresponding activities and communication needs. Note that the change objectives differ from stage to stage. As a consequence the organizational activities and the requisite communications change accordingly if one is to maximize the success of the change and minimize its associated problems. For example, a primary objective during the unfreezing stage of organizational change is readying people for the

	Unfreezing	Changing	Refreezing
Organizational objectives	Readying the organization for change Challenging the *status quo* Provision of rationale	Beginning the process Developing momentum Evaluating pilot efforts	Reinforcing the change Shoring up weaknesses and correcting deficiencies Making the change demonstrably successful Institutionalizing the change
Organizational activities	Planning the organizing for change Assembling resources Designing structure Training personnel Targeting change areas Collecting baseline data Soliciting participants' input	Implementing change in selected areas Monitoring impact of change Modifying or fine tuning process as warranted Extending changes as warranted	Broadening the change to all appropriate areas Rewarding successes Solidifying supporting monitoring organizational structures
Communication needs	Explaining issues, needs, rationale Identifying and explaining directives Identifying and explaining first few steps Reassuring people Informing management cadre	Informing employees of progress Getting input as to effect of the process Developing sophisticated knowledge among all supervisory management personnel Challenging misconceptions Continual reassurance of employees Delineating and clarifying role relationships and expectations	Publicizing the success of the change Spreading the word to employees

Table I.
Stages of organizational change: objectives, activities and communication needs

change, whereas reinforcing and institutionalizing the change are major objectives at the refreezing stage. Each of these classes of objectives requires different organizational activities and different communication needs. To illustrate, during the unfreezing stage the content of the communications is characterized by explanations, rationales and reassurances, whereas during the freezing stage it is characterized by concrete information concerning organizational outcomes.

Given the different organizational objectives, activities and communication needs, as illustrated in Table I, different communication strategies are necessary to support the change; these are depicted in Table II. Note that each stage can benefit from an invocation of the previously described communication principles but different strategies of utilization seem to be appropriate, depending on where you are in the change process. As an example, the use of line management in face-to-face communications changes from intensive and frequent reliance on top management in the unfreezing stage to a much heavier reliance on supervisory management in the refreezing stage (see Table II). Together Tables I and II provide a rationale (Table I) and a possible blueprint (Table II) for a management communication strategy for organizational change.

Communicating during the unfreezing stage: justifying the change

Readying the organization for change. The primary communication *objective* of the unfreezing stage should be to prepare organizational participants for the change. This has been called "readying" the organization and the research results are clear concerning the wisdom of such preparation (Cummings and Huse, 1989; Jick, 1993). If the change is more than marginally incremental, it is likely that resistance, some of it quite strong, will surface because old values and method are implicitly challenged. Some resistance will remain underground while it is gathering strength. People talk in the corridors and on the factory floor and a wall of resistance may appear suddenly. It is far easier to move forward if that wall is not built at the beginning. That can occur more readily if the communication strategy is carefully planned to account for the initial resistance.

In our experience, the unfreezing stage involves a lot of organizational activity such as planning, that has little objective outcome but for which management will be held accountable by the rest of the workforce. Hence a secondary objective of this stage is to account for this activity.

Although we have found that it is almost impossible to predict the long-term future implications of most significant change processes, it is possible and necessary to communicate the objectives of the change (Young and Post, 1993). To help ready the organization, information on what is going to happen, and why, ought to be conveyed. This can take the form of a concrete description of the activity associated with the first steps of the change.

Table II.
Relating communication principles to stages of organizational change

Principles	Stages Unfreezing	Changing	Refreezing
Redundancy and multimedia aids retention	Multimedia campaign delineating rationale, of objectives, planning activities and expectations	Frequent multimedia delivery including outcomes as they occur	Use of media to celebrate success as warranted with phase out as new process is institutionalized
Face-to-face medium is effective	Group meetings at each level of the hierarchy	Group meetings at each level of the hierarchy	Reliance on supervisor at each level to convey change – relevant information with senior management playing a key role regularly but less frequently than in other stages (e.g. awards assembly, semi-annual progress report ,etc.)
Effectiveness of line management as communications channel Direct supervision as key communicator	See above with senior management of each unit presiding at stage setting meetings Meetings subsequent to stage setting are conveyed and run by unit supervisor	Emphasis on delivering information through line management. Special emphasis is placed on the top and consistent knowledgeable participation of each supervisory level	
Opinion leaders as key communicators	Opinion leaders are kept completely abreast of all relevant information through face-to-face meetings	Same as in unfreezing	Same as before
Personal relevance of interpretation	Expectations concerning personal impact of change should be conveyed via unit management and supervisors	As more information becomes known, supervisors disclose relevant personal and job-related information to subordinates. Especially job and role expectations as each person may be affected	This information is becoming increasingly accessible from personal experience but should be conveyed by supervisor when necessary. Clarifying personal impact is essential
Communications should be consistent and reinforcing	All communiqués should carry the same message and be consistent with organization's core values as appropriate	Same as unfreezing except more attention is placed on details as they become known	Reaffirmation of successes in supporting core values and meeting objectives

Challenging the status quo. During the unfreezing stage the status quo and the forces that sustain the *status quo* need to be called to question (French and Bell, 1984). The first thing to do is to communicate the need for a change by providing a specific rationale such as a discrepancy between necessary outcomes and actual outcomes or an opportunity that can only be captured with some procedural modification. This first communication should come from the senior management person in charge of the unit. If the change is organization-wide, the CEO should be the one who is the main communicator (Young and Post, 1993); if it is confined to a specific sub-unit it should be the unit manager who communicates and so on. Although logistically it may not be practical we have found that a written communiqué followed by a meeting where people can ask questions and provide feedback is effective. This is especially useful to establish the precedent of multimedia and multidirectional communication.

Providing a rationale. Several other things need to happen during the unfreezing stage of change. The factors that might support the change require strengthening, attitudes about current processes need to be re-examined and cultural elements such as values and behavioural norms require scrutiny for congruency with the proposed change. Those various social structures need to be repeatedly challenged with an appropriate rationale when they are at odds with the proposed change, for they are notoriously resistant to change and might cause unnecessary difficulties along the way (Cialdini *et al*., 1981). These objectives can best be met in communications forums presided over by senior management.

Furthermore we have found that the greater the discrepancy between the proposed change and the current practice the more difficult it is to execute the change. This is due in part to the underlying values and attitudes that sustain the status quo. A carefully constructed communication strategy using the principles of redundancy and multimedia is likely to be useful, especially if the attitudes about current processes are generally favourable and the change conflicts in important ways with significant cultural elements (Weick, 1987).

Focusing on communication principles. Our experience suggests that soon after the first wave of printed communiqués and general assemblies that provide the background rationale, the previously described principles should be considered seriously as the communication strategy unfolds. These along with corresponding communication activities are listed in Table II. This would include, at a minimum, a follow-up series of communiqués hitting key points and delivered down through the hierarchy. We have found that it is most important that each successively lower organizational level be convened by its management in a give and take forum. Once again we have found that it is useful that the senior management be present and take an active part in the question and answer phase of the forum.

As the planning for change proceeds and takes on some degree of certainty with added details and implications, meetings should be held again at each successively lower organizational level. Each presiding supervisor should be

equipped to provide the requisite information and to answer most of the questions that inevitably will be raised.

So far we have emphasized that during the unfreezing stage the principles of redundancy, multimedia, the use of authority and of supervision in face-to-face forums are all important. Invoking the forums as a means of involving lower levels in the change process can be invaluable as plans are modified, as they often are, during the initial stages of change. In this way, those not in on the planning can still provide a valid input to strengthen the change while feeling that they have had an opportunity to voice their concerns and ideas.

Communicating during the changing stage: reporting the changes

At the beginning: dealing with uncertainty. Normally there is a lot of organizational activity as plans are being implemented but it is unevenly distributed across the organization. If the changes follow a planned change model, initially they are being made provisionally; that is experimenting, piloting, and testing (Cummings and Huse, 1989). Because most of the workforce is not directly involved and may not know exactly what is happening there is a lot of uncertainty and rumours tend to emerge. Thus the communications strategy during the changing stage should have three primary objectives. The first is to provide those who initially are not directly involved with the change with detailed and accurate information of what is happening. Second, those not currently involved should be aware of how they will become engaged in the future; how the change will affect them, their new roles and responsibilities. Third, to challenge whatever misinformation is circulating about the change.

Focusing on specifics. The change process now has moved from an abstraction with theoretical outcomes to reality with very practical outcomes. Organizational structures or processes are being modified and these changes are beginning to have some organizational impact. As one moves down the hierarchy to points of operation, reality is determined by increasingly narrow circumstances. Hence the communications process should shift to a more specific character then that which characterized the unfreezing stage. From a tactical standpoint the management and supervisory cadre should become familiar enough with the progress to answer questions knowledgeably as they emerge, individually and in meetings of subordinate groups. Furthermore, relevant data detailing the impact and the outcomes of the change should be available as supporting evidence and as a means of reducing uncertainty.

To reinforce the above described information flow, we have found it useful for the senior unit manager, in person and through written media, to issue periodic supporting statements which generally highlight progress and which reiterate management's support for the change. All too often executives go on to other things once the change is launched, thinking that once they have indicated their support that should be enough. It rarely is!

Reporting the progress. As the change moves from piloting and evaluation to more widespread applications, people need to be informed of the progress. The

credibility of management is enhanced if they own up to the difficulties inherent in most changes and inform people of how the difficulties have been overcome or how the process has been modified on the basis of the evaluations. As a practical matter, we have found that the problems associated with change become a matter of public knowledge soon after they are discovered. The actual problems are often embellished by those who revel in such things, and if unanswered with the facts, they become part of the common folklore. The hierarchy ought to be invoked again, and accurate information should proceed down through the structure to the lowest levels in face-to-face meetings.

Communicating during the refreezing stage: celebrating the change

Building understanding. As depicted in Table II the primary organizational objectives during the refreezing stage include building structures and processes that support the new ways (Katz and Kahn, 1978). Do efficiencies result? Is the organization more effective than before? Are people rewarded in accordance with the new work demands and expectations? Is there sufficient control over one's job territory? Are the role relationships reasonably clear? These are all questions that are likely to be out in the workplace. Obviously it would be useful to answer them in any case, but it is a good idea to anticipate the questions so that the answers are not off the cuff. These issues are especially important at this stage because people are getting first-hand experience with the personal impact of the change. This impact may not comport with expectations or it may be perceived as negative, but in any event the burden of face-to-face communication has shifted down the hierarchy through supervisory management. Although higher management still has an important symbolic role, the specifics of the change, especially as they affect people personally, can best be conveyed by direct supervision (see Table II).

Understanding personal implications of the change. The information flow should be multidirectional, continuous and concrete so that people can become comfortable in the fact that they have a reasonably full understanding of the personal implications of the change irrespective of their attitudes towards the change itself. Because the organization would like to institutionalize the change – make it a way of life – it may be necessary to create mechanisms that can ferret out the inevitable misunderstandings as they develop and then deal with these misunderstandings in terms that are easily comprehended by the workforce. An example of this key point is described below, and is provided by a small, continuous-process flat-rolled galvanized steel mill that adopted a fully participative management system.

A case in point. There were four key elements of the change to this participative system:

(1) The decisions with respect to the distribution of bonuses from production gains are made by a labour-management committee overseen by the corporate management. Previously, all compensation had been negotiated and was part of an iron-clad contract that had specified hourly rates for each job classification.

(2) Decisions about scheduling turn assignments, vacation and maintenance schedules, hiring new personnel and disciplinary actions are made by labour-management committees. Previously these decisions were made solely by management.

(3) There was a change from a traditional foreman-worker structure to a semi-autonomous work team structure with turn co-ordinators, usually college trained engineers, acting in a loosely defined supervisory capacity.

(4) The pay structure changed from a straight hourly system to a pay for knowledge system that is co-ordinated with a stepwise training process.

In each case, except for the scheduling process, problems arose primarily because of a lack of anticipation that misunderstandings would be likely to occur about aspects of the workers' job territory and their relationship with management. No provisions were made for extraordinary communication efforts for purposes of clarification.

In the case of the gain share distribution, the rank and file did not understand the particulars of a very complex gainsharing formula even though it had been explained to them. Nor did they understand that corporate executives had the final say about the gains distribution. The workers erroneously thought that once the plant committee had made their determination that was the end of it. These misunderstandings led to a series of grievances.

The issues were not resolved until the union president and the gainsharing committee became fully knowledgeable about the formula and the decision-making process of the bonus distribution. Then, together with the plant manager, in carefully structured seminars, they went over the particulars with the rest of the workers until everyone appeared to understand.

In the case of the pay for knowledge system, the key misunderstandings were embedded in the training standards that were utilized to make decisions about movement from one knowledge level to the next. That was resolved through intensive communications in small group settings where questions could be fielded and the workers could develop a sense of the rationale and equity inherent in the new system.

The ambiguities concerning the new role relationships are being resolved by restructuring the position of co-ordinator, allocating more supervisory responsibility to the team members and, through ongoing discussions, delineating the various role responsibilities.

At this time, a negotiated labour-management communications committee has been established that acts as a conduit from the production floor to the decision makers and then back again. Where communications seem deficient, the committee is responsible for crafting an appropriate process. This mechanism seems to have worked well in that queries concerning clarification of the new processes have diminished from several a week to less than two per month. Associated grievances have disappeared.

Conclusions

Organizational changes often founder because not enough strategic thought is given to communicating the rationale, the progress and the impact of the change. Communications are important as changes are planned and carried forth. We believe that many difficulties often associated with significant change can be more easily dealt with if there is strategic thinking about what and how to communicate. The process should be based on a good grasp of some principles of communication together with an understanding of the change process.

With this in mind we have presented elements of a communications stratagem designed to deal with some of the problems associated with major organizational changes. Most of the previously identified principles are appropriate during the entire change process but are utilized in different ways depending on the stage of the change process the organization is in. The ambiguities that most changes give rise to are more pronounced during the early stages and consequently an intensive, multimedia approach designed to justify and rationalize the change and to reduce uncertainty seems appropriate. As one moves through the stages, the objective evidence mounts with respect to the impact of the change and ways to deal with particularistic issues and necessary adjustment need to be devised and used.

Publicizing successes is especially important during the changing stage of the change process. It is equally important to develop a means of rectifying problems through feedback and adjustment. This can be done by developing communications structures that legitimate and encourage the disclosure of problems and the discussion of solutions. As the change is being institutionalized, significant operational problems are likely to occur that are to some degree based on misinformation and unclarity. At this time, intensive face-to-face communication seems to be warranted so that the misunderstandings can be cleared up.

As we have emphasized, the regular use of the authority structure as a conduit of important communiqués and as a symbol of support, approval and control is helpful from the beginning. Supervision especially needs to be well informed, thoroughly involved and the clear locus of requisite information for the subordinate group. Change is hard in most cases but this is especially so when the current situation is reasonably comfortable to most participants. It seems to us that a well-planned communications process can be most helpful in easing the way to a more effective process.

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