



KnowledgeCity®
Learning Solutions

KnowledgeCity® COMMUNICATING ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE



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Communicating Organizational Change

"The most successful businessperson is the one who holds onto the old just as long as it is good, and grabs the new just as soon as it is better."

Robert P. Vanderpoel _____
Financier and Conservationist

Do you like change? You may answer "yes" if the change is a pleasant one, like a vacation. What about changes in the workplace? Change can be an unnerving experience, especially when you are not given the specifics. Communicating organizational change is an art that will lead to positive and successful changes within an organization.

Communicating changes to employees can be a challenging task, particularly if they include difficult choices, such as downsizing. There are ways to make that easier and to counter resistance to decisions. You can start by:

- 1 Learning to empathize with your team's concern
- 2 Understanding why employees resist change
- 3 Clarifying the understanding by bringing the organizational culture into alignment with the change
- 4 Understanding the different types of organizational change to sustain momentum and motivate employees
- 5 Avoiding misperceptions to gain support from employees during the change

Change can be unsettling for everyone, so it is crucial that if it falls to you to communicate organizational changes you understand that you need to be clear, positive, and available to explain the changes. Try to avoid mixed messages and identify ways to transform resistance into support.

The manner in which organizational change is communicated can make all the difference between employee resistance and employees embracing the changes. It is really up to the communicator to ensure that the change is successful by using proven communication practices and creating a positive environment for successful change. Whether the change is small, such as introducing new technology, or major, such as a merger, the ability to communicate effectively and clearly is necessary for success.

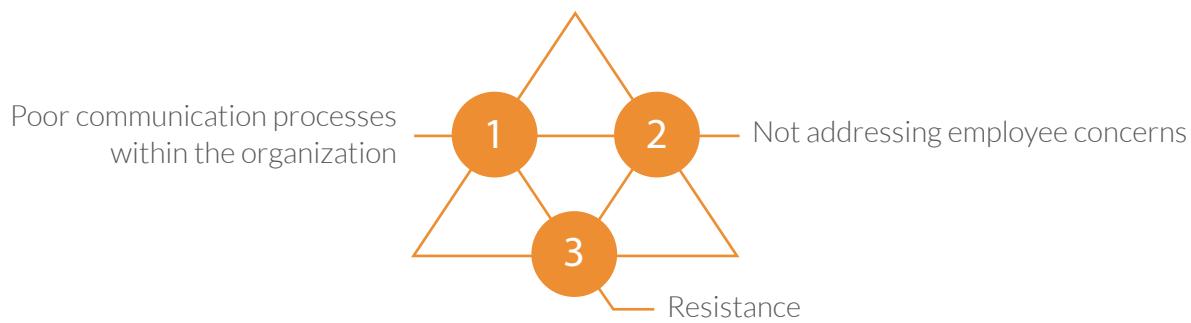
All of this seems obvious, but how do you go about communicating clearly and effectively? Let's find out.

Even the best communicators have a bad day sometimes, and the message gets misinterpreted. The results of that can be difficult to reverse. Seventy percent of all organizational change efforts fail due to communication problems. Companies waste \$37 billion a year due to miscommunication. Adapting to changes can mean continued success or going out of business if you don't look for trends and make changes accordingly. This phenomenon is all around us, as we see long-established retail outlets disappearing while online shopping soars.



Why do organizational change efforts fail so often?

There are three reasons:



Organizational change is not always bad news. There are different types of organizational change that occur in the business world. For example, a company that makes a now-obsolete product may go out of business because there is no longer a demand for their product. Another type of organizational change is when a crisis occurs, whether it is a natural disaster, an accident, or a stock market crash. The final and most common type of organizational change is the planned change. As the name suggests, these changes are intentionally made to improve the business. These changes can include mergers, restructuring, or introducing new technologies or new policies.

No matter the type of change, communication is the critical component of moving forward. Let's look at some factors that thwart the communication process.

Poor Communication Processes

When you are in a conversation with someone, how much do you think you are actually listening to that person? 100 percent? 75 percent? 25 percent? It may surprise you to learn it is 25 percent! In order for communication to occur, it is necessary to listen actively to the other person. This is the most critical requirement for good communication practice.

It is imperative that employees have input during an organizational change. The process begins with listening to their concerns and allaying their fears and the uncertainty change will bring. When listening to employees, create an open environment for discussion so they know you understand their concerns and the impact the change will have on their jobs.

When you don't keep people informed during a change process, employees can perceive this as not showing appreciation for the work they currently do, and they won't feel valued by the organization. In a Gallup poll of one million workers, the top reason people left their jobs was because they did not feel valued or appreciated. Seventy percent of Americans say they receive no recognition or praise on the job. One way employees feel valued is when they are included from the start in the decision-making process during an organizational change. This sends a clear message that you value their work and their input.

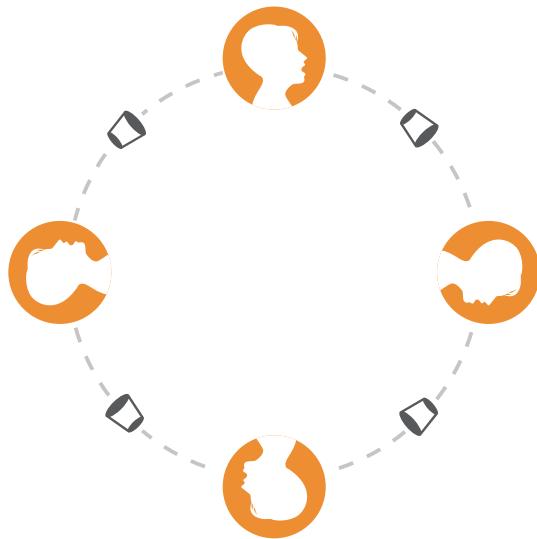


As you hone your listening skills there is another communication process you need to know about: misperceptions.



Misperceptions

Remember the Telephone Game you played as a kid? You would form a circle, and one person would repeat a short sentence to the next person until the last person said it out loud. Usually, you were pretty surprised at the result! It probably bore little resemblance to the original sentence said by the first person.



Misperceptions are giving or receiving mixed messages and then drawing incorrect conclusions. During organizational change, this can lead to unfortunate outcomes. How can this be avoided? By being responsible for both sides of the communication.

When we deliver a message, it is incumbent upon us as the sender to make sure the receiver understands the message. One way to do this is to ask questions to check understanding. Ask the receiver to repeat back to you what you said without sounding too much like a school teacher. Many people are uncomfortable asking questions for a number of reasons, so by asking them to paraphrase what you said, you can be sure they understood your message. This process works in reverse, too, so always repeat back to the sender what you think you heard that person say.

This is an especially important factor when you are dealing with language or ideas the majority of people do not fully understand. Technology seems to be the area where this happens most frequently. The key is to match the level of your audience by presenting the information in a clear, understandable format.

Delivery is important, but what about content? Too little information leads to rumors as employees try to figure out what is happening. Even if the change will only affect one department, it is important to let everyone in the organization know what is happening. Withholding information has the same effect and leads to a lack of transparency and trust between management and staff. If the information is filtered down through the ranks and becomes distorted or secretive, rumors will fill in the gaps. Perhaps the worst scenario is a meeting for all employees where the change is a done deal with no input from staff; no communication; just a mandate.

Now, you can understand some of the worst ways to communicate organizational change. Let's move on to the best ways.

Communicating Change to Employees

Before you can communicate organizational changes effectively to employees, you need to understand why they resist change, even if they don't know the details. It stems from basic fear and uncertainty. Will they lose their jobs? How will their jobs change? It all boils down to the following question: How is this change going to affect me?

Let's consider the cycle of resistance: People are creatures of habit. Change disrupts our routines and takes us out of our comfort zones. Here are the elements of resistance:

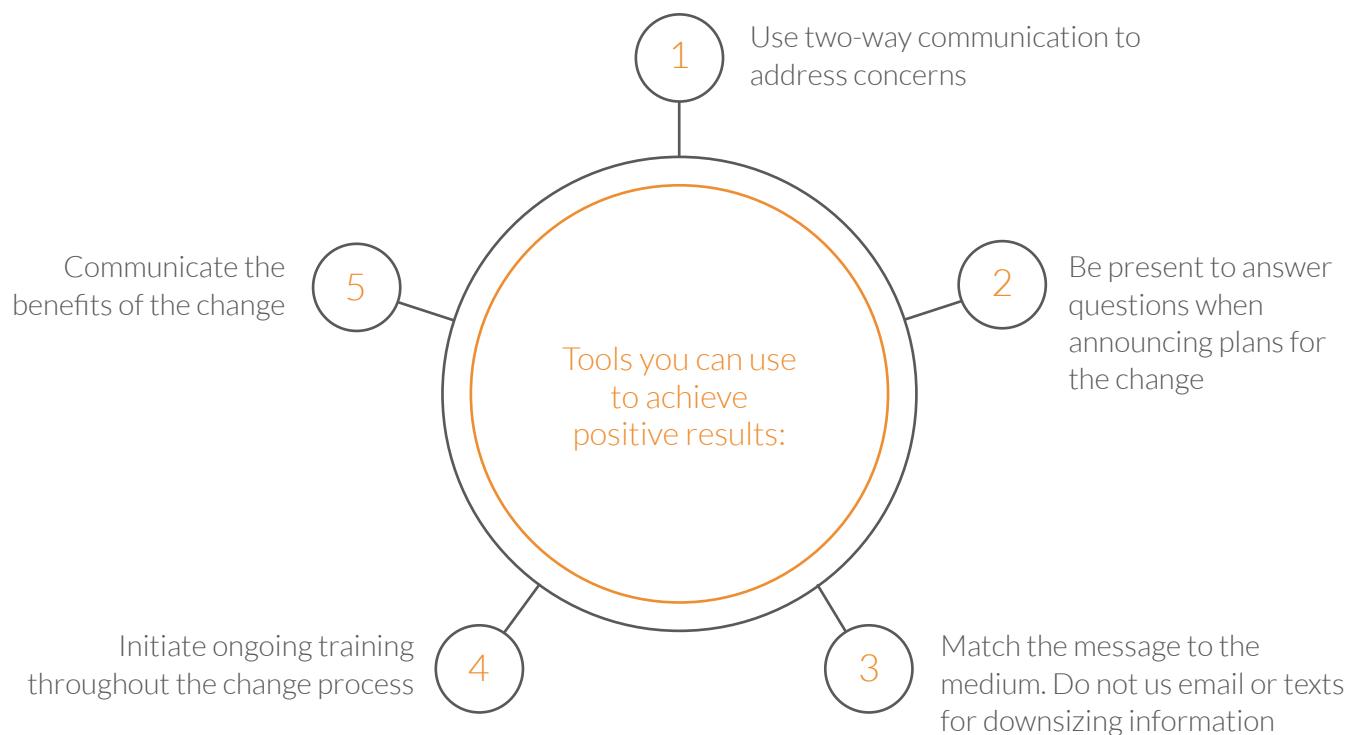


Sometimes, employees have gone through similar changes before and may react accordingly, perhaps even with complacency. What could have been done differently? Remember that inclusion at the very start of the change process is critical to getting employees on board with the change and will lessen the resistance down the road.

Alleviating fears and concerns boils down to giving honest, direct responses about the impact that the change will have on employees' jobs. Be clear about the change by addressing the why, when, how, and who of the change. It is better to maintain open communication, even if the change may cause a negative impact on some employees. Don't ignore a question. If you don't know the answer, it is okay to say you don't know but will try to find out. Make sure, though, that you follow through.

What tools will help you to deliver the organizational change message effectively? Let's move on to some ideas.

Effective Communication Practices



Even if you are unsure of how the change will impact jobs and routines, maintain a positive attitude toward the change and discuss how the change will impact job responsibilities for the better. A positive attitude can go a long way to overcoming resistance and getting people on board with the change. There may be some negative outcomes to the change, so be prepared for some tough questions.

Ways to alleviate negativity and gain support during the change:

- Communicate openly during the planning stage
- Anticipate communication issues
- Prepare for a full range of reactions and arguments, especially from those negatively impacted
- Encourage participation and ongoing involvement from employees at all levels

Effective communication practices are about honesty, transparency, and staff involvement from the initial planning stages of the change to implementation. Maintain a positive attitude during the process and keep the lines of communication open for everyone, particularly those who will be negatively impacted by the change. Listen actively to their concerns, be empathetic, and be present instead of relying on email, texts, or memos.

Dealing with individuals and change is essential, but it is also necessary to ensure the organizational culture is in alignment. Let's look at some ideas on how to achieve the best results.

Bringing the Organizational Culture into Alignment

Organizational change is not only difficult for employees, it is also problematic for management. At times, managers may pay lip service to the change but not fully embrace it. Getting employees to buy into the change is critical, but it is also important to have the entire organization in alignment so that the change will be permanently implanted into the organizational culture.

Management needs to openly support the change by modeling the behavior inherent in the change. If key people do not support the change, this can affect the entire organization and can stall or even derail the change. One idea to achieve cooperation is to offer an incentive for each department that comes into alignment and models the behavior for other departments.

During times of organizational change, the probability of miscommunication and misperceptions increases exponentially. Be prepared for a surge of negativity from employees, or even managers, who feel justified in questioning the change in a harmful way, which can quickly affect others in the organization. At that point, it is important to take individuals aside and find out what the basic reason is for their resistance. You may find out things you were not aware of that affect their jobs. Listening to the concerns and trying to help find solutions will be the best way to proceed and prevent the negativity from spreading throughout the organization.

Sometimes, though, there is no other solution when the change impacts staffing and job responsibilities than to reduce staffing. Letting people go is one of the most difficult tasks organizations face during an organizational change. What is the best way to proceed? Let's examine some ideas.



Downsizing

No matter how necessary it is to let employees go during organizational change, it is still a stressful and uncomfortable situation for everyone within the organization. Many companies elect to wait until the last minute to inform people who are losing their jobs, from fear of demoralization, lower productivity, or sabotage. The best approach, however, is to again use the tools of excellent communication and inform not only those who are to be downsized, but also those who will remain, about the situation as early as possible.

Many companies offer assistance to employees who are being downsized. These can include job search assistance, severance pay, recommendations, and recruitment firms. Although this is a good start and shows that the company wants to help during this transition, it is not enough to just hand downsized employees a list of resources and wish them luck in their job search.

Two key points to remember are:

- 1 Respect the dignity of the person being downsized
- 2 How downsizing is handled directly impacts the morale of remaining employees

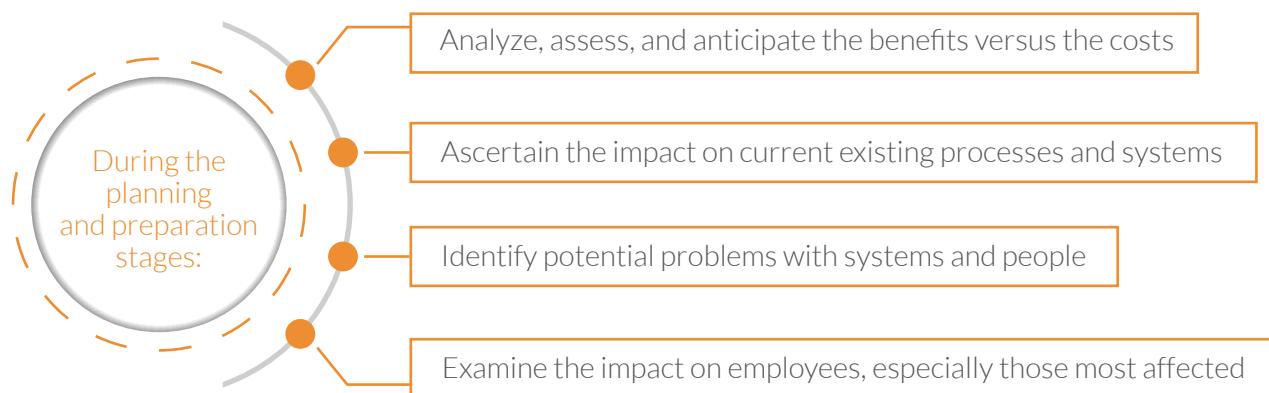
Before downsizing is implemented, make sure it is the only solution to the problem. Downsizing to show stakeholders you are a tough, lean organization will almost always backfire. Ask the question: do we really need to let these people go? Can they be retrained or reassigned? No matter how necessary or how expertly handled, downsizing is often a toxic solution. So, before using this tool, consider the situation from all angles and see if there is another way to handle this effectively and with minimal damage to the organization.

With all components of the change in place, implementation is the next step. Let's look at the factors that are necessary for a successful organizational change.



Conducting Successful Organizational Change

What are the keywords to assure success during organizational change? Communication and commitment. If management does not effectively communicate the reason for and the vision behind the change, it will be difficult to get support from the entire organization.

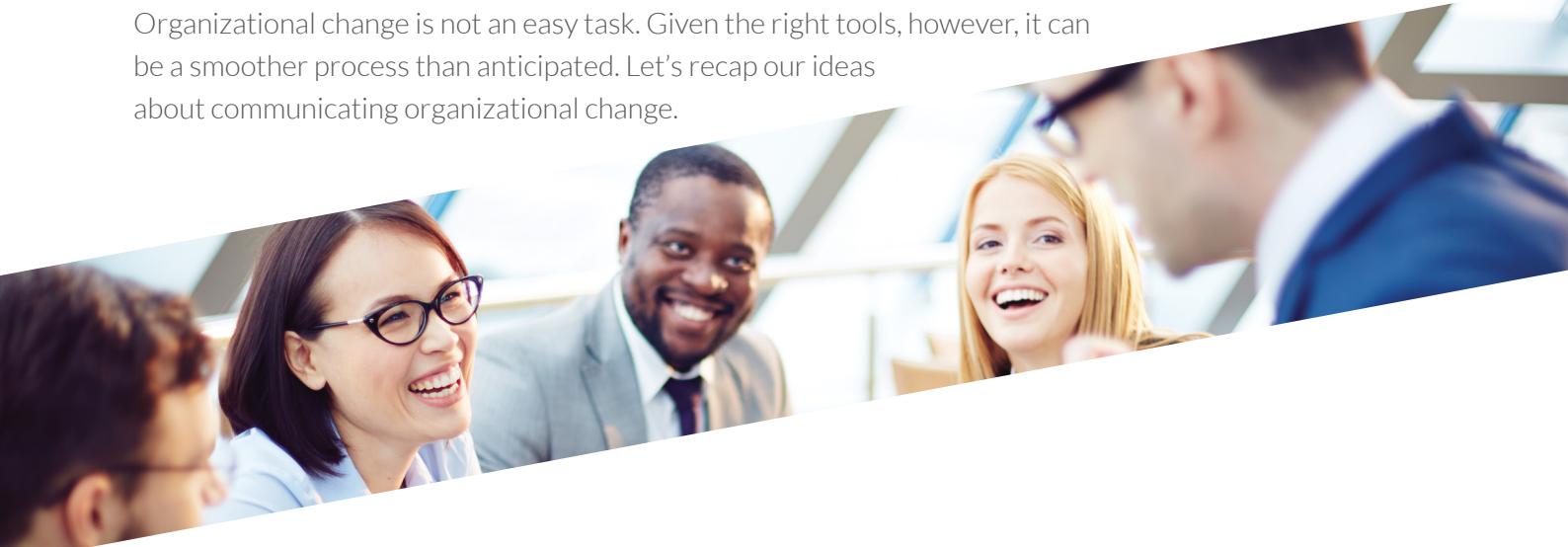


Armed with this information, develop a step-by-step plan for integration and implementation. Look for ways to motivate employees to embrace the change and see it as a positive step for the organization. Make sure company leaders are in alignment with the change and model behaviors that create a positive environment for change implementation.

Before organization-wide implementation, select a unit to do a test-run of the change. Use training and coaching to solicit feedback and make adjustments as necessary. Nothing feels as good as success, and employees who see an effective implementation of the change on a singular basis are more likely to support the change.

Remember: ongoing, informative, and transparent communication is critical to the success of the organizational change. Don't rely on meetings and memos to convey the message. Be present, along with other leaders, and be available during the process to answer questions, allay fears, and discuss concerns. Ask your employees for their opinions, ideas, and input. Then consider how to effectively incorporate employee feedback into the change. Make employee input an ongoing part of the process.

Organizational change is not an easy task. Given the right tools, however, it can be a smoother process than anticipated. Let's recap our ideas about communicating organizational change.



Conclusion: Message Loud and Clear!

It is not only important to actively listen; it is also important to hear what others are saying. That is what the communication process is all about, and for companies that are contemplating or embarking upon organizational change, it is well worth remembering as the starting-off point in the process.

Why do some organizational change processes succeed, and others fail miserably? Ground zero is communicating the message clearly, openly, and in a timely manner. Letting employees know what is happening as soon as possible allows an exchange of ideas and information from the very beginning of the process, building trust and commitment between leaders and employees. Employees being part of the process, rather than having the process thrust upon them, is a significant factor for success during any organizational change.

The way the message is conveyed also serves to alleviate much of the fear and concerns that accompany organizational change.



These are all valid concerns and can lower employee morale and productivity if management does not address them in a transparent manner.

The best path to success is to maintain a positive attitude about the change, modeled by company leaders, while being aware of negative factors that can accompany the change. Employees who understand the why, when, how, where, who, and what of the change are more apt to support it. Withholding information or giving partial information only fuels the rumor mill and leads to a toxic environment that will not sustain the change.

Perhaps the most critical component of the process is to always be present and available for employees who have questions and concerns. With an open-door policy, there will be less opportunity for rumors to start and grow. Be honest, be fair, and be empathetic as the change is implemented. Your employees will respect you for your behavior and be more willing to participate actively in implementing the organizational changes that are needed, both now and in the future.

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