CHAPTER 11

# Strategic Change Communication

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Globally, organizations face a changed competitive landscape that expects organizational designs and processes to continually renew. Enabling and implementing change with communications has received scholarly attention over the years (Barrett, 2002; Bersin, 2020; Graamans et al., 2020; Klein, 1996; Lewis, 2007; Lewis et al., 2013; Strebel, 1996). However, the gap between the scale of change and the ability of organizations to manage it continues to widen. According to Gallup's State of the Global Workforce Report (2017), a staggering 85% of employees worldwide are not engaged or are actively disengaged in their job. One key underlying reason is the resistance to change—the inability to adapt to the ascent of information technology, globalization of markets for products and labor, the rise of the gig economy, stagnant management practices, and evolving expectations of the younger workforce.

Managing change is considered an integral part of a manager's job. In a study among HR professionals, 82% of organizations were involved in a change management initiative. These included introducing or renewing performance management processes and facilities and organizational

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L. R. Men and A. Tkalac Verčič (eds.), *Current Trends and Issues in Internal Communication*, New Perspectives in Organizational Communication, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-78213-9_11

culture changes (Austin, 2015). It is estimated that considering the pace and scale of change and that 9.9% of every dollar is wasted due to poor project performance, there is a need for more attention to lead change within organizations (Project Management Institute, 2018). In addition, agility to sense and adapt to change can result in organizations achieving increased productivity and efficiency and helping them stay competitive (Project Management Institute, 2018).

Keeping employees informed, helping them appreciate messages and take appropriate action on key initiatives are crucial for successful change. However, change can create stress and uncertainty among staff. According to the 2019 Gartner Change Fatigue Survey, an average employee experienced 12 changes in a year. Furthermore, change is creating stress which impacts an organization's topline. Stressed employees underperform than those who aren't by 5%, reducing the topline by USD 32.5 million at an average company (Bryan, 2019). Therefore, the value of managing and communicating organizational change is considered more important than ever (Bersin, 2020).

## Understanding Change

Change is considered as an organizational phenomenon within the context of human social interactions with communication serving as a medium. Organizational change relates to disordered and modified states, often complicated and unsettling for stakeholders (Lewis & Sahay, 2019). Change is classified as first order and second-order changes (van Vuuren & Elving, 2008). First-order changes are minor, state van Vuuren and Elving (2008), incremental in nature and needed to avoid second-order changes. On the other hand, second-order changes are adjustments within the organization where the end state is unknown. Examples of change include scenarios such as downsizing, introducing an internal process, or implementing important technology. Actively managing change can increase the success rate of such initiatives. Organizations that have highly effective change and communication practices are known to out beat competition by 3.5X. On the other hand, low effectiveness organizations aren't adept in managing change (Towers Watson, 2013). High performing organizations are known to address change as a manageable opportunity, stay resilient, believe that their change capabilities are ahead of competition, communicate their purpose and invest in training employees to be change-ready (Austin, 2015).

There is a difference between information and communication in relation to change management. The former relates to steps taken on change actions while communication is about establishing mutual understanding and improving the quality of interactions (van Vuuren & Elving, 2008). The process of change is understood as a successive series of steps which requires interventions with resources, communications, and culture inputs (Kotter, 1995).

Despite organizations spending millions of dollars on change management and systems, there is limited evidence of the impact because employees are often in the dark and people aren't clear on how to use the infrastructure organizations possess (Bersin, 2020). Also, the success of change management has been less than optimal with accountability and operational efficiencies inappropriately managed. Only less than half indicated they achieved desired operational goals from change initiatives. Likewise, 44% were able to stay on schedule, and just 47% hold team members accountable for deadlines. Just 48% of those surveyed indicated they stayed on or under budget (Towers Watson, 2011). Kotter (1995) explains that strategic change needs to go through a series of phases, and it takes a considerable amount of time. Skipping stages to speed up change doesn't work and can cause unrepairable damage. Therefore, paying attention to embedding change is essential for organizational success.

## Embedding Change

Strategic change is a "difference in the form, quality, or state over time in an organization's alignment with its external environment" (Rajagopalan & Spreitzer, 1996, p. 50). Change management is defined "as a structured approach to transitioning individuals, teams and organizations from a current state to a desired future state" (Austin, 2015, p. iii). Strategic change management involves a series of successive steps each having definite objectives, activities, and communication needs (Klein, 1996). Making change work expects organizations and individuals to shift their mindsets and behaviors. According to the IBM's Change Study (2014), there are five maturity stages of managing change—informal (without a standard plan for driving change), emerging (change capabilities are emerging yet do not use a formal approach to change management), formalizing (specific projects have consistent change management practices), scaling (mature standards are applied companywide and leaders as

well as managers are held accountable for change) and embedded (the highest stage of change maturity with all parts of the organization enabled with skills and capacity); each stage builds on the other in a continuous process of growth and development.

Among the models of change management, the Kurt Lewin's three-stage approach of unfreezing, changing, and refreezing serves as a useful framework for understanding the process (Schein, 1996). During the unfreezing stage, the organization prepares for change, challenges the current situation, and provides the rationale for change. Activities practiced include planning, investing in resources, training and preparing the structure. The communication needs during this phase include identifying the audiences, explaining the change, and reassuring stakeholders. In the changing stage, the goals include starting the progress, creating momentum, and testing progress in some areas of the business. The activities include implementing, evaluating, and modifying the change needs. Communication focuses on taking feedback, challenging and reassuring staff. In the refreezing stage, the goals are to reinforce change, supporting the process and correcting any gaps. The activities include broadening the extent of change, recognizing successes, and monitoring impact. On the communication needs, the focus is to showcase the impact and cascade the message widely (Klein, 1996).

Extending this direction, the Change and Communication ROI Study Report (Towers Watson, 2011) identifies three stages of change: (a) to understand and segment (gauging the environment, appreciating what's evolving, what matters to stakeholders and which audiences get impact), (b) to design and build (create customized strategies and approaches which includes tools and resources to create awareness and drive behavioral change), and (c) to implement and improve (deliver on change goals, measure impact and recognize progress and improvements).

Only when organizations align activities with the appropriate phases will change outcomes be most acceptable.

Austin (2015) suggests that change is facilitated in three phases—designing, enacting and sustaining with key moments where ideas are translated into action. Six activities influence overall change success—leading, communicating, learning, measurement, involving and sustaining. Those organizations who have been able to sustain change over time focused on leadership, communication, involvement, training/learning and measurement (Towers Watson, 2011). Three actors in the change management process from the viewpoint of senior leaders

are change strategists—who create the framework of change; the change implementers—those who help influence and land change and change recipients—those who are the beneficiaries of change.

The first has the power to make decisions while the other two groups have no decision-making authority (Stoyanova, 2011). Lewis (2007) believes expanding the change stakeholder group beyond employees can benefit change implementation while considering key components such as alignment, consistency and genuineness in change communication. Understanding the barriers to change and the underlying motivators can enhance an organization's ability to drive progressive initiatives.

## Change Impact

Among the key barriers to implementing change are uncertainty (Redmond, 2015), lack of buy-in (Project Management Institute, 2018), change fatigue (Baker, 2020), rumors (DiFonzo & Bordia, 1998) and resistance from staff (Strebel, 1996). Uncertainty is defined as having an inadequate state of knowledge due to multiple explanations and possibilities. As the number of options increases, so does confusion. It ranges from self, other, and partner uncertainty to cognitive and behavior uncertainty. Organizational and personnel changes lead to uncertainty and stress among employees (Redmond, 2015).

According to the Uncertainty Reduction Theory, improving our ability to comprehend the motives of others can help improve predictability and therefore certainty. Making sense of the situation can take the form of proactive, explanatory and descriptive approaches (Redmond, 2015). The inability of organizations to share timely information results in employees seeking insights from informal channels that cause stress, job dissatisfaction, and erode trust (Schweiger & Denisi, 1991). When employees don't receive timely communication from reliable sources, they resort to gathering information from informal channels such as rumors. "Rumors are a symptom of the uncertainty that often accompanies organizational change and persist or even flourish when poor communication strategies fail to adequately assuage this uncertainty" (DiFonzo & Bordia, 1998, p. 297).

Sensemaking is another way in which people infer meaning by interpreting themselves and the world around them. It is based on interruptions, anomalies, and disturbances. Through an ongoing process that covers location, meaning making and becoming, conversation and nonverbal behaviors help shape meaning (Weick, 2012). Sensemaking,

communications, and change hold organizations together as they navigate ambiguity and pace of progress (van Vuuren & Elving, 2008).

Language plays an influential role in the comprehension of change (Ford & Ford, 1995). Understanding change from the context of communication means appreciating conversations. Ford and Ford (1995) refer to four types of conversations that can allow change to take shape through communications: initiative (a change starting exercise that focuses listeners' attention on what could or should be done), understanding (helping gain consensus), performance (interplay of requests and promises between parties involved), and closure (interactions that bring an end to the change process). The Speech Act Theory refers to business conventions within the realm of discourse. Since communication emerges from three levels within the context of language—the literal meaning, the intent of the act, and the outcomes, the message, channel, and timing matter most for effective change communication (Smeltzer, 1991). The approach in which organizations communicate impacts the success of change initiatives, especially on individual's commitment, morale, and retention. Studying two organizations, Goodman and Truss (2004) emphasize that both process and content of the communications strategy were important. The timing, personalization, methodology, and flexibility led to better change results.

Employee change fatigue is a serious concern with organizations unsure how to keep them engaged while progressing with change. Managing change fatigue is considered a critical priority for organizations (Gartner, 2020). Gaining employees' trust leads to change acceptance. Baker (2020) recommends engaging employees at all levels by focusing on two key aspects—building trust and improving team cohesion. Those employees who reported higher trust were 2.6 times more adaptable to change than those with lower trust. Likewise, those teams who felt they were in it together were more connected and committed, up to 1.8 times more than those with lower team bonding.

## Effective Change Communications Strategies

Internal communication is an essential element of change management. One of the roles of the internal communication function is as a change agent (Vercic et al., 2012). The role of internal communication in employee relations and improving trust especially in times of change and stress is valuable (Dolphin, 2005). Effective employee communication

is considered as a glue that holds an organization together, and during major change, it allows the smooth operation of the organization and links all other processes of the organization, such as the strategic and business planning processes (Barrett, 2002). One among the 8-step model proposed by Kotter (1995) is the crucial role of internal communication.

Change communication is more effective when related to the company's culture and workforce. Trained and informed managers can influence how change is conducted especially engaging the workforce to direct discretionary effort and pace (Towers Watson, 2013).

Transformational leadership and transparent communications provide clarity, reduces uncertainty, and enhances employees' trust in organizations (DiFonzo & Bordia, 1998; Yue et al., 2019). In a study among employees experiencing change, Yue et al. (2019) discovered that transformational leadership and transparent communication influenced how employees trusted their organizations by increasing their openness to change. Leaders can influence employees' organizational identification during change. Effective communication is one of the key leadership approaches that help staff cope during business disruptions and create deep connections with the organization during uncertainty (Aitken & von Treuer, 2020).

Honest and timely communications are among the top soft factors for change. When leaders personally demonstrate change behaviors, create a compelling reason for change and involve change catalysts at all levels, there is more acceptance for change (IBM, 2014). Employees reacted negatively when messages were indirect and sounded overtly positive (Smeltzer, 1991). Change is embedded when it seeps into the organization's culture. Communication plays a role in demonstrating the new approaches, behaviors, and attitudes that impact the organization as well as providing a line of sight (Kotter, 1995).

Employee alignment is crucial for change success. When an individual's psychology and the organizational strategy synchronize there is improved alignment. During the initial stages of change, training and communications are important to be established to accelerate knowledge and trust (Gagnon et al., 2008). Another aspect to consider is employees' personal compacts with their organizations. The dimensions of personal compacts are formal, psychological, and social which influence how employees accept change (Strebel, 1996). Strebel (1996) opines that formal compact covers the basic tasks and performance expectations on the job—compensation, performance evaluation among others.

The psychological dimension covers trust and relationship-based understanding which are mostly implicit. This is viewed in relations to their manager and covers new performance standards and goals—from the intensity of work needed to recognition and financial rewards. The social dimension is related to the culture—how the values are lived and if leaders walk the talk. It considers if the company really works including resource allocation, decision-making, conflict management and risk taking. Similarly, Barrett (2002) argues that when a culture of communication spreads to all parts of the company and management accepts it as a role they have to play, change is easier to implement.

Seeking feedback and including employees in the change communications process leads to improved results. Highly effective organizations consider and act on employee suggestions (IBM, 2014). Inviting views from stakeholders as they go along the change journey values their knowledge and skills and makes change a participatory process (Graamans et al., 2020; van Vuuren & Elving, 2008). A crucial aspect of change communication is appreciating the emotions and feelings of participants and using a mix of channels while engaging audiences. In a study involving hospital staff related to procuring sutures for surgery resulted in change rejection as doctors believed their sentiments weren't considered (Graamans et al., 2020). Similarly, while introducing change in a large public organization, when communication was poor, employees felt their feelings weren't considered, leading to a deterioration in senior management trust (Proctor & Doukakis, 2003). Such challenges can destabilize change movements and gaining perspectives on potential resistances can help organizations and change leaders.

## Implementing Successful Change Communication

To successfully implement change, Kotter (1995) cites an eight-step model: creating a sense of urgency, forming a powerful guiding coalition, creating a vision, communicating the vision, empowering others to act, planning for and creating short-term wins, consolidating improvements and creating still more change and institutionalizing new approaches. Errors while following these steps can lead to a breakdown of trust, missed expectations and erosion of organizational effectiveness, opines Kotter (1995). In a longitudinal study among blue-collar workers at production plants, change communications and training that focused on sharing strategic knowledge and gaining commitment led to aligned

behaviors (Gagnon et al., 2008). Kotter and Schlesinger (1989) highlight the importance of communication and education in situations where there is a lack of information or disinformation and rumors. Once convinced, employees will participate in implementing change although this approach can be time-consuming and involves many people. Among the strategies to progress through change, organizations can consider revisiting and revising the employer–employee compact. Revision of the compact can be done in three phases. First, leaders can draw attention to the need to change and establish connect for revision. Following that, they need to initiate a process for revising the compact and lastly, confirm commitment with the revised agreements (Strebel, 1996).

Involving stakeholders in the process of change matters. 74% of organizations have a top-down approach to change communications with few channels for employee feedback (IBM, 2014). Effective change takes place when the process is collaborative (Towers Watson, 2013). Involving stakeholders in the development process of change is believed to be more effective than a top-down approach that mandates participation and alignment (van Vuuren & Elving, 2008). When considering a deficit-based approach (review mistakes in change management) versus a constructionist approach (that positively reinforces improvements), having a blend of these approaches helps because individuals are irrational in their behavior and are risk-averse (Keller & Aiken, 2009).

Timing of change communication is critical to the success of initiatives. Providing timely information and even a preview communication helped alleviate fears and reduced uncertainty. In a study among employees to gauge the impact of communication during a merger between two plants, it was found that timely communication prevented informal channel messages from increasing uncertainty and stress. Employees in one plant were provided a preview communication while the control plant didn't receive the information on time. The preview communication helped give employees a realistic picture of the changes faced (Schweiger & Denisi, 1991). In another study that reviewed change communication in 43 organizations, the timing of messages was the biggest differentiator between effective and ineffective companies (Smeltzer, 1991). Exploring the themes that popular press books highlight on the role of communications in effective change, participation and empowerment, purpose, and vision, and creating a changed culture emerged as key approaches for success (Lewis et al., 2006).

While directly reaching employees with key organizational messages rather than cascading communication helps in timebound situations (Proctor & Doukakis, 2003), involving supervisors can enable deeper appreciation of the change goals (Salem, 2008). Salem (2008) argues that the valuable role of managers in transformational change is discounted and that management believes in the wrong assumption that producing communication with the right words brings about commitment to changes. Likewise, considering communication skills while hiring is a good practice because social interactions at the workplace make sense of change. Investing in training people on interpersonal communications helps. The use of technologies such as intranet and e-mail work best for change communication although conventional approaches to change management do work in influencing employee attitudes and management behaviors. Tapping into human psychology is an important strategy which most organizations fail to grasp (Keller & Aiken, 2009).

Studying the role of internal communications in a large-scale change in a multinational organization, it was found that meetings in small groups helped to explain and reinforce change. On the other hand, large meetings resulted in a lack of dialogue and two-way communications. Written communication was best for delivering data and information, although they were inappropriate while disseminating knowledge, skills, and wisdom (Stoyanova, 2011).

Although social media use in organizations is nascent, it is considered important and has a consequence on organizational change. They influence socialization, information sharing, and power processes, essential for communicating, and embedding change (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). By connecting people and creating a forum of sharing information, communication serves as an important approach to meet employee demands and develop a conducive situation through dialogue, feedback and transparency (Stankovic-Rice, 2011). Social media helps to facilitate goodwill toward the organization leading to change and renewal. A study among executives across different industries discovered that about half of their companies had adopted social media initiatives and of these 60% had a positive impact on the surveyed organizations' internal communications. Social media can help influence change among employees by creating feelings of trust, playfulness, belonging, and pride (Huy & Shipilov, 2012).

Storytelling is another valued approach to help communicate change effectively. Framing communications helps to diffuse conflicts, diminish

the value of informal channels of communications, and share a unified narrative, binding stakeholders (Keller & Aiken, 2009). Feedback is crucial for change acceptance and needs to be included in the process of framing (van Vuuren & Elving, 2008). By creating a memorable story and inviting stakeholders to tackle complex problems facing a healthcare facility in the United States, it turned around the center's fortunes. Not only did employee morale and engagement improve, it also rallied the community and raised funds for future expansion. (Adamson et al., 2006).

## Measuring Strategic Change Communication

Measurement of strategic change and communications is less established among organizations. While internal communications influence how change is accepted among employees, there are limited tools and resources to gauge its effectiveness (Harkness, 2000). Of the six factors of facilitating change (leading, communicating, learning, measuring, involving, and sustaining), measurement had one of the biggest impacts on overall change success. Organizations that are highly effective at change management are much better at measuring progress against goals than are lower effectiveness organizations (Towers Watson, 2011).

The traditional measures of change success were scope, time, and cost. These are no more relevant in a fiercely competitive environment. The need to demonstrate how businesses matched their goals with tangible benefits is the need of the hour. Organizations that completed 80% or more of their projects on time, within budgets, mapped to objectives and helped realize business benefits were considered successful (Project Management Institute, 2018). This is corroborated by the IBM Institute for Business Value study (2014) that discovered that project completion is considered the top measure of change management (IBM, 2014). Change is also measured by the readiness of the organization, individual and group as well as their receptivity.

Ranging from negative to positive, receptivity is a measure of the openness to change (Armenakis & Harris, 2002; Frahm & Brown, 2007).

Demonstrating positive intent by taking the views of employees on board can improve how strategic change communication is received. There is still progress to be made. For example, while 71% of organizations consider and act on employee suggestions, only 8% encourage dialogue via collaboration tools (IBM, 2014). Another gap is that practitioners have scarce abilities to conduct thorough communication

evaluation or the understanding of valuation methods, thereby limiting measuring organizational change impact (Zerfass et al., 2017).

Finally, measurement can be considered at all stages of the change management process and include the role of communications. For example, asking employees about the quality of the change communication, gauging the effectiveness of the different messages and media used to inform employees, and understanding the extent to which the knowledge of the objectives of the change was accepted, can help measure success (Elving, 2005).

## Summary

Managing change is a complex process and there is no one-size, fits-all model. Every change brings unique challenges and expects specific change design and communication. Organizations who invest and implement effective communication and change management strategies are financially successful. Involving change and internal communications professionals early in the journey can create positive value and outcomes. Building trust, creating a culture receptive to change and influencing behaviors can help overcome resistances.

## Interview

Mahul Brahma, Ph.D. and DLitt heads Communications, CSR and Branding at mjunction Services Limited. A former journalist, Mahul is an award-winning communicator, a renowned luxury commentator and an author. He is the alumnus of institutes such as Indian Institute of Management (India) and University of Cambridge (UK).

1. **How is strategic change communications and management understood in your organization?**

Any change that influences how an organization progresses on its strategy across all levels is strategic change management. For example, a change in management, repurposing the organization or an improved brand positioning exercise. Strategic change management is a journey and that's how the organization approaches the subject.

2. **What is the role of communication in change management?**

Communication plays a crucial role as strategic change needs buy-in from all stakeholders including those outside the organization. Communication helps accelerate how organizations convey the imperative for change and presents a strong narrative from senior management. Without communication, strategic change will be ineffective.

3. **What signs tell you that communication in change management works? How do you differentiate between effective or ineffective communications?**

Strategic change is effective when the organization is ready and there is a sense of alignment among stakeholders. It can fail to fructify if stakeholders don't understand the rationale and don't trust the motive. Effectiveness of change is an outcome of the degree of stakeholders' alignment. Ineffective communication can result in poor understanding. On the other hand, effective communication is inclusive, clear and takes stakeholders along the journey.

4. **Which channels work best while communicating strategic change?**

It is key that stakeholders hear directly from senior management to establish context and importance. Therefore, channels such as face-to-face Town Halls and open Q&A forums are essential as platforms for stakeholders to engage and clarify the change. Co-creating change alongside stakeholders means staying transparent and involving them early. Internal communication channels such as discussion forums and mailers help in conveying change.

5. **What are the key obstacles or challenges while going about strategic change management?**

The key challenge is when your stakeholders, internal and external, aren't in agreement with the change. Since change creates uncertainty and stakeholders can feel insecure, communication needs to address relevance and context. For example, if the change entails automation of roles at the

workplace using machine learning and artificial intelligence, stakeholders may fear losing their jobs. By explaining how impacted employees will be retrained and rebadged for other critical roles in the organization can help improve change acceptance.

6. **How are employees included in change management and communications?**

Senior management needs to convince stakeholders that change is a win–win for all involved. By explaining how strategic change allows the organization to be resilient and overcome macroeconomic situations, leaders can involve employees to voice their thoughts, be change agents and support change. For example, when a company shuts down stores it is perceived to be bad news. However, if the organization explains that reducing loss making units can help keep the business running and turnaround fortunes in the future, it can alleviate the concerns.

7. **Please share a recent example of a strategic change management practice.**

When the pandemic swept across the globe, working from home became the norm. However, the strategic change of working remotely created opportunities for the leadership to communicate the benefits of collaborating virtually, saving time and improving efficiencies. Employees shared ideas to reduce costs, directed their energies on more fruitful projects and increased knowledge sharing. That dramatically resulted in productivity improvement across the organization.

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