CHANGE COMMUNICATION

The missing link in change programmes
Getting the organisation on board when implementing a new strategy, a new system or new processes continues to be one of management’s greatest headaches.

Despite the acknowledgement that communication is key when implementing change, change efforts often fall short due to poorly designed communication. In this article, we offer some common misconceptions about change communication and share seven simple steps for how to perform more effective change communication.

Most change initiatives start with the best intentions to improve or optimise one or more aspects of the organisation’s everyday operations. The problem is that most initiatives tend to stay like that – an initiative. More than 70% of all change initiatives are considered to fall short in meeting their original intent. Why does change often die with the project that was supposed to foster it?

One overarching constraint is the rare ability to provide clarity and engagement throughout the project. A study performed by Project Management Institute offers the conclusion that poorly managed communication is to blame in more than 50% of the capsized efforts. In contrast, projects with effective communication reach their objectives 80% of the time. Taken into account how vital it is for the success of businesses to implement changes successfully, it is paradoxical how permissive many are when handling communication. Effective change communication simply does not happen by accident, and relying only on conveying facts and figures to rationalise the reason for change only creates the illusion that communication has taken place. In truth, this can at best be regarded as information.

While executives often acknowledge that communication is crucial to the success of implementing organisational change, an inconvenient truth continues to haunt change projects. Research depicts that many seem to have been seduced into thinking that they are doing it better than they actually are. As an example, while 62% of executives perceive themselves as succeeding in communicating strategic alignment, only 43% of project managers agree with this self-evaluation.

These conclusions point in the same direction. A well-thought communications strategy, designed to prepare and engage the organisation in the change from the point of departure, increases the odds of success. Without it, chances are that the desired change the project was set up to entail is doomed before it ever stood a chance to succeed.

Successfully implementing change initiatives should start with the acknowledgement that, no matter the ambition or the content of the change, it’s essentially about people who must do things differently tomorrow than they do today. The recipients of the change are always the most influential change driver, as they are, in most instances, those who must change behaviour.

Even though this perception is often shared by management, most projects curiously fall short when it comes to executing change communication. In this article, we touch upon some common misconceptions about change communication, which we have encountered when working with communication in a broad spectrum of change projects. In extension, we offer a simple 7-step approach for how to perform better change communication.
7-step approach to Change Communication

Follow-up communication
- Adjust the communication plan as the project matures with new inputs
- Launch new initiatives targeted for specific segments

Track change impact
- Track how the organisation is moving up the acceptance ladder
- Define barriers and opportunities

Activate communication initiatives
- Introduce the core story and put it in the heart of all communication activities
- Cascade communication through the organisation
- Apply a multi-channel approach

Communication strategy and plan
- Define principles for the communication
- Plan how to cascade the communication to the organisation
- Identify what channels to utilise

Change readiness assessment
- Understand how the organisation feels about the change
- Identify motivation issues, obstacles or resistance to the change
- Identify communication needs in relation to the change

Core story
- Set a clear direction by establishing a common language about the change ahead
- Frame the project in a rational and emotionally appealing story
- Articulate the why, how and what behind the strategic aspirations

Key messages
- Develop the segments based on the most relevant parameters
- Develop the right messages for the right segments

1. Understand the organisation and the people who must change
2. Create a common language about the change
3. Identify segments and develop key messages
4. Plan how to communicate with impact
5. Launch communication
6. Evaluate impact
7. Reinforce
Our employees will support the change because they have to

There is a big difference between accepting a change and supporting a change. While silence and obedience are often perceived as support, in most cases it is merely acceptance of the change. This is far from being supportive and motivated to embark on new behaviours. For changes to be successful, it requires vocal and engaged ambassadors who take ownership for the success of the change.

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Our employees see the world the same way we do

It’s a human trait to project one’s own world views to others, thinking that the counterpart is in perfect agreement with you. Unfortunately, communication in change projects is often no different. If the communication to those who must change does not reflect the reality or perception of the receiver, it will not resonate. Instead, it is likely to be perceived as irrelevant or even alienating. Similar to marketing communications, change communication must also be built on insights of the target group – in this case the organisation. For unapparent reasons, retrieving insights from the organisation in an attempt to understand their hopes and fears is often neglected. Instead, what leads the communication is based on what management feels is important rather than on the needs of the organisation.

If you have ever experienced why change initiatives only remain a priority for management and not as an organisation-wide journey, this is most likely the scenario. Our claim is that all managers will gain valuable input to implementing change with greater impact, if they grab the opportunity to scratch the surface of the organisation and understand the emotions that hide beneath.

If we don’t have the answer, we should avoid the conversation

Do you know the type of person who always has the answer to everything? It’s rarely a characteristic that builds trust or relationships. On the opposite, it often makes the person seem self-sufficient and supercilious. More importantly, it sends the signal to others that their input or assessment is not important or valued. Imagine how this looks in an organisational setting. When announcing changes, not having all the answers should not be perceived as a weakness. Instead, it’s an opportunity to gain trust as it sends a signal of honesty and provides the foundation for dialogue and involving the organisation in providing the answer.

We gave them the facts and figures, so we should be on track

Facts, figures and plans are important in change communication as it lays the foundation for rationally understanding the change. Most people emphasise this in the purpose of the change but neglect the importance of making the facts, figures and plans easy to digest and understand. Rational messages should never stand alone, if the ambition is to mobilise and engage the organisation, as it speaks only to the mind. This is probably the most common mistake we have experienced when doing change projects – underestimating emotions. For management to appeal to the employees’ hearts and take into account how all people are motivated by fulfilling a larger purpose is the key ingredient of change communication.

If you recognise one or more of the above, you are not alone. Despite an increasing awareness of the pitfalls in
change initiatives and the importance of conducting some degree of change management, too often insight-driven change communication is neglected. Communication often ends up as an ad hoc discipline executed in short bursts when launching the change. Of course, doing something is better than doing nothing. But the occasional ad hoc messages will not get the job done. Often, we meet the perception that change can be communicated in a one-off launch when introducing a new structure, process or strategy in the organisation. The reason for doing so is not unjustified, as this is the moment where the tangible change should occur. However, the foundation for change to happen is laid months before, when the organisation is made aware of changes in the horizon. Communicating a shared core story about the change before the change actually occurs is simply paramount to winning people over and setting a common direction. There is no reason to preach about the story. You are not trying to cross a desert. What is important is that it’s provided at the beginning of the project to establish a common language about the changes ahead, fuel new conversations and provide the organisation with a clear purpose.

So, if you are on the verge of launching a new change initiative, ask yourself – do you have the organisation on board? If not, feel free to find inspiration in this simple approach to change communication.

As simple as this approach might seem, it stands in stark contrast to how most change programmes are planned. Firstly, because it articulates the phases leading up to communication being rolled out. Secondly, because it considers communication to be a continuous process rather than a tool. This implies that the organisational impact of the messages should always be measured, as the project matures and constantly reinforces impact with adjusted communication. Just by understanding communication as a well-planned stream of action, moving the organisation from awareness to engagement and ownership will get you a long way.

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About Implement Consulting Group

Implement Consulting Group is a Scandinavian-based consultancy engaged in creating sustainable change and transformation.

The company was established in 1996 and has approximately 850 employees across offices in Copenhagen, Aarhus, Oslo, Stockholm, Malmö, Munich and Zürich.

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