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 insights FROM ALPMA

Communicating change

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Do you recognise these comments about change in organisations?
'Why are we doing this? Our organisation is successful — this is just change for change's sake!'

'I sent the email! How can people say they're not informed?', or

'My manager doesn't seem to know what's going on'.

Chances are, you've heard them many times. For some organisations, these become the reasons why organisational change fails. And failed change can have major consequences for an organisation, such as major financial write offs, lost opportunities to be more competitive and a rise in employee cynicism and turnover.

Most managers and change specialists know by now how important it is to communicate throughout each stage of an organisational change. But too often, organisational communication is little more than advertising — easily ignored, discounted or deleted.

What do we know about how to make change communication effective? The sad truth is that good quality research in organisational change is rare. Much of what we do in change management is based on anecdotal evidence, the advice of our colleagues or experts, or our own experiences. But we also need to understand the research and theory behind why something has worked or not worked so we can apply it intelligently to our organisation, otherwise we risk wasting time on fads.

Most leaders underestimate the difficulty of change

Recent research conducted in Australia by Dennis Turner and Michael Crawford at the Australian Graduate School of Management made some startling findings. The research was based on 240 case studies of change in 140 private and public sector organisations in Australia and New Zealand.

About 90 per cent of executives believed that the change was the right one for their organisation; and 92 per cent believed their organisations were capable of achieving the required change.

But only 33 per cent of changes achieved partial or complete success. This means that the majority of change initiatives failed — wasting everyone's time, energy and money.

It also tells us that most leaders are over-confident about change. They overestimate their own and their managers' capability to lead change. They delegate when they should get involved. They need to get out and about, at meetings and workshops, in people's offices, workstations and lunchrooms. They are not involved enough in communicating change — they press the 'send button' too often.

Three change capabilities

The second important finding of this research is that there are three success factors for change — called ‘change capabilities’. These are found in organisational systems and processes and in the people. They can be learned and developed, and they can also be run down and forgotten.

These three change capabilities are:

- *engagement* — engaging people’s hearts and minds in the business and its future direction and influencing them to act;
- *performance management* — proactively managing the factors that drive the organisation’s performance to ensure it achieves what it intends; and

change, try this quick test. Ask the CEO or managing partner, the change project leader and a random sample of people in your organisation, from a mixture of levels, functions and locations, the following communication reality check.

1. Why are we making this change?
2. How will it benefit our clients, employees, shareholders or other stakeholders?
3. What will happen if we don’t change?

If you get the same, correct, answers from everyone in your survey, your communication is effective. If not, there is more to do.

In most organisations, the senior executives or partners have a clear

We are so bombarded with email, we screen it out, we select what to read or delete and we interpret it based on our personal experiences and preferences.

- *development* — developing all the resources — personal, technological, and systems and processes needed to achieve the firm’s future direction.

Of the three, engagement is the most important. As engagement in change increases, success increases; as engagement decreases, so does success.

Communication plays a key part in engaging people in the change process — it’s necessary to get people to understand the need for change, the direction and content of the change, how change will happen and their role in it.

A key part of communicating change is listening. Behind every comment from a change weary or change resistant employee or manager, are the seeds of a solution.

The ‘why’ of change

Lets go back to the comment: ‘Why are we doing this?’. The ‘why’ of change is a key message that needs to be communicated and understood at all levels in the organisation.

If you want to know how you are going with communicating the ‘why’ of

understanding of the need for the change, which they have developed over months or years of analysis, debate and discussions with their staff, customers and stakeholders. But managers and employees outside this group often have a limited understanding of the need for change.

Senior managers believe there is not enough time to explain to, or educate, people about the changing business environment. Financial information is kept secret; the need for change gets watered down, simplified and often distorted; and information about the change that could be used to engage people, and to wake up the sleepyheads and cynics, gathers dust in a filing cabinet.

A team from the Australian Tax Office (ATO) I worked with recently had no idea, until our change management training, that the project they were working on was the most significant change in the nation’s taxation system. The consensus was it was ‘just another IT project dreamed up by senior management’. After we discussed the reason for the change and

its benefits, I asked them: 'How many times in your career will you work on a change this important?' 'Once,' they said. Our 20 minute discussion helped them to realise the significance of the change, not just for IT or the ATO, but also for Australia. Engagement and commitment in these people was waiting to be activated.

Communication

'I sent the email! How can people say they're not informed?'

Communication is the response that you receive — it's not what you send. If people say they were not informed, then you haven't communicated, no matter how many emails you sent.

Email is a quick, consistent and cheap means of broadcasting a message. It's ideal for relaying brief, factual information. But it's not communication — it's advertising. We are so bombarded with email, we screen it out, we select what to read or delete and we interpret it based on our personal experiences and preferences. Email is fine for 'lean' communication that is simple and emotionally neutral. But it is useless, and even counterproductive, for any 'rich' communication; that is, messages that are complex, have an emotional content or that require dialogue to develop genuine understanding.

Communicating change only takes place in one way: face to face.

When people meet face to face, they can have open, authentic conversations. These conversations do not happen by chance. They need to be carefully designed, structured and facilitated. They need to be planned and integrated into change programs.

I can hear the chorus of objections already. 'It's so time consuming and we are busy', 'time is money', and 'it's expensive and difficult to get everyone in the same room together'.

Yes, it's true that face to face communication is all these things, but have you heard this saying? 'If you think education is expensive, try ignorance'. Ditto for change: 'If you think face to face communication is expensive, try failed change'.

A team I worked with in 2005 discovered at a team building session in

week five of a project that they had completely misunderstood their role. In a team purpose activity, they described their role as *recommending* solutions. The project sponsor intended their role as *implementing* solutions. The team manager had had to persuade head office to allow him to spend \$600 on the training. The team was about to waste hundreds of thousands of dollars and thousands of hours heading down the wrong path.

In my experience, the best communication on the 'why' of change always has an experiential element. Rather than the CEO or HR director simply telling people why they need to change with a 100 slide PowerPoint presentation, we need to create a process of discovery in which people connect the dots themselves. Adults learn through discovery and dialogue, not dot points.

A large food company started an IT project with a 'kick off' workshop for the project team. The first item on the agenda was 'the need for the change'. People rolled their eyes, muttered and complained that this was change for change's sake.

The activity we asked them to do was simple: write a list of all the software programs and systems their team or department use to do its work in typical month. As people read out their lists, we wrote them up on flip charts. Half way through the exercise, people were laughing in shocked amazement as they realised that their global organisation was being managed on hundreds of Excel worksheets stored in individual PCs around the country. The data on which the company based major decisions, and which affected its operations and performance, was fragmented, often inaccurate and completely insecure. It took months instead of minutes to gather information and make decisions. The response from the team to this engagement activity was: 'Why have we waited so long to upgrade our systems? Let's get going.'

Leadership support

'My manager doesn't seem to know what's going on.'

A worldwide benchmarking study by

Prosci Research in 2005 identified the number one success factor for change: the active and visible support of a senior leader in sponsoring the change. This means senior leaders and project sponsors cannot delegate change communications to HR teams and change specialists.

Change is a team activity — middle managers, team leaders and supervisors all have a role to play. There are no spectators in communicating change.

TJ and Sandar Larkin's research into communicating change found that most employees want to hear about change from their direct manager. They trust him or her to tell them what is really going on and why.

When middle managers resist change, in most cases it is because they have been left out of the change process — either they had no input into the direction of change or key decisions, or their role was relegated to a recipient of change rather than a shaper and driver.

The message is: enable, insist, coax and cajole line managers into taking a major role in communicating change. Give them the time, skill and support they need to do it well. Hold them accountable for doing it, like any other management priority. Give them an opportunity to understand, debate and shape the change before they communicate it. Reward those managers who communicate well or who are trying, support those who do not perform — the success of your change depends on it. ●



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