

Change for the Better— How Communicators Can Make Change Work

by Dennis R. Ackley

Too many employee communicators have gotten splinters jumping on the “change management” bandwagon. Communication techniques that worked well for other programs have not always been effective in introducing new ways of working.

The “it’s coming” early announcement of the new program; offering multiple ways to get questions answered; building the communication campaign on techniques borrowed from other organizations; involving employees in all aspects of the program; and cascading of information through layers of management — all best practices of change communication. Yet in hindsight, these techniques may have contributed to the downfall of some change management initiatives.

Senior management too often blames poor communication as a culprit of unsuccessful change programs. But the communicators responsible for some unsuccessful efforts frequently were seasoned professionals using the “best practices.”

So maybe it’s time to rethink the change communication process. Continuing to do more of what hasn’t worked isn’t likely to alter the outcome.

Faster Communication is Better

If the leaders have a new vision of where the organization needs to go — and a solid plan of how to get there — communicators need to create their own plan to help move it there fast. If the “old school” was to take six months or more for the communication rollout, develop an accelerated

communication plan to do it in three months, or even faster.

The business case for every redesigned work process is based on making money, saving money, or adding value. Communicate the fact that doing these things sooner is better. Shareholders will appreciate speed. Customers will also like it if the

new process improves service, reduces prices, or improves quality.

Equally important, speed makes the transition more humane. Employees who adopt the new work behaviors get reinforced and rewarded sooner — eliminating their

apprehensions more quickly. Employees who choose not to change their behaviors — or are unable — can more quickly decide to pursue their careers elsewhere. The longer the process allows them to hang on, the more discord they generate. It can be like slowly removing a Band-Aid: not productive, not humane.

Communicate in Concert With HR

Speed is vital, but it’s not how quickly you start. It’s how fast and how well you communicate *once you get started*. The communication should not start before the supporting human resources systems are ready or nearly ready; just because it can begin sooner is not a reason to go ahead. Corporate communicators are in the business of making organizations successful — not the news business.

When to start communicating is a sensitive, emotional, and critical issue. Sure, early communication can help shape employee

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expectations. And employees deserve to know what's up. But being told change is coming and then waiting for it is torturous for employees and unproductive for the organization. In an environment of uncertainty, good employees become prime targets to be acquired by competitors. The aim is not simply to get the word out before it gets on the grapevine (although that's important), but to implement change successfully, keep good employees, and remain productive. Also, remember that for organizational change to happen, it must be aligned with related HR practices. Launching communication without them dooms the effort, and the communication will be blamed.

Get “Say” and “Do” in Sync

It's damaging to get the “say” far ahead of the “do.” At best, this generates cynicism among employees; at worst, it destroys trust.

The communicator's job is to help say what the organization values and where it intends to go — and to do it in a way that reflects what you say. The synchronization of say/do is critical in earning (and re-earning) the trust of employees. Trust is an essential fuel of passion — the well-known secret ingredient of high-performing organizations. In the business vernacular, trust means believability and passion means commitment. But don't let the words obscure what business leaders know: Where you find employees who have passion about their employer, you're likely to find a successful and humane organization. So a communicator's success formula is:

[Say = Do] ⇒ [Trust + Passion].

But remember to view the “do” through the same lens as employees. Employees see the employee communication function as an integral part of the employer. The actions communicators take — what you do and when you do it — are viewed as part of the organization's behavior. If those actions do not directly support the intended vision or new way of working, you've let the “say and do” get out of sync.

For example, if the organization is going to ask employees to demonstrate new ways of working (the “say”), at the same time it must be prepared to help them acquire, measure, and be rewarded for the new behaviors (the “do”). Why

should people change their work behaviors if the organization continues to reward the current ones? Organizations should expect to get what they are paying for.

Saying one thing and doing another is a dysfunctional behavior that will probably be mimicked by too many employees.

That is why the “do” — the performance measurement, pay, recognition, training, work process, employee feedback, and even the recruiting and selection systems — must be ready to support the new way of working. Without this supporting framework, the communication alone cannot succeed.

What About Me?

It's cruel to start telling employees about the new work process if there's uncertainty they'll be part of it. Furthermore, much of the communication will be ignored by employees who are distracted by the critical “*me*” issues:

How about my job, my pay, and my future career opportunities?

What does the organization expect me to do?

How will the organization help me gain the new skills?

How does the organization intend to measure my progress and assess my performance when I'm working in the new way?

A necessary, yet unfortunate, element of the communication will involve what the organization will do for employees who will no longer have a role with the company. What's done for these employees, and how it's explained to everyone, will send a clear message about how the organization really values people.

Not the Same Things Faster

Accelerating the communication about the new work process requires going through all the necessary steps quickly — while attaining the intended results — but not before the strategy is defined and the appropriate HR systems are in place.

Adding speed is not just using old communication techniques with more hustle. It

requires communicators to identify what matters the most: high-impact techniques and messages. Sweat everything, but don't let the small stuff slow the big stuff.

Communicators must:

Be assertive. Incremental change will not do. Avoid communicating in “bite-sized pieces” over a long period. Otherwise, the proponents of the *status quo* will be subjected to a form of Chinese water torture — small, continuous droplets of change. Not productive. Not humane.

Be bold. Don't imply there's room for compromise. If you do, the leaders will waste energy fighting a host of small battles. They'll lose a few — and the momentum.

Describe Excellence in Action

Defeat uncertainty by describing “excellence in action” for employees. Uncertainty is the killer of workplace change. For communicators, the first step is often to help leaders articulate their vision of “excellence in action” by working with them to define:

Where we're headed and how we'll know when we've arrived.

Why we need to get there and what will likely happen if we don't.

How we intend to get there and when.

How the organization will help employees get there.

What employees can expect from the organization.

What the organization expects from the employees.

Communication is essential, but it cannot lead — only leaders can lead. And to be effective, leaders must be visible, not hidden behind a blizzard of paper and electronic communication. Use communication to support leadership — and to build and maintain the momentum.

Communicators as Master Painters

The most important job of an employee communicator is to use an array of effective media to “paint” a vivid and compelling picture of the leaders' vision of the organization — the details of “excellence in action.”

The most powerful medium is face-to-face — leaders personally delivering the messages communicators helped create to provide a well-defined picture. Other communication techniques will need to fill in details and reinforce the messages.

By looking at the picture you create, employees will see what the organization will be doing when the business strategies are working. They can determine what responsibilities they will or will not have. Your picture is the target that employees can use in aiming their efforts and deciding how they can help hit it.

In getting the organization to move toward the new vision, it is essential that communicators help employees see what they are expected to accomplish. And employees must then have the opportunity to participate in creating and implementing the work activities that will make the new vision happen.

As the global marketplace continues to redefine what the organization must do to survive, your picture will need more brush strokes. You'll need to add new details of what actions will be required and rewarded — and what actions no longer support the organization's momentum.

Review Previous Techniques

Identify the techniques that were previously used to communicate new “programs”. Don't use them for the next “change communication.” No slogans. No T-shirts. No kickoff celebrations. Don't leave the impression this is a program. Ongoing change must become the norm.

Change for the Better

If the redesigned work process is viewed by employees as “another program,” that’s the first step toward failure. The continual pursuit of higher levels of customer satisfaction, quality, and shareholders’ value through ongoing innovation and renewal must be viewed as a positive, vital, and never-ending aspect of a successful organization.

The majority of the communicators’ efforts in implementing workplace change should be spent on reporting the progress — reinforcing the “excellence in action.” Highlight accomplishments of employees who are demonstrating the new way of working. Create an e-mail box or website that shares and celebrates employee “wins.” Distribute a video that shows customers discussing how the new way of working adds value to the products and services they purchase.

Create a Set of Guiding Principles

In designing your communication approach, work with leaders to agree on the values that will guide the communication effort. These are the “it goes without saying” statements that are assumed to be universally accepted — until you find out they’re not. Many of these values should be publicized; all should be practiced. Here are some examples. Throughout the workplace redesign process, communication will:

Describe everything in clear, candid, and straightforward terms.

Clarify who will communicate what by when.

Use high-status, high-credibility supervisors and leaders to deliver the key information.

Involve employees in determining how the redesign will be implemented — make sure they know what they should influence (and what they can’t — for example, reverse the decision to redesign the work process or delay the timing of it).

Demonstrate that the organization cares about its employees, customers, and other key groups.

Deliver the information in a timely manner — as viewed by employees.

Explain again and again how the redesign adds value and to whom.

Describe the effort that went into defining the new direction.

Outline some of the alternatives that were considered.

Explain — don’t sell.

Live the intended values — communicate in the new way of working.

Avoid trendy business jargon — it adds a “program of the moment” impression.

Tell employees it won’t be easy — learning how to be successful in new ways takes effort.

Use a variety of communication channels — never underestimate the importance of face-to-face communication.

Obtain buy-in and support from supervisors — senior leaders must require it and punish those who don’t promote the process.

Coordinate what gets said to whom and when — employees must receive the same messages that go to the press and shareholders.

Communicate Aggressively

Address issues before employees raise them, and don’t let employees think they must ask questions to get answers. Avoid the over-promotion of Q&A-style newsletters and “frequently asked questions” flyers. Broadcast the details — don’t use one-on-one techniques for general information.

Don’t conduct early focus groups to ask employees the obvious: “What would you like to know about the new direction, and when would you like to hear it?” If leaders and the communication professionals don’t know, asking employees will only prove they’re out of touch. Not a strong leadership stance. Later in the communication process, focus groups are a terrific tool to find out what messages are getting through and how the communication and implementation process can be fine-tuned.

The Communicator's Short List

Clarify the expectations through “excellence-in-action” statements and examples — describe what will be happening when employees are acting in the “new work way.”

Focus on the essentials — the communication activities that are likely to have the greatest impact toward attaining success, and be accomplished quickly.

Report and celebrate what is being done — avoid simply saying what to do.

Heavily involve supervisors — tell employees what their supervisors are expected to communicate — and tell supervisors that their employees will be asked for feedback on the communication.

Send crucial messages directly from senior leadership. Avoid “filtering” and “spinning” through layers of messengers.

Address the “*me*” issues as soon as possible.

Leave the impression — and make it the fact — that everyone gets the same information.

Creating the Excellence-in-Action Communication Plan

Leaders don't look for well-worn paths to follow. So to lead the communication effort, use best practices for ideas — not direction. What works in other organizations may be completely out of sync with the intended values and work processes your organization wants to pursue. Collecting information provides only information — not a map.

Start creating your plan by assembling a team of communicators, HR representatives, and senior leaders. Use the team's collective insight on your organization — along with pads of blank paper — to chart the course for using communication to support your organization's transition. Get the team to create a wish list; e.g., “I wish we could develop the perfect communication campaign that would...” (fill in the blanks).

- Get all employees to understand _____.

- Use effective communication tools, including _____.
- Accomplish these vital things _____.
- Eliminate common misunderstandings, including _____.
- Reduce major uncertainties, e.g. _____.

Next, develop the key messages by creating the “road signs” that will help the employees to:

- Recognize “excellence in action” behaviors.
- Learn the new skills needed to stay on the right track.
- Avoid hazards and obstacles.
- Identify inappropriate actions – unwanted old ways of working (the old “road signs” must be torn down).
- Know they're on the right path.

Then make a list of what the team believes employees expect to learn, by when, from whom. Determine how these expectations can be met or modified.

With a clear view of the goals, messages and expectations, the team can select the best approaches to meeting the communication challenges and the means of measuring progress.

The next step is to organize the communication into five stages. Spend a good deal of time on stages four and five — that's where momentum is built and maintained.

1. Prepare for the journey — develop the communication plan to support the new workplace strategy (link communication to the new direction, agree upon guiding principles, objectives, and key messages).
2. Select the best path — identify your key audiences, major obstacles, best communication vehicles, milestones, measures, tactics, and responsibilities.
3. Begin the journey — launch the communication effort and set the right tone and expectations, orchestrating what messages get sent, by whom, by what means, in what

sequence, and preparing for additional activities if the messages are not received in the way they were intended.

4. Maintain the momentum (from the start and throughout the transition); add further definition and new details.
5. Reinforce the new direction (when success is in sight); report on excellence in action.

Your Road Map

As a result of this planning, you will have a road map that outlines:

Objectives — what we will do.

Alignment — how the “do” (our tactics) supports the new “say” (our strategy).

Messages — what we will communicate.

Milestones — when the communication is made and reinforced.

Measurement — how we know we did what we intended.

About Change Management

“Change” and “management” are two dirty words to avoid in change management communication. “Change,” as in “the company will change the ways employees conduct...” will be translated by employees to: “You’re doing it wrong. So we’re going to change things.” From the employees’ view, when something has to change, there must be someone to blame.

Communicating about change also leaves the impression that stability will be re-established when the change is completed. That won’t happen. That’s why it’s better to replace change with these messages: grow, improve, renew, pursue higher levels of customer satisfaction, re-aim resources and efforts, and strengthen links to our customers. The word “change” is fine when it describes customers’ expectations: “To meet our customers’ changing needs better, we are improving....”

As for the other dirty word, “management,” a message like “Through management efforts, the company will implement a better...” will be translated by employees to mean, “We executives will use our wisdom and authority to develop the

right ways of getting work done.” “Management” is another word for being told what to do.

The word “management” can be replaced with leadership. Employees don’t want to be managed. They want to be part of a successful team that has good leadership. And leaders don’t want employees who want to be managed. They want employees who are self-reliant and who use their brains and efforts to demonstrate excellence in action. By the way, if executive management teams heard the Board say, “It’s time to change management,” they wouldn’t appreciate the words either.



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Dennis Ackley

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