The Value of Communications in an Ever-Changing Environment

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INTRODUCTION

Around the world, many people have experienced large-scale change due to COVID-19. The pandemic has impacted various areas including healthcare, child and elder care, the transition to remote work or temporary business closures, travel restrictions and limits to personal socialization. During this time, there has been a deluge of information from various sources—each with a distinct perspective on the unfolding events. The circumstances are unparalleled and clearly illustrate the necessary role of effective communication through periods of intense change.

Recent months have demonstrated that in new or uncertain situations, people may create their own narratives about what is happening unless a clear explanation is provided. These scenarios may differ from what is actually happening, which can result in misinterpretation or change resistance. Without a compelling case for transformation and a clear vision of what the future should look like, stakeholders may question the need for change or even opt out entirely. This reaction is a natural human response to the unknown, as people typically fear what they do not understand.

While incomplete or missing communication may result in resistance to change, effective communication can inform impacted people about what to expect and prepare them to respond productively. The right communications strategy helps set expectations and connect people to appropriate resources so that they can adapt to new situations, adopt supporting behaviors and pave the way toward realizing the full value of change.

So, how do organizations prepare people for change?

COMMUNICATIONS IN ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE MANAGEMENT

Organizational Change Management (OCM) is the strategic analysis, planning, execution and measurement of activities for navigating the workforce and workplace impacts of new technologies, operating models or performance expectations. Simply put, OCM addresses the 'people' side of transformation to help organizations efficiently and effectively reach and sustain a target future state. Organizations that prioritize the people impacts of transformation can accelerate project value, including projects that require integrated business consulting capabilities and deep technological expertise.

However, when OCM is only introduced at the end of a project, and limited to activities such as setting up user training or sending follow-up emails after a solution has been deployed, its value is not fully realized. Early OCM engagement in any transformation lifecycle is critical— otherwise, change initiatives are likely to fail. In fact, 70% of change initiative efforts do not reach their desired value because OCM efforts are neglected.[1]
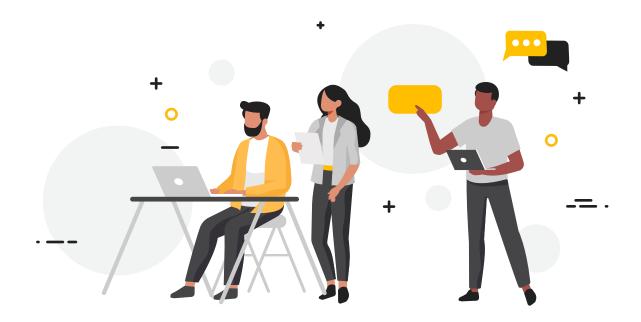
OCM practitioners utilize multiple strategies, tactics and tools to ensure the success of each transformation effort. One of the most powerful OCM techniques is communication. Effective communication enables sustained change by socializing key information and messaging through multiple channels. These communication channels build awareness and ownership around the strategy, meaning, scale, scope and timing of the adoption of new behaviors. Clear, fit-for-

purpose messages are integral to a successful transformation, whether the changes are technology or process-driven, as both require people to respond to new expectations and ways of working.

Communication modalities can, and should, take many forms to maximize impact. Although traditional email communication plays a role in OCM efforts, other communication activities may include one-on-one interaction, social media campaigns, planned team events or more formalized efforts such as surveys, interviews, instructional content videos or informational 'what's changing' sessions for those impacted. The goal of each of these efforts is to build awareness around a change and drive the adoption of new behaviors. When deployed correctly, communications create informed, committed and capable stakeholders who can do their part in supporting the transformation and effectively transition from 'business as usual' to 'new ways of working.'

Communications are an essential part of the change support process and transformation lifecycle. According to Forbes, organizations of all sizes are in a constant state of change now more than ever… one of the most important roles a leader has is to drive necessary change and evangelize its importance. Obtaining buy-in and protecting the company culture are critical and this can only be done with clear and consistent communication and follow-through.[2]

So, what does effective communication look like?

[1] https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/leadership/changing-change-management

[2] https://www.forbes.com/sites/brentgleeson/2016/10/17/8-steps-for-helping-your-employees-accept-change/#795dff9429f2

PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS

EMPOWERING & EQUIPPING STAKEHOLDERS

Communications **enable alignment** among all participants invested in the success of a project, as well as empower stakeholders to actively participate by equipping them with the knowledge and tools to contribute to successful transformation. By addressing key questions including: "Why is a change occurring? Why now? Why this way? What's in it for me?" communicators can align the change to organizational and individual goals as well as strategic drivers to build a credible business case.

To target stakeholder groups with messages relevant to their scope or function, communicators must first identify and explore the unique perspectives of specific groups before communicating. Analyzing the organizational structure, conducting stakeholder interviews and focus groups and assessing group preferences are all effective ways to gather insights about people to develop a communications strategy.
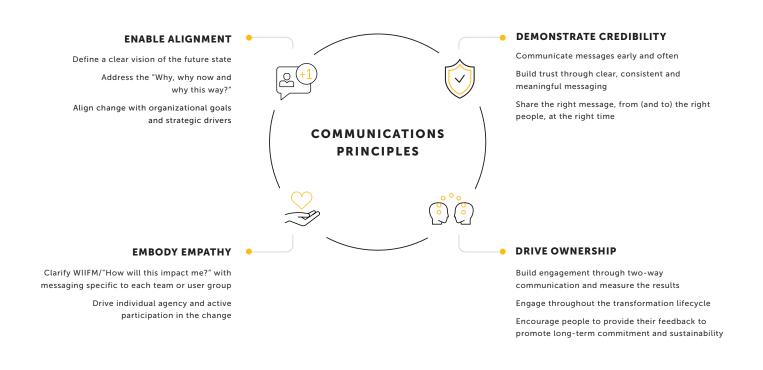
Many organizations utilize traditional hierarchical structures, as well as informal networks that combine people, partners and processes. These networked teams help facilitate a shift from rigid organizational structures that stifle communication to the enablement of fluid collaboration and communication across silos. In addition, some organizations have a complex ecosystem where every person has not one, but many roles and bi-directional interactions. In such cases, team dynamics and human relations are valued over rules, standards and

control. In these organizations, the communication approach requires an engagement model that targets informal team and network structures to enhance the overall value-creation dynamic. This engagement model promotes stakeholder alignment and active involvement in a change.

In addition, leaders and organizations can **demonstrate credibility** by communicating early and often. Trust is built through clear, timely and meaningful messages shared from (and to) the right people. Messages must **embody empathy** and explain how a change may specifically impact each end user. Human-centric language closes the gap between complex concepts and tangible actions by clearly communicating the nature of the change. The care taken to precisely communicate the gap between how things are done today and how they will need to be done in the future—and then clearly articulating what that means for the individual—is paramount to the success of an organizational transformation.

Finally, communicators should gather feedback and build engagement using two-way communications and measurement throughout the transformation lifecycle. Requesting and acting on input builds trust and promotes long-term commitment, as well as further empowers people to adapt to the change.

COMMUNICATION IS KEY TO SUCCESSFUL TRANSFORMATION

ENABLE ALIGNMENT

Define a clear vision of the future state

Address the "Why, why now and why this way?"

Align change with organizational goals and strategic drivers

DEMONSTRATE CREDIBILITY

Communicate messages early and often

Build trust through clear, consistent and meaningful messaging

Share the right message, from (and to) the right people, at the right time

COMMUNICATIONS PRINCIPLES

EMBODY EMPATHY

Clarify WIIFM/"How will this impact me?" with messaging specific to each team or user group

Drive individual agency and active participation in the change

DRIVE OWNERSHIP

Build engagement through two-way communication and measure the results

Engage throughout the transformation lifecycle

Encourage people to provide their feedback to promote long-term commitment and sustainability

DRIVING OWNERSHIP WITH TAILORED MESSAGES

Understanding what resonates with each stakeholder group also allows communicators to craft messages to address their specific perceptions and motivations. By acknowledging the beliefs that underpin an organization's culture and considering how each group may internalize these values, messages can be customized to address the unique perspectives of individuals and support their ability to make meaningful connections.

Effective communications **drive ownership** and individual agency in a change by facilitating a mindset shift from "this is happening to me" to "I am part of this change." By examining change through the eyes of impacted stakeholders, communicators can better predict obstacles and remove barriers to adoption. Anticipating the needs of others and utilizing human-first thinking provides an avenue to use empathy as an asset in the development of effective communications. These insights are then incorporated into messages to increase transparency and understanding around decision-making processes and results.

So, how do these principles apply?

KEY INSIGHTS

Experienced practitioners hone their communication skills over many years and use multiple tactics and techniques to help ensure the success of a transformational effort. Although we may not all specialize in OCM or communications, anyone can work to improve their communication skillset. Those who recognize a changing environment can incorporate the following communication best practices into their toolkit:

CRAFT CLEAR AND FIT-FOR-PURPOSE COMMUNICATION TO ENABLE ALIGNMENT, DEMONSTRATE CREDIBILITY, EMBODY EMPATHY AND DRIVE OWNERSHIP	**TRANSLATE TECHNICAL CONCEPTS TO EASILY UNDERSTOOD IDEAS AND ACTIONABLE BEHAVIORS**
UTILIZE A PEOPLE-FIRST APPROACH TO EMPOWER STAKEHOLDERS BY EQUIPPING THEM FOR THE FUTURE STATE	**CREATE A CULTURE OF BI-DIRECTIONAL COMMUNICATIONS BETWEEN SENDERS AND RECEIVERS; SHARE THE RIGHT MESSAGE, FROM (AND TO) THE RIGHT PEOPLE, AT THE RIGHT TIME**

CHANGE IS MADE POSSIBLE BY PEOPLE

Significant change can occur at any time and with little notice. Globally, lives have been impacted by the recent pandemic—from severe health and safety risks to sudden social distancing and dramatic shifts in ways of working. The situation has also highlighted how an effective communication strategy is an essential component of managing change.

When an organization works through a significant change, like a software upgrade, or a leadership or cultural change, clear and strategic communication helps ensure employee understanding, buy-in and adoption of the change, all critical to a successful change management initiative.[3]

Whether responding to a global pandemic or adjusting to new processes in the workplace, everyone has a unique role to play in managing change. Societies and organizations cannot successfully transform if its people do not also transform. Communicators who understand that individual transformation is a critical success factor can craft messages that empower people to adapt to change and adopt new behaviors.

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[3] https://hartmanadvisors.com/communication-strategies-effective-change-management/

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