Why is Communicating Change so hard to do?

Lessons learned from a PhD in change communication

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WHY IS COMMUNICATING CHANGE SO HARD TO DO?

By Jennifer Frahm

Background

Despite a wealth of best practice books on the market on how to manage change, there still exists a desperate need to improve our change communication. This is particularly important given the rate and prevalence of major change going on in business today. Change can be exciting, change can be born of opportunities, but change can also be very painful and messy for those involved. The following article is a summary of findings from my PhD research and some observations from my experience in managing change in organisations.

Methodology

My PhD is based on two case studies for which I conducted research between 2002 and 2004. I was interested in how different models of communication impact employees' experience of change. I was particularly interested in organisations that undergo continuous change; from my experience working in communication and marketing roles, my assumption was that just "communicate, communicate, communicate" was actually contributing to change fatigue and employees' cynicism. I conducted surveys over three time periods in both organisations. I also conducted focus groups and in depth interviews within the cases, and worked on site in both organisations to observe what was occurring in a natural setting.

The Case Studies

The first organization was a Government Owned Corporation (GOC) service organisation. The purpose of the organisation was to transfer new technology to the manufacturing industry (technology diffusion). Their main clients were small- to-medium enterprises (SMEs). After 12 years of operation, a new CEO arrived. This CEO had a long history of successful change programs behind him, and he favoured highly participative initiatives with an emphasis on teams and employee involvement. He had been brought in to turnaround the company -- the funding department was not so sure of what the GOC's purpose was anymore. During his leadership, there were federal funding cuts and a reduction in the state funding. The CEO's primary focus was to make the GOC more commercial, to be a "continuously changing" organisation. As he said in the early days: "Just because we're not-for-profit, doesn't mean we can't be commercially slick". The turnaround and change program took close to four years and consisted of culture change, multiple restructurings, spin-offs of business units, and new accounting systems. When I started my research there were 72 employees; at the time I finished there were 36.

The second organisation was a business unit within a large government-owned utility provider. The business unit had a retail focus, yet was still required to meet public service expectations. They too had 70 staff at the time of starting the study (May 2003), and were undergoing performance management, new product development, and a business process re-engineering program. At the time of entering the case study, the CEO of the parent organisation bought in a new manager whose mandate was halt the losses and improve gross margin. He had twelve months to turn the business around. Nine months into the program, this manager was seconded to another urgent project, and one of the middle managers was promoted to complete the turnaround. This organisation bought in a dedicated change agent for the turnaround, while the first case study did not.

Findings

The following section provides a snapshot of the four most important findings with some discussion from theory and practice.

Why is Communication so hard?

We are working with an old paradigm of what change communication is. Traditionally in MBA classes, textbooks and "how-to" guides we are taught that change is a three step process. This is founded on the work of social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1890 -1947)[1] :

Step 1: Unfreeze (create a need for change)
Step 2: Change (implement the program)
Step 3: Refreeze (institutionalize the changes)

While this is sound in principle, no change I have been involved in has ever been so simple. Most times there is little opportunity to refreeze before we are moving on to the next change. Unfortunately, most of our communication interventions follow this formula. We communicate the need for change, we announce the change, and we communicate to reinforce the change.

This communication model is built on assumptions that good change communication is about information. If we provide more information about change, we are doing a good job. There is much to support that with the continuous changes that companies, industries, and nations are facing today, three-step programs are not sufficient and we may need to adjust the way we think about communication.

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[1] Lewin, K. *Field theory in social science; selected theoretical papers.* D. Cartwright (Ed.). New York: Harper & Row, 1951

The first step is to think about communication ***during*** change, rather than communicating ***of*** change. It's a small but critical step. When we start thinking about communication during change we realise there is much more to change communication than improving the information provision. My research highlighted four key issues:

1. determining what is the purpose of your communication,
2. establishing your employees' communicative expectations,
3. developing communicative competence, and
4. engaging with the background talk of change.

1. What is the purpose of your communication during change?

When faced with multiple change programs, or continual change occurring in our organisations, we need to think very hard about what is the purpose of our communication. Simply put – do we want to create further change, or do we wish to create some stability? Both are needed at certain stages, if not simultaneously. Good change managers know when to employ different communication tools and tactics to achieve these purposes.

Communicating for stability is all about reducing the anxiety and addressing the information needs of your employees. It's about creating as clear a vision as you can and assisting the employees with making sense of what is going on. This is where we pay attention to the credibility of the communicator and make judicious choices in what mediums we use (eg email, face-to-face, intranet). We spend so much time communicating what is changing; we forget to communicate what is staying the same! When we communicate what is staying stable, we provide employees with an anchor in stormy seas, something they can cling to while they get use to what is changing.

Some things to think about with this are:

- Media selection: managers are overwhelmingly using email as a proxy for good change management practice – "Well, I sent you the email, you should have the information" – and employees are already overwhelmed by overflowing inboxes. A morning 10-minute meeting can covey a lot of information and settle things down.

- Source credibility: Who should be doing the communicating – frontline supervisors or senior management? Short answer is: It depends. This has become a contentious issue with research conflicting on the answer. Some studies suggest senior management must be the ones communicating the information, others suggest that employees prefer the frontline supervisor as there is more trust in the relationship. I discuss this more in the section on communicative expectations.

- Metaphor usage: Using metaphors when seeking to create stability has a lot of potential, but it is high risk as well. Metaphors allow us to reframe new issues in the language of the already understood. But you have to know your audience or stakeholders very well to be able to use the correct metaphor. The CEO of the first case was fond of saying "we're like a boat at sea on journey and we don't have time to go into dry dock to have our paneling replaced, but we just have to do it. This metaphor got turned around pretty fast by the employees "Yes, but how will the boat get to its destination if it the captain doesn't know where it is going?"

If, however, our purpose is **to create further change**, then we need to employ very different communication tools. These tools are informed by a very different philosophy of communication which suggests that organisational change is the product of our organisational communication. Through our communication we create new organisations, new processes, and these new organisations unfold from our conversations.

This is where the concept of organisational dialogues has stemmed from. Good dialogues are challenging to start, difficult to maintain. They demand higher-level skills and capabilities of the participants – you need to be able to listen, to be empathetic, congnisant of differences. Dialogues are particularly difficult for managers as they require managers to relinquish their power perspectives and become equal partners in the conversations.

So often we hear the words 'two-way' conversations, participative communication, and collaborative engagement. If these are all tools to achieve 'buy-in' and successful sale of your change, then the purpose is not creating further change. The purpose is creating stability by implementing the change that those in power have determined should happen. Let me very clear – participative communication is a worthy goal in itself, and usually better than a monologue, but it is not always constructive. It can be the wolf in sheep's clothing and we need to acknowledge this.

Good dialogues are messy; you don't have a preconceived plan of where they end up. You need to be comfortable with ambiguity. But good dialogue will result in new and enhanced understanding as you explore the possibilities and different positions of the participants. Organisations are born of dialogue; change erupts from dialogue. Good dialogue creates conversations for change.

The ideal of the Learning Organisation is one of the examples of communicating for further change. Made popular by Peter Senge in the book the Fifth Disciple[2], learning organisations are:

> organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.

It's a lofty goal to create a Learning Organisation. This was the goal of the CEO in the first case study. However, what we sometimes overlook is that creating a learning organisation is a change program in itself – where we need to introduce the concept, test how receptive employees are to it, and work with implementing the program. Communicating for change means focusing on the relationships and attitudes that members in your organisation have with each other. It's tough work trying to create a learning organisation if your employees speak to each other with disrespect and are focused on winning battles. This is discussed further in the section on communicative competences.

Communicating for change means skilling your people in communicative competences such as empathy, active listening, trust, risk-taking, and courage. Being courageous enough to acknowledge what you don't know, for instance, provides a conversational space to let others into a dialogue. So how do we do this? One way is by modeling the behaviours, building rewards into our performance framework on risk, empathy, and respect. If you are using 360 degree feedback tools, then make sure you are measuring the communication competences, beyond information provision. The next consideration in communication for change is creating physical space for dialogue – opportunities for constructive communication to occur either formally or informally. Think about your organisations and the physical spaces – do you have breakout rooms, do you have open door policies, who is situated on what floor?

So by reviewing your purpose of the change communication you start to recognise that there are many options available to you. The automatic default of "tell-and-sell" may not suit your purpose; it's not just as simple as soliciting input to achieve employee buy-in. Making the decision on whether to communicate for stability or whether to communicate for further change depends on knowing your employees' communicative expectations.

2. Communicative expectations.

This was one of the key learnings from my research. In planning our communication strategies and tactics during change, nobody stopped to find out

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[2] Peter Senge ,1990, *The Fifth Discipline*, Currency Doubleday, New York.

what the employees communicative expectations were within the change programs such as:

- what type of communication did they want?
- did they want to be involved?
- did they just want to be told what to do?
- did they want face-to-face or did they want written memos?
- how much information did they want?,
- who did they expect to hear from?

In talking with the people involved with these change programs there were plenty of indicators that they had expectations "They should talk to us first", "he should have", "we need more information on…", "we want to hear from…". Instead, the change agents and managers involved were working on default 'theories-in-use', eg good change management means more information, good change management means involving people from the start. The employees in the first case study had expectations that they would be provided with a step-by-step plan on how things would occur. They rejected notions of high involvement practice (that's what the CEO was paid to do!). In contrast the employees of the second case study believed they should be included from the very beginning. They marveled at the new manager "because he just listened", and were disappointed later in the process when their voice was not asked for. The lesson was fairly simple: violate the expectation and you create mistrust and cynicism, even if you have the best of intentions.

There is a fairly heated debate about who is best to do the communicating. Some researchers[3] suggest that the frontline supervisor (or direct report) is best as they have the strong relationship with the employee. Other research conducted by large consulting firms[4] suggests that senior management need to be integral in the communication plan. My research suggests you won't know until you ask.

3. Communicative Competences

Developing communicative competences is critical to be able to respond to the employees' communicative expectations. Some change agents are particularly skilled at being able to switch styles depending on the needs of the employee. They know when to employ an authoritarian information based style which unequivocally reduces the anxiety, and they can switch to a softer style which emphasises listening, engagement, empathy and learning when there is a need to enter into conversations about change. Most managers have learnt the former style, this is after all what a manager does – set the boundaries, makes it clear what is to happen, and is comfortable with the power position. It is less

[3] Laurie Lewis (University of Texas), TJ Larkin and Sandar Larkin, www.larkin.biz
[4] Hay Group, Towers Perrin

comfortable for managers to encourage risk taking, acknowledge what they don't know, and treat employees as equal partners in the change effort. Empathetic engagement and a genuine interest in another person's position can be a challenging task. This means that to create organisations that change continuously, more organisations are undergoing dialogue training – whereby management and employees learn how to engage in discussion and learn together.

4. Engaging with the background talk of change

The final key learning of my research was the importance of engaging with the background talk of change. The background talk is a term that came from my research that the participants used to explain the informal conversations going on in the background of the organisations. Some people refer to this as informal communication, gossip, rumour, and I know of few change agents willing to roll up their sleeves and engage with the background talk. But it is so very necessary to do so – the back ground talk is the site of sense-making and decision-making about the change. It's a normal and natural communication process within our organisations. Dismissing the gossip and background talk as the bush telegraph can have damaging effects on our change programs. The background talk can be a very important barometer of change where you gauge the success, acceptability, and uptake of your change initiatives. It is a place to establish where there may be a lack of understanding that will impede your change efforts. And it is also the site of better ideas.

In the first case, the CEO chose not to engage with the background talk[5] and, not surprisingly, change took a long time to occur. In contrast, the change agent was very engaged with the background talk and actively sought out the influential members of the informal network to diffuse correct information or clarify misunderstandings.

Summary

So what happened to the cases two years down the track? The first case study is thriving, a completely new organisation with employees that have strong communication competences, and dare I say it, pretty close to a Learning Organisation. While the environment is still quite challenging, they are much better skilled in managing continuous change. The CEO, satisfied with his work, has retired now.

The second case study closed its doors this year – while the employees and management possessed much stronger communication skills initially, the change

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[5] This was not always a conscious decision; the CEO was often 'distracted' by the political requirements of the position. It underscores the importance of having your supporting management team high in communication competence and able to pick up the slack!

initiatives were not sufficient to turn around the business unit within some pretty volatile industry and organisational changes. Whilst the employees had a better experience of change within the second case study, than those of the first, it was not sustainable.

About the author:

Dr Jennifer Frahm is the principal of Jennifer Frahm Collaborations, a change management and communication consultancy based in Melbourne Australia. Her PhD (Management) was awarded in 2006 from Queensland University of Technology and looked at how different communication models affect how receptive employees are to change. She worked with two case studies, both Queensland-based organisations and found that it is important to match the organisation's communication competencies with the employees' communication expectations. Additionally, it is as crucial to communicate what is staying the same, as it is to communicate the changes. Her previous research projects include a study on the communication processes in New Product Development in Biotechnology firms.

Jennifer is the Events Chair, on the IABC Victoria Board (www.iabcvic.com.au) and a member of the Asia Pacific Regional Council of the IABC. She consults to private and public sector organizations on organizational change and communication. Jennifer is available to conduct change communication coaching session and workshops on change communication - more information on this at www.jenniferfrahm.com. Contact Jennifer on 0422 417 155