Managing Communication During a Change Effort

Penny Emery

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Managing Communication During a Change Effort

Abstract
Because organizations are often faced with change, organizations need to be aware of how those within the organization may react to change in order to make any change effort successful. Human resources can assist with communicating the change vision by preparing the employees for the stages the change will go through, and can provide additional support to management which is discussed in this paper. This paper examines how human resource departments can better prepare leadership to be accountable for communication and assist with conducting a successful change effort. It does this by examining the relevant extant published literature regarding change and communication. This review includes an in-depth discussion of change models from Kotter, Galpin, and Weisbord and Janoff. It also includes an examination of resistance to change. Finally, it ends with the steps that human resources can implement as part of a communication plan during a change effort.

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Managing Communication During a Change Effort

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Dedication

This paper is dedicated to my grandparents, Fred and Pat Emery. At a point in your life when you could have been enjoying an empty nest and the joys of retirement, you gave me a home, an education, and more love than anyone could ever want. Though he did not make it to see me complete this paper or the HRD program, my grandfather taught me that hard work never hurt anyone, and that education would open doors for me. And if not for the unconditional love and faith you have in me, Gram, I do not know if I would be half the woman I am today.
Abstract

Because organizations are often faced with change, organizations need to be aware of how those within the organization may react to change in order to make any change effort successful. Human resources can assist with communicating the change vision by preparing the employees for the stages the change will go through, and can provide additional support to management which is discussed in this paper. This paper examines how human resource departments can better prepare leadership to be accountable for communication and assist with conducting a successful change effort. It does this by examining the relevant extant published literature regarding change and communication. This review includes an in-depth discussion of change models from Kotter, Galpin, and Weisbord and Janoff. It also includes an examination of resistance to change. Finally, it ends with the steps that human resources can implement as part of a communication plan during a change effort.
Chapter 1

Introduction

Businesses are often faced with change. This change, which may keep organizations competitive, also brings new perspectives. It may even be a proactive choice based on a careful analysis of future threats and opportunities, or based on a reactive decision to deal with existing environmental conditions. Regardless of why change occurs, organizations need to be aware of how those within the organization react to it in order to make any change effort successful.

Human beings often react to most change with at least some level of aversion (Chawla & Kelloway, 2004). The word change itself may evoke feelings of threat and anxiety, leaving an employee unsure of what the future holds for them within the organization. Thus it is important for an organization to assist employees in understanding that change occurs to serve a strategic purpose within the organization.

This understanding is typically communicated through the use of a communication plan developed specifically to coordinate the change effort. Whether the communication plan is guided by the human resources or corporate communications department, the ultimate goal is to provide the employees of the organization with the information necessary to understand the need for change, their role in the change, and how the change effort will progress over time.

The purpose of this literature review paper is to explore the link between communication delivered to employees during change and whether it impacts a successful change effort. Because there is little empirical research regarding this link, it
is my goal to provide a foundation from which future research may be conducted. I accomplished this by presenting various topics on change and communication.

Problem Statement

Up to 70% of change initiatives fail. Most leaders agree that ineffective communication or lack of communication is at the core of that failure (Daly, Teague, & Kitchen, 2003). At the same time, little research has been done to demonstrate the link between the failure of a change initiative and ineffective or poor organizational communication surrounding the change. Even though communication is often cited as a critical factor to the relative success or failure of change, the impact of communication on change has not been widely researched (Demers, Giroux, & Chreim, 2003).

If an organization is to be successful with a change effort, the leadership in that organization must be held accountable to create the vision to communicate the change. This accountability can be driven by human resources as human resource departments serve a dual purpose as a business partner to the organization and as a steward of the employees. Employees must understand not only what is going to change and how it will affect them, but also how the change will affect the overall good of the organization. Senior leadership puts the expectation on human resources to be the conduit for communication of change, be it from employee newsletters, town-hall style meetings, or training to support the change efforts rather than sharing in that responsibility. Human resources may be better equipped than management to read the pulse of employees during such an effort by conducting climate or commitment surveys. Human resources also has the ability to equip the organization’s leadership with the tools and ability to actively engage employees in communication throughout the change effort through
training and skills development, such as how to open channels for two-way communication as well as assembling a group to participate in a dialog on pressing issues.

This paper examines how human resource departments can better prepare leadership to take on the accountability for communication and assist with conducting a successful change effort. In doing so, human resources steps forth as a strategic partner to the organization during a time of change.

Significance

Organizational change typically comes as a response to a changing external environment, such as pressures from competition, pending legislation, poor economic conditions, and even social change. Regardless of what prompts change, the inability to accept and respond to these changes could result in a total system failure (Ahmad and Buttle, 2002). However, effectively communicating the circumstances to employees and providing feedback, even negative feedback, during the course of the effort, can improve an organization in its efforts to produce change.

This study also benefits human resource development practitioners because communication of what the organization is doing makes the change seem legitimate to the employees. Human resource development practitioners can equip leaders at all levels with the tools to communicate the necessity and progress of change efforts within the organization.
Terms

**Change** is defined as any shift in process, policy, procedure, or philosophy within an organization resulting in a new vision, behavior or guiding principle for that organization. This is the large-scale, evolutionary change that an organization goes through approximately every four to five years according to Lewis (1999).

**Communication** is the method by which employees are informed as well as the act of dissemination of information to employees (Chawla & Kelloway, 2004). A review of the literature on change and communication has shown to have common themes emerging regarding the meaning of both terms (Elving, 2005; Moss Kanter, 1999; Moss Kanter 1983; Kotter, 1996; Palmer, Wilcox King & Kelleher, 2004). Therefore, the definition of these key terms is a compilation from how several others have defined change and communication. This has been done purposely to allow for broad interpretation of how organizations employ and manage their change effort rather than selecting one theorist, and to allow for each term to be both an object and an action.

**Culture** refers to the norms or group behavior and the shared values within the organization. According to Sanchez (2004), it is how an organization accomplishes all of its tasks in pursuit of its mission.

**Vision** is a picture of the future of the organization that is imaginable, desirable, feasible, focused, flexible and communicable (Kotter, 1996).

Theoretical Foundations

This paper takes a broad view of change, change resistance, and communication in a time of change. To understand how change progresses, Weisbord and Janoff's

Several theorists in psychology and sociology have explored the many reasons why people find themselves at a point of resistance when a change is announced as well as during the change effort (Chawla & Kelloway, 2004). Neider and Zimmerman’s resistance pyramid was selected as the key theory for this paper because of the impact of communication tactics at each level of progression. In order to better understand the resistance pyramid, Maslow’s (1970) hierarchy of needs, in particular the second level of safety is discussed. Maslow’s (1970) hierarchy of needs is a sequence of needs, or goals, that motivate and drive people to increase and reduce tension. The resistance pyramid has three levels where resistance is overcome at each level therefore allowing less resistance at the next successive level. These levels of resistance are defined as not knowing, not able, and not willing (Galpin, 1996). In times of organizational change, basic communication serves as a factor to break down the employees’ lack of understanding. As this paper will explore, the subsequent steps to the pyramid can be impacted by the strategies that human resources implements for further communication during the change effort.

Methodology

This paper examined the relevant extant published literature regarding change and communication. This includes a discussion of change models from Kotter, Galpin, and Weisbord and Janoff, which each include a communication component as part of the process. Resistance to change is also examined, along with the steps that human resources can take to assist employees and management during a time of change through
several communication tactics. The paper concludes with a communication plan which follows one of the change models and addresses each stage of the resistance pyramid.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The Impact of Communication on Change

Every organization has its own particular culture and way of doing things. Sanchez (2004) states that culture comes forth as a mix of organizational strategy and structure, the people, and the processes; if an organization were a living being, then its culture would be analogous to its personality. During a time of change however, culture is reshaped to adapt to the future vision of the organization. How the organization communicates change, therefore, is in part a reflection of the culture itself. Thus, if an organization is open in its practices and shares information regularly with employees then it will continue its open communication style during the change effort to ensure that its employees are well aware of what is going on and why. On the other hand, if an organization is closed and hierarchical, then it will probably approach the announcement of a change effort with little detail and instruction, instead leaving the message to sound more like a command than a call to understand what is happening.

The culture of an organization can be determined through direct observation of the environment. An organization expresses who it is through artifacts, such as posters on the walls, how the work space is decorated, and even in how people dress for work. A more defined expression of culture can then be observed in the behavior of the individuals in the organization. Behaviors such as how decisions are made, whether individually from above, by a work team, or by a group of staff and leaders are also a large part of organizational culture. How change is handled, therefore, is also a part of culture, even when it is the culture itself that must change (Gillis, 2004).

Change
According to Senge (1999), an estimated 70% of all change efforts will fail. In many cases, poor communication is blamed. It is important to first understand change in order to understand how communication within an organization can help improve how people respond to change. Thus understanding change requires an exploration of the organization and the human reaction to the change.

Organizations in today’s economy are constantly going through some sort of change (Lewis, 1999). These are the changes that require large investment in time, money and resources, and often result in a shift in organizational culture, vision and behavior. For example, systemic change occurs when a manufacturing company implements machine automation to take over the formerly manual task of assembly, a quality process such as TQM or Six Sigma infiltrates all areas of an organization, or an organizational structure changes due to cutbacks and “right-sizing”.

Change models

There are several change models an organization can adapt for its own efforts, some that are even quite similar. For example, Kotter (1996) and Galpin (1996) both note the establishment of the need for change as the foundation to the entire change process model, and emphasize the development of a solid vision of the change. Conversely, Weisbord and Janoff’s (1999) future search serves as a model for change that centers only on the establishment of the need for change and designing actions to support the future vision of the organization.

The eight stage process model. Kotter (1996) proposes an eight-stage process for change. This model begins with establishing a sense of urgency to overcome complacency within an organization. In his book titled Leading Change, Kotter uses the
example of a pharmaceutical company with lagging sales, poor stock performance, and a
developing poor reputation in the press due to product complaints. In this instance, the
organization must come to the acceptance that there are problems, identify the problems,
and determine that the problems must be addressed in order to restore the company’s
reputation and boost sales. Likewise, the organization needs to communicate the
consequences of maintaining the status quo to create the sense of urgency to initiate a
change effort.

When the sense of urgency has been established, a team must be pulled together
to guide the vision for the change effort. Kotter refers to this as the guiding coalition
(1996, p. 52). This team is comprised of members all dedicated to the goal, all sharing in
the vision of the change effort. However, the members of this team should not be
restricted to management or to employees of the organization, the internal stakeholders.
Kotter believes that external stakeholders, from vendors to customers to stockholders,
may even be as committed to the success of the organization as the employees are. It is
during this stage that the foundation of the change effort takes shape, leading to the next
stage to develop a future vision of the organization.

Members of the guiding coalition come together to develop a vision of what the
organization will look like in the future when the change effort is complete. According to
Kotter (1996), a strong vision serves three purposes as follows: to clarify the general
direction for change, to motivate people to take action in the right direction, and to
coordinate the efforts and actions of all of the stakeholders quickly and efficiently.
Developing the vision of the change will focus the strategic efforts of the organization as
they embark on the change effort.
The fourth stage of this model centers on communicating the change vision. Communication allows people to develop understanding of the need for change, as well as to become committed to participating in the change effort. Kotter endorses the use of all available channels of communication to get the message out consistently, as well as to keep repeating the message for greater depth of understanding. He also encourages two-way communication, which will be explored later in this paper.

Once the change vision has been communicated, the fifth stage is that employees must be empowered. Kotter (1996) defines empowerment as the ability to take action toward the change. Empowering people to act should not be limited to allowing people to make decisions. Empowerment also includes giving people the skills, systems, and tools to make decisions and take action. This may mean removing barriers to empowerment, such as controlling supervisors or operational silos that prohibit the flow of information between departments. It is during this stage that training may be most crucial to help the employee move toward the change vision. Employees may not possess the skills to successfully meet the demands of the change, and training can be a springboard for obtaining the necessary skills. Likewise, if a step toward empowerment is to give employees tools they need to work towards the new vision, then it may be also necessary to train the employees in the proper use of those tools.

Because a major change can take time, perhaps even years, to accomplish, Kotter’s sixth stage of the change model focuses on creating short-term wins. These are efforts that result in smaller successes that support the overall larger change effort, and that provide immediate, visible, tangible evidence to all stakeholders that the change effort is on course. Kotter recommends that these short-term wins occur within 6 months
for small organizations, and within 18 months for large organizations (1996). Larger organizations can experience short-term wins within departments or business units of the organization within 6 months of the beginning of the change effort, and thus should make those wins known to the rest of the organization to maintain momentum.

In the seventh stage of Kotter’s model, all of the gains made by the organization should be consolidated and can be used to produce more changes. The guiding coalition can bring together all of the short-term wins to push the organization forward and encourage employees to take on bigger projects that are a part of the change strategy.

The final stage of the Kotter’s eight stage model centers on making the changes that have occurred a part of the organizational culture. If the change is counter to the organizational culture, then it must become entrenched into the culture or people will revert to old behaviors and undo the efforts of the change. It is in this stage that the organizational culture will shift once peoples’ actions and understanding have adapted to the new vision of the organization. Kotter believes that the behaviors that make up culture become instinctive over time, and therefore cultural needs should be addressed strategically during each stage of his process model. But it is in this last step that leadership can have impact by fully grafting the new approaches to thought and behavior within the organization to its culture.

The change management process model. Galpin (1996) also proposes a model to the stages of change. This model is conceptually similar to Kotter’s, but is more methodical in approach. It is more step-by-step, giving a tactical approach to change that removes a portion of the human element in its description. However, Galpin considers
the human element by demonstrating how to establish tactics for each phase of this strategic model, especially in regards to managing communication during a change effort.

According to this model, all change begins when the need for change is established and a picture of the desired state of the organization is developed. A gap analysis between current conditions and the desired state provides those involved in designing the change an idea of where the change needs to begin, allows for idea generation of what must occur to foster the change, and finally the development of a detailed plan for the change. Once the plan is implemented, Galpin recommends pilot testing for “quick wins”, that is, small successes to show the benefit of the change effort. These quick wins provoke feedback from those affected by the change, and therefore ready the organization for a wider roll out of the change efforts. The final recommended stage of change is follow up and evaluation, so that the organization can fine tune changes as they are needed.

**Future search.** Most change models are deeply rooted in traditional organization development, with the exception of future search. Future search is not viewed as a long term strategy for sweeping organizational change, but is rather a process with a few participants. Instead, it views the organization holistically, seeking to find the best of what the organization is capable of being in the near future, rather than presenting a gap between present and future conditions as going from bad to good or good to better.

Weisbord and Janoff (1999) cite the beginnings of future search in early work from Lippitt and Schindler-Rainman as well as Emery and Trist. Lippitt and Schindler-Rainman conducted conferences on community futures in the 1970s where the focus was on getting the whole system together to focus on the future, not on problems. Similarly,
Emery and Trist’s Search Conference looked at an organization globally, and allowed people to manage their own future planning. Each of these pieces, according to Weisbord and Janoff (1999), find their roots ultimately in the work of Lewin’s action research.

In future search, the whole organization comes together in a three-day conference to review past and present, to make a picture of the future, confirm their shared values, and commit to an action plan. Weisbord and Janoff believe bringing together the whole organization enables systems thinking. This is because all areas of the organization are represented and given the opportunity to express themselves and bring its own perspective on its part in the organization. The end result is that each part of the organization is better able to see the organization as consisting of interrelated beings as they develop a greater understanding on how each piece of the organization works together as one.

To conduct future search, Weisbord and Janoff recommend bringing together 60 to 80 people from the organization in a mix of staff, line management, middle management, and senior leadership. All of these representatives should provide a reasonable representation of their various part of the organization. This three-day conference begins with a collective review of the organization’s past, moving to an examination of its present as well as external trends. At this point, the collective breaks into smaller groups of relevant stakeholders to develop a response to these external trends, bringing in a keener focus on the present. These breakout groups speculate on several future scenarios before the collective rejoins to being work on the common ground. The conference ends on the third day as the common ground results in a series of
action plans. It is at this point, according to Weisbord and Janoff, that the real change begins.

Compared to Kotter’s (1996) eight phase model and Galpin’s (1996) change management process model, future search prepares the organization to tackle only a few, manageable issues. However, it should be noted that the results of these few issues lays the groundwork for future work on additional changes.

*Comparison of change models.* These three models are representative of what organizations go through during a change effort. There are similarities in all three. The most important is the creation of a future vision for the organization. The selection of which model to follow should be done as a part of the reflection on the need for change itself. It may also be impacted by the relative size of the organization, how functional its culture is, and even how committed employees are to achieving the organization’s mission.

Because each model starts with establishing the need for change and examining a vision of the future state of the organization, organizational leadership may wait to select the proper change model based on the complexity of the problem or problems it wishes to address in the change effort. It should be noted, however, that each of these models presented, as well as the many others attributed to organization development theorists, is not one-size fits all nor a panacea for an organization seeking a recipe for change. In the context of this paper, they are instead offered as a means to understand how an organization comes together to plan and develop its change effort.

*Human Reactions to Change*
What seems like a fairly stepwise and methodical process of change as presented in the previously mentioned change models may still lend itself to extreme reactions from employees about to undergo the change because the change itself is still a threat to the status quo, and therefore may be difficult for individuals to accept on an emotional level (Kotter, 1996). As a result, Fox and Amichai-Hamburger (2001) believe that one of the major mistakes of management in addressing change is that they do so in a rational and logical manner, rather than give attention to the fact that there will be an emotional reaction to change.

Change is a very uncomfortable state for all. This is mostly due to fear of the unknown and the feeling of losing control over what is happening to the individual employee (Proctor and Doukakis, 2003). People may react to change by wondering if they will still be needed once the change occurs, if they have the skills to be useful after the change, and even if the organization will be one they want to be a part of after the change is complete. According to Kotter (1996), where change will take a person can be a difficult concept to grasp on both an emotional and intellectual level. The most common initial reaction is to question ‘what’s in it for me’, which in turn can lead to fear and anxiety if plans for change are not effectively communicated. The end result of this fear and anxiety is a general resistance to change.

Resistance to change. Resistance to change is a natural by-product of the fear reaction that change provokes. People like to be in control of their own lives, and a change imposed by others is a direct threat to that control. The plans for change often come from leadership above, seldom from staff employees, and often without seeking employee input to the change. Thus, the individual’s willingness to cooperate is their last
power base, according to Proctor and Doukakis (2003). By refusing to change, the individual holds on to their ability to control their own destiny.

How the individual manifests this resistance has the greatest impact on the organization’s efforts. For example, some individuals voice their concerns, perhaps in the form of a complaint while others dig their feet in to try to maintain the status quo. These are far less problematic than other covert methods such as sabotage.

To deal with resistance to change, it is first necessary to understand why resistance exists in the first place, exploring options other than fear of the unknown. Perhaps the individual does not clearly understand why the change is needed. Maybe the individual does not like the manager or supervisor who is leading the change. Resistance also comes about when the individual feels as if the change is a commentary on his or her personal performance, and he or she feels offended by the mistaken criticism. Perhaps he or she may assume that the only thing that change will bring is more work to be done. Finally, the individual may find that there are others who feel similarly. The individual then becomes part of a group strongly opposed to the change effort. There are many other examples of how an individual may show their resistance to the change effort.

Understanding why resistance occurs can help to create a communication strategy to overcome resistance. Nieder and Zimmerman’s (as cited by Galpin, 1996) resistance pyramid can make it easier for leaders to understand what an employee may be going through as the change is announced and progress of the change effort is reported back to the employees. Galpin (1996) compares the resistance pyramid to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and then explains how each are intertwined. This is detailed in the following section.
Maslow's hierarchy of needs and change. Maslow contends that people all have very similar basic needs in their quest for self-actualization, or the process of fulfilling one's potential (Gordon-Rouse, 2004). At the bottom of the hierarchy are the physiological needs of food, water, and sleep. The next level is safety, which in the human context refers to being free from danger and having shelter, but also has implications in the context of organizational change. The third level is belonging, that is, the need to be a part of a group. This too has context within organizational change. The fourth level centers on self-esteem, and whether or not the individual feels good about him or her self. Finally, self-actualization is reached at the top level. The fear of change is an immediate threat to the basic human needs within Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, specifically at the second, third and fourth levels.

According to Galpin, at the initiation of organizational change, an individual may feel that his or her safety is threatened. He or she may wonder 'will I have a job', 'will I have the skills to do my job after it has been changed', 'what will happen if I lose my job', or similar concerns. These uncertainties may be expressed among coworkers, and in may be the basis for bonding together in the desire to maintain the status quo. In extreme cases, this may make the organization vulnerable to the formation of a union, which may provide not only a sense of security to the individual, but also appeals the third level of belonging. It might also be a work team, business unit or department, or even a group of detractors who oppose the change effort. By acting in a group opposed to the change, the individual finds safety in numbers and feels as if he or she belongs to a group with common thoughts or feelings, and thus may experience a boost in self-esteem in their opposition to the change effort. When his or her fears are actualized through threats
becoming real, such as job cuts, or work groups are divided as a result of restructuring, the individual makes a decision to resist change even further.

*The resistance pyramid.* Nieder and Zimmerman’s resistance pyramid is similar to Maslow in that each level is a succession from the last (Galpin, 1996). The first level is called not knowing. It is at this level that the individual needs to understand what they do not know, or the “who, what, why, when and how” of the change effort.

The next level is referred to as not able, where the individual’s abilities must be addressed. This takes the assumption that if the individual feels confident that he or she is able to do, then he or she will become more likely willing to do.

And thus the final level is called not willing. At this level, ‘what’s in it for me’ needs to be addressed to the individual, as they have progressed with the knowledge, skills and abilities to transform. It is at this point that an individual makes a decision on their behavior in regards to the change. If not properly equipped during the two prior stages, this may result in actions designed to sabotage the change.

*Understanding the human reaction to change.* Change is a state of uncertainty to most human beings. Though some organizations would prefer to focus on the business side of change alone, the emotional aspects of change cannot be ignored. When human resources assists leadership with understanding the reaction to change, it is also able to assist leadership with developing a plan to manage the human reaction to change through a solid communication plan addressing the individual and their need for security and belonging, as well as presenting a path that takes the individual from the unknown to the known.

Communication and Change
A 1993 survey conducted by Watson Wyatt asked CEOs of major US companies who had gone through or were currently undergoing a change management effort what was the one thing they would go back and change. The answer was overwhelmingly, "The way I communicated with my employees" (Larkin & Larkin, 1996, p.95).

Similarly, a 1996 survey conducted by consulting firm KPMG of Canadian organizations showed communication ranking as one of the most important factors to successfully dealing with change (Barrett & Leudecke, 1996). Furthermore, Semeltzer (1991) showed that the most common reason for a failed change effort to be poor communication. More specifically, he showed that inaccurate and negative rumors were the greatest contributing factor.

The common theme in existing literature on change management efforts is that excellent communication is absolutely critical, and none would dispute this as less than fact. However, very little research has been done on the effect of communication on a change effort. Yet this lack of empirical evidence does not diminish the underpinning of communication and change.

Whereas Kotter dedicates an entire stage of his process model solely to communication, Galpin (1996) gives a simple prescription for managing communication through the stages of his change model: build awareness, give status reports, define 'what’s in it for me’, and follow up on progress. A communication plan for the need for change must be developed as the need for change is identified and a vision of the change is developed. The organization must build awareness of the value of change, inform people what their roles will look like during and after the change, and most importantly what the
organization will look like after the change. A clear vision of the future provides a clear
direction and purpose to the change effort.

After building awareness, the organization begins its efforts and informs
employees of early progress with change program. Galpin not only suggests getting
employees involved in the change effort early on, but also recommends the formation of
two-way communication channels. It is also important here to communicate any early
successes, and even to communicate what was learned from early failures. As the change
becomes more widespread within the organization, it is critical to address the ‘what’s in it
for me’ of a project or a team integral to the change, and finally to provide follow up and
evaluation, sharing more successes.

Galpin also suggests some fundamentals for the messages relayed to the
employees within the organization. First, each message must be directly linked to the
strategic purpose of the change initiative. It is not enough to say we must change to
increase customer satisfaction. Instead, for example, the message needs to be that the
organization must manufacture our product with less than three defects per million to
keep customers satisfied with its product. This message should also be realistic and
honest. If the organization is manufacturing a product that customers are returning at a
high rate for defects, then it must be willing to say that there is a breakdown in its quality
process and that could cause the loss of consumers for their product and ultimately a loss
of revenue for the organization.

As the change effort progresses, the goal of message delivery is that it should be
proactive rather than reactive. This includes addressing failures that occur as a part of the
change. It is far better and lends to the credibility of the effort to let employees know that
a failure happened, what the organization learned from it, and how it will be overcome going forward. Another alternative would be to ignore the failure and hope that employees do not learn of it through the informal company grapevine. This could end up with the organization having to go into a reactive mode to justify the change, and leave employees with a sense of nervousness. To that end, it is also important that employees are able to engage in two-way communication where they can give feedback and offer suggestions. This not only helps the employee to understand the learning experience of a failure, but also ensures continued buy-in from the employee who is allowed to voice their opinion and concerns.

_Common Communication Mistakes_

Before exploring how human resources can impact the communication of a change effort, it is important to mention some common mistakes that occur in the communication strategy during a change effort. According to Galpin, (1996) there are four key mistakes made in communicating change as follows: delegating communication to the communication department, keeping information a ‘secret’ and underestimating the grapevine, having a poorly developed communication plan, and closing communication channels too soon.

_Delegating communication._ Perhaps the most common mistake is delegating communication to the communication or public relations department. An organization may enlist the assistance of public relations to get the message out to its employees because it seems to be the logical choice. Public relations departments usually are entrusted with delivering information to the external stakeholders with a particular branding applied to the message. However, their focus is usually external and bolstered
by demographics or other data that support their PR brand. Larkin and Larkin (1996) assert that the change message from public relations is not trusted by employees because public relations is working to develop a message for senior leadership. Instead the employees perceive the message as one tailored to the executive staff and without relevance to themselves. Larkin and Larkin (1996) specifically attribute this to a general mistrust of management by employees, and cite a study that reveals 43% of employees believe that management lies. This is clear evidence that communication/public relations departments should be avoided and human resources is instead a better alternative.

If the organization is large enough to warrant an employee communications department, the messages are better left to be developed there. This department may even be a part of human resources. Or if the organization does not have this department, then human resources may be enlisted to develop and deliver the message. In either case, human resources will have internal demographics and may better understand how to communicate with their constituents than a public relations team can because their focus is on the internal stakeholder—the employees. The internal communication effort can be a focused marketing campaign for the change, not an executive marketing campaign to promote senior leadership.

*Keeping information secret.* Another common mistake that leaders make is to hold information secret and assume that people will only hear what they are told through official channels. There is perhaps no greater communication vehicle than the informal grapevine in any organization (Galpin, 1996). Every organization has its own grapevine just by the nature that employees talk to one another (Galpin, 1995). To deny its
existence is to not realize one of the most effective communication channels within an organization.

The grapevine can be further supported by management. For example, line supervisors engage in daily conversations with staff in a less formal and more social manner than the executive leadership might. Line managers engage in conversations with their staff to relay information about tasks to be completed or give directions. They often also discuss what is going on in the organization informally as part of casual conversation. Larkin and Larkin (1996) believe that, even though employees mistrust the top levels of leadership, that employees are may feel bonded to their direct supervisor and thus are likely to trust what their supervisor has to say. Therefore, supervisors can be a conduit to promoting the change effort through their conversations by showing support for the change effort and reinforcing the organizational vision.

Senior leadership can also exploit the grapevine through their actions. If Larkin and Larkin (1996) are correct that employees do not trust what the top levels of leadership are saying, then leaders can support their words by actions. Drickhamer (2004) refers to this as walking the talk. The top level of leadership needs to show their personal commitment to the change vision through actions, not just words. These actions, if powerful enough, may soon make their way through the organization’s grapevine.

For example, if an organization’s change effort is focused on increasing customer service and the CEO spends time taking calls in the call center listening to customer complaints or concerns, then this news will spread as employees share the story of the CEO coming into the ranks. The grapevine communicates that the executive leader is
involved and cares about what is going on at all levels of the organization through the simple act of being visible. A message of this sort delivered through the grapevine may have greater impact than a company newsletter showing a picture of the CEO taking calls, which may have a negative impact if it is perceived to be for PR purposes. This can reduce employee fears about the commitment that leadership has to the change effort when the very highest level of leadership is seen visibly supporting and promoting the change efforts in the organization.

*Poorly developed communication plan.* A poorly described change plan, which typically results from a poorly defined communication plan, may give the appearance that management does not really know what is going on or what it is are doing. Conversely, a well-described and well-thought out change plan that is not given priority in corporate communication will only result in decreased buy-in from employees and increased barriers individuals put up to change. Or, if senior leadership delegates the communication message to middle management alone, it gives the impression that there is no commitment from the top to make the change happen successfully. Each of these situations presented leaves management with the blame for an unsuccessful change effort. Management at every level must present itself as firmly committed to and actively behind the change effort, not only to assist employees with accepting the changes, but also to reinforce the vision of change as a leader bringing their constituents to the forefront.

*Closing communications channels too soon.* One final mistake that can be perhaps most critical to the long-term success is to shut down communication channels while a change is implemented. This is a time when employees may have more concerns than they normally do as they face a change in what they do their daily work lives. In
addition, they may have suggestions for additional improvements to help to manage the change or enrich the organization. Unfortunately, shutting down communication gives the illusion that any change is complete, and this false perception may disrupt those individuals who are just coming to grips with the reality of change by closing them off to information they might seek to move ahead.

*Communication summary.* There are several complex models that an organization may follow to communicate a change effort, yet communication mistakes like those previously mentioned can bring about total failure for change. This may be avoided if there is an entity responsible for managing communication and holding the necessary players accountable for their role in delivering the messages. However, this should typically not be senior leadership because if they take control of communication the effort may appear to be a mandate or top-down command, and may not deliver the desired effect on employees. The public relations or corporate communication department seems to be well-equipped to handle a change communication campaign; yet the goal of communicating change should not be to market a brand for the executive decisions, which is typically the objective of public relations. Thus the best choice to manage a successful communication plan seems to be human resources, which is often better equipped than executives or public relations to utilize all of the appropriate channels of communication, at the right time, and with the right message.

*Implications for Human Resources*

Implementing a communication strategy is as important to an organization as implementing the change strategy itself. When human resources is involved in the communication of change, it may result in a greater chance of success in both short term
gains and long term endurance of the changes that have taken place. Regardless of the
nature of the change program, the ultimate goal is to change organizational (and hence
individual) behavior in some manner. Therefore, it is up to human resources practitioners
to be strategic partners during change to create a communication program that will
educate, facilitate, support and promote employee participation in the change.

Preparation for Change

Human resources has several communication tools at its disposal to prepare
employees for change, as well as to move the employees successfully through a change
effort. These tools can follow the traditional channels of newsletters, company meetings,
department meetings, videos, posters and so forth, all with the message that
communicates the vision of the change effort. There are other means that human
resources can employ as part of its communication strategy. I propose that training,
employee development plans and performance measures are ways in which human
resources can communicate the change plan to the employees and help them to
understand what is taking place.

Training. The literature supports the foundation of training as a prime
communication method, and one that human resources and training departments are well
equipped to implement. The first thing training does is assist in removing the barriers
people put in place to change, and offers the individual a chance at personal resolution to
their own feelings of resistance (cite). Going back to the resistance pyramid, training
answers the dilemma of not able by giving people the ability to view their roles and
perform their jobs under the new program. Training is also a powerful means to
empower employees to deal with the new business challenges they face (Kotter, 1996).
To be successful, training should be built around what the organization will look like when the change is complete. Rothwell and Kanzanas (2003) offer suggestions on how to put together a training and development plan to compliment an organization’s strategic plan, including change efforts. They offer several different approaches that may be selected based aligning training needs to business needs. Ultimately, human resources needs to partner with leadership to ensure that its training offerings are best able to communicate the future vision and address the knowledge and skills employees need to move to the new vision.

Not all training needs to be mandatory. While some employees will be dealing with their own resistance, others may be early adapters or simply curious to what is next on the horizon. According to Pollitt (2005), in the case of Zodiac Automotive in Australia, human resources only required one session related to the change projects that were taking place, and announced a certification that employees could achieve by attending five additional voluntary workshops. Within a short period of time, almost 96% of Zodiac’s workforce had attended because the first session clearly explained what their roles would be in the new organization and how the voluntary sessions would enhance their roles (Pollitt, 2005). In just over a year, Zodiac Automotive went from being a company on the verge of closing with low employee morale and high absenteeism to an organization recognized for its turnaround. An investment in training their people is at the center of this turnaround, resulting in a reduction in manufacturing downtime from seven to three percent that directly relates to an eight percent drop in absenteeism and a twenty-three percent reduction in employee turnover.
Employee development plans. Beyond training is the completion of employee development plans. Whether the employee development plan is facilitated by human resources on a broad basis or is individualized by the line manager, the employee development plan must directly link to the strategy of the change effort. If the greater, direct communication plan falters, the employee development plan should have already solidified employee commitment to the change according to Hogg (1996).

An employee development plan, like a training program, must also be built around leadership’s vision of what the organization will look like when the change is complete. This helps the individual to better understand how they fit into the change, and will make it easier to reduce resistance at the top level of the resistance pyramid, not willing. In addition to clarifying their role, it gives the employee a sense that they are valued by their supervisor and perhaps even the organization. A written development plan sends a subconscious message that the organization is committed to the individual’s success within the organization, and in turn creates greater commitment from the individual. Again, Rothwell and Kanzanas (2003) offer suggestions on how to develop an employee development plan to encompass past performance, assess present performance and skills, and forecast what is needed to meet the needs of the organization’s future vision.

Performance measures. Organizational change comes most often from the development of a new organizational strategy. The organizational strategy needs to have some metrics in place to be able to determine if goals are being met. This should be no different for the individual employee. It is believed that management’s ability to
communicate their expectations effectively creates a mutual expectancy of high performance from their employees (King, 1974).

Many organizations may already have some sort of performance appraisal process in place prior to a change effort. Once the change effort begins, human resources needs to ensure that change performance measures are incorporated into employee performance measures. The strongest way to send this message is to incorporate key aspects of the change effort into the employee’s job description and hold the person accountable for it as part of the review process. The Society for Human Resources Management has resources available to assist an organization with this, as well as to assist an organization that may have no appraisal process to form one that meets the needs of the change effort and can be adapted for future use.

One example from the literature shows that it does not have to be as formal as this. According to Bettman (1989), Andrew Carnegie once wrote the number of tons produced in a shift at a steel mill near the front gate of the mill. At the end of the next shift, that number was replaced with a higher number produced. The same happened after the next shift. Simply knowing a goal can be a motivator to individuals to perform.

*Supporting Management*

Human resources also has the capability of supporting management through the change process. In some instances, each of the above proposed communication tactics can be utilized to prepare management as well. Very often, management below the executive level is the first group of constituents that human resources must win over to the new vision of the organization in order to gain further support in the change effort.
However, regardless of middle management and supervisors' understanding or acceptance of the change, some line managers and supervisors may not know how to deal with their employees during times of change. A survey by KPMG suggests a majority of middle management have a knowledge gap when it comes to being prepared with effective change management and communication techniques (Barrett & Luedcke, 1996). Human resources can be responsible for providing the tools and training to meet the challenges that come to line managers.

In large organizations, it is an absolute necessity to get the change message out to all the employees consistently. In this instance, human resources can train managers how to hold cascade meetings, whereby the line manager provides information that they have been given from senior leadership, and explain it in such a way that the message is relevant to the employees and still maintains its consistency. This can be followed up by assisting the managers with holding additional meetings that appeal to adult learning methods such as small group discussions and self-discovery (Bettman, 1989).

Other ways that human resources can assist in supporting management in communicating and promoting change includes keeping management in check, that is, making sure they walk the talk (Drickhamer, 2004). It must be visible at all levels of leadership that the leaders are an example of the change and that they have not only embraced the change but are also committed to it. There can be no dispute of the commitment to change when the very highest level of leadership is seen visibly supporting and promoting the change efforts in the organization. What matters most is that the messages are delivered by a credible and respected source (Anastasiou, 1998). If the front line managers are trusted more by employees than the top levels of management
according to Larkin and Larkin (1996), then allow them to reach out to their employees so long as the top level of leadership speaks and behaves consistently with the messages put forth by the line management. In many cases, regardless of organizational size, it may be best for the line managers to deliver the change message as they may be the person most familiar with what is really going on in the organization on the front lines.

There are two additional techniques for communication that human resources can prepare and support management throughout the change effort. A common theme in the literature on communicating change centered on ensuring two-way communication exists in the organization (Anastasiou, 1998; Palmer, Wilcox King & Kelleher, 2004; Hargie & Tourish, 1996). In doing so, employees are given a voice to express their concerns, and also the opportunity to make suggestions for further improvements. Another method is to organize and promote dialog groups to focus on learning the issues at hand, as well as to give everyone involved a stake in developing a solution.

*Preparing managers for two-way communication.* Human resources can prepare line managers for handling two-way communication. For some managers not used to taking input and more used to delegating orders, this may seem foreign. When feedback or suggestions from employees are ignored by the managers, then the employees end up feeling undervalued and ignored. Research from Watson Wyatt suggests that 80% of employees feel their company does a good job communicating downward, but less than 30% feel their company promotes upward communication (Moore, 1996).

Two-way communication reduces the employees’ barriers to change by allowing them the ability to talk about their fears (Barrett & Luedcke, 1996). It helps management to build relationships with their employees, and ensures that the change is
more likely to stick over time. Managers serve as the advocate for change, and, with proper preparation, they can serve as a sounding board for employees to address their issues and concerns. This is an excellent way to build trust among employees when they feel as if they can come forward and be listened to by their manager (Drickhamer, 2004).

For example, the former CEO of Motorola put a policy in place that all managers had to respond to their employees’ messages or complaints within 72 hours (Bettman, 1989). Employees felt encouraged to voice their opinions because they knew they were being heard. Managers should not underestimate the suggestion of an employee, as a suggestion or criticism may lead to a better improvement than was already underway. Hargie and Tourish (1996) believe that allowing the free exchange of ideas and communication may result in further, positive innovation during a change effort, and that the related communication plan during the change effort must promote participation and involvement from all levels. Moore (1996) cautions that organizations must also communicate back to the employees why their suggestions were or were not acted upon, rather than just listening and not taking action.

*Dialog.* Gerard and Ellinor (1999) compare dialog to sitting in a room with friends talking about a topic, all coming at it with diverse perspectives, where those listening do so with curiosity rather than by looking for the right or wrong in what is being said. The formation of dialog as a method to expand change communication began with Bohm’s work, and was made popular by Peter Senge in *The Fifth Discipline*. Bohm spent time observing and working with the Eastern practice of meditation, and came to the conclusion that, if individuals could become more aware of themselves through their
stream of consciousness, then perhaps similar conversation held in a group could also raise awareness of what is shared within a system or organization.

Dialog can help a change effort that requires the development of communication skills within work teams. Gerard and Ellinor (1999) propose that dialog works best in smaller groups to help focus on learning the issues. Human resources can assist as the facilitator to assemble a group of dialog participants. Members of the group may be selected from various work teams to form a cross-functional group where each person is able to bring a different perspective to the same issues. This can avoid ‘stacking the deck’ in favor of management by assembling a group representative only of management, or assembling a group more heavily weighted with a hidden agenda, where the dialog will turn to a discussion as one side loses and the other side wins.

As the dialog progresses, so too does a shared meaning of the issues, and a shared leadership in resolving the issues. This shared leadership transcends authority and reporting structure. In that sense, human resources may need to coach those in management and supervisory roles to release their authority for the benefit of the dialog. It becomes important to understand that everyone is responsible for contributing to the conversation, and therefore the top levels of management need to also be prepared for the open environment that dialog can produce (Gerard & Ellinor, 1999).

The benefits of dialog include being able to see the system as a whole and understanding how subsystems can impact the organization. It also lends to the building of relationships that might not have otherwise occurred in an organization, in part because it does transcend authority, but more so because its very nature is to create a shared meaning, rather than to win or lose.
Suggestion of other communication methods. What has been presented above is only a fraction of how human resources can conduct, manage, or assist leadership in managing a communication plan during a change effort. As previously mentioned, human resources can assist with defining other vehicles for communication.

With the wide availability of technology, some suggest (Moore, 1996; Lewis, 1999)) that organizations may want to consider greater use of technology to deliver the change message, such as video messages shown on the intranet. An organization’s intranet can also be used to post announcements, host a FAQ (frequently asked questions) page, and even host an online bulletin board where employees can talk virtually to one another about the change.

In some organizations, the human resources department is responsible for creating the employee newsletter, which can also be used to communicate change efforts. One caution here is to ensure that the messages in the newsletter are not over-edited to the point where the publishers lose sight of the employee audience and instead write the article to appeal to the senior leadership audience. Research by Larking and Larkin (1996) suggests that there is a greater chance for this to happen when a corporate communication or marketing department is put in charge of the change communication program, and turns it into an advertising campaign.

Surveys can also be used to get feedback on the change effort, which is another way to promote two-way communication. Much of the literature (Lewis, 1999; Huggett, 1999; Chawla & Kelloway, 2004) speaks to conducting various surveys of employees to gauge the change effort. In most cases, employee commitment surveys are recommended for management to measure how committed the employees are to the organization as it
goes through the change. There is very little mention of measuring the employees' perception of communication during the change; however, some organizations do look specifically at employee perception, and an example is referenced in the next section.

Conclusion

If poor communication is to blame for a majority of the change efforts that fail, then human resources must immediately act to implement a comprehensive communication plan that addresses the needs of both employees and management. This communication plan should be in congruence with the change plan, that is, the scope of the communication plan should be relative to the size of the organization and the complexity of the change.

Human resources can serve as a partner to the organization and an advocate to the employees by addressing the business needs and the emotional impact of a change effort. They can control change resistance by getting information out early and regularly. The communication plan should be seen as a strategic piece of the change effort, and the messages relayed should be proactive, realistic, and honest.
Chapter 3

Conclusion: Advice for Communicating Change

The actions of human resources generated toward communicating a change plan can have significant impact on how well the organization endures its change effort. As has been discussed, there are many ways in which this can be accomplished, yet it is also important to have an understanding of the empirical research that has been conducted in order to make future recommendations.

*Significant Empirical Research*

A study conducted by Lewis (1999) is perhaps one of the most comprehensive on communication during change, yet it only goes as far as to survey those involved in implementing the change and getting information out to the employees. This study does provide value as it is one of the few that can make positive correlation between communication and the outcome of organizational change.

In brief, Lewis received 89 usable questionnaires from various types and sizes of organizations where the respondents had been responsible for implementing some sort of significant organizational change in technology, policy or program in the last five years. Lewis discovered that, in the majority or organizations, the source of formal information comes from the top, with almost 46% of information stemming from senior and middle management (1999, p. 60). This discovery supports the necessity of a human resources effort to equip managers with the necessary tools to inform their employees, as well as gives authority to human resources to ensure that the top levels of management are in fact walking the talk.
Lewis also found that employees were frequently asked for input in an informal manner and typically face-to-face with their direct supervisor. On the opposite end were attitude and opinion surveys and formal evaluation tools. So while formal methods to establish two-way communication were utilized, informal and more personal methods were employed more frequently to solicit information from employees. According to Lewis, the most rigorous methods of measurement were those that were used the least. In general, however, the use of two-way communication to seek input was used less frequently in the overall communication plan than all of the methods of message delivery were used.

Because the survey tool that Lewis used consisted of primarily closed-ended questions, it would be interesting to perform a qualitative follow up, both of organizations who did not use surveys and those who did. In some cases, surveys may not have been used due to cost factors, time restraints, or even because there was no one within the organization with the analytical ability to interpret the results accurately. This may again support the cause for human resources to assist management with making way for two-way communication.

What may be the most important to human resource practitioners preparing a communication plan was Lewis' discovery on information dissemination and solicitation. Lewis found that there was a difference between the mean scores of message dissemination to employees versus the solicitation of input from employees. So while informal channels were used to solicit input from employees, management was still in the mode of delivering more information than it was receiving. This sends a message to human resource practitioners that it needs to emphasize the importance of two-way
communication more, that policies should be in place to encourage two-way communication, and that managers need training in how to facilitate two-way communication.

Finally, Lewis’ recommendations for future research still centers on gathering information from those implementing the change, rather than those enduring the change. My curiosity on this subject centered on the employees’ perception of communication and how that may or may not relate to the change effort’s success. This led to finding some recent results of employee surveys conducted by Newmeasures.

Newmeasures (2007), a consulting company in Boulder, CO, develops and administers employee surveys for mid-sized and large organizations. Their employee survey instruments consist of 16 to 21 items and can be customized depending on the issues their client is seeking to survey. For example, one survey administered at a healthcare system in Upstate New York included a question specifically addressing the employees’ perception on how well changes are announced (Grant, personal communication, March 5, 2007). To date, this survey has been conducted four times, once at the beginning of the organization’s change effort, with the rest at six-month intervals since the inception of the change effort. The results for the first three surveys have been published thus far.

To collect data, Newmeasures used a convenience sample, distributing the surveys to all employees of the healthcare system. Results were separated and published according to location. The following data are reflective of the results at one location of this healthcare system that is made up of a majority of non-clinical, professional staff engaged in support functions such as billing, accounting, records management, and so
forth. They estimate their return rate at approximately 70% of all eligible participants. However, there was no method employed to link results from one survey to the next, which could lead to slight differences in data due to employee transfers in and out of this location and turnover.

The first survey of 320 respondents indicated that 49% of employees were satisfied with how change was announced in the organization. As a result, Newmeasures recommended that a greater effort be put on communicating change at this location, as well as throughout organization to maintain consistency. The organization implemented a change communication plan that included employee forums led by the CEO or COO, updates in the monthly newsletter, signs placed around the organization that emphasize its vision, departmental cascade sessions led by line managers, and regular status updates by email and on the company intranet. As a result, the second round of 334 respondents indicated an increase to 54% satisfaction with how change is communicated, and a jump to 64% satisfaction of 325 respondents with how change is communicated in the third round. (Newmeasures, 2006).

Discussion

A complete review of change models and communication methods would be exhaustive and do little more than confuse the human resources practitioner when trying to determine what model or method is right for their organization. In fact, there is no one best practice or theory that fits each situation. Instead, each theory offers something different that can add value to the organization undergoing change. Sanchez’s holistic view of culture as personality clearly indicates that no one size fits all, nor does there need to be. The goal, therefore, is to select the best for each organization.
Sometimes, the very nature of a change effort itself may have some trial and error, thus it should be acceptable for human resources and management to team together to find what works best for their organization and follow that path. However, the focus should not become so narrow that there is no room for an alternative view. Just as it is important to allow for two-way communication from employees to management in suggesting solutions during a change effort, it is as important to allow shared accountability between human resources and management in communicating change. In the end, their goals are the same; that is, each is focused on achieving the new vision of the organization.

Limitations

The limitations to this review exist primarily in the lack of published empirical research on both change and communication joined together. There appears to be considerable research in both areas. However there is little about how communication impacts change. Adding to this are the numerous change models an organization can employ. As one begins to research what organizations have actually done, that is, how they have managed their change process, the reader can see a hybrid version of many models brought together. In some cases, early training is indicated over the establishment of open, two-way communication channels, even using training as the beginning to open up the communication channels. Others suggest soliciting input from employees at the very beginning when the need for change is established in order to develop a plan for the change effort.

Every change effort appears to begin with recognition of the need for change. How people are brought together to plan and lead the change may differ, but the guiding
force for the change seems to come to life when the future vision of the organization is communicated with all of the organizational stakeholders. From this point, how change is managed may vary, but the majority of researchers indicate the need for strong and continuous communication throughout the process.

However, structured and planned change still tends to be preferred. Callan, Latemore and Paulsen found in their interviews with CEOs in Australia, that most preferred a stepped method such as Kotter’s eight-stage approach. A structured plan for change thus becomes the foundation of the organization’s business strategy, and each step through the plan is thus a tactic to reach the end goal, the future vision of the organization. By following a structured change plan with a well developed communication plan, the organization hopes to achieve success in its change effort.

A possible structured communication plan developed around Kotter’s eight-stage process model with the intent of addressing each stage of the resistance pyramid follows the following steps (See Table 1).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Not Knowing</th>
<th>Not Able</th>
<th>Not Willing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Establish a sense of urgency</td>
<td>Announcement of current state of the organization</td>
<td>Support announcement with facts and figures</td>
<td>Explain consequences of not changing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build a guiding coalition</td>
<td>Begin two-way communication, get people at all levels involved</td>
<td>Train management on how to facilitate two-way communication</td>
<td>Encourage early participation, ensure employees that their concerns will be heard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create a future vision</td>
<td>Hold cascade sessions, open up dialog</td>
<td>Continue dialog</td>
<td>Open feedback channels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicate the change vision</td>
<td>Get a consistent message out through multiple channels (newsletter, intranet,</td>
<td>Hold informational seminars and training as needed and where relevant</td>
<td>Establish goals and performance measures, begin formation of employee development plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>posters, etc.), repeat the message often</td>
<td></td>
<td>Implement employee suggestions, ask for feedback / conduct surveys, ensure employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empower employees to take</td>
<td>Receive messages back through two-way communication, conduct informational</td>
<td>Give feedback to employee input, conduct skills training</td>
<td>have the opportunity to use their training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>action</td>
<td>training / workshops</td>
<td></td>
<td>Explain significance of successful outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create short term wins</td>
<td>Publicize early success, announce survey results</td>
<td>Provide continued training where necessary</td>
<td>Take action on survey results and feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consolidate gains</td>
<td>Publicize larger success, hold cascade sessions</td>
<td>Encourage continued two-way communication and suggestions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make changes part of culture</td>
<td>Repeat message until it is embedded in the culture</td>
<td>Allow more opportunity to use new skills</td>
<td>Performance measures and employee development plans are now fully integrated</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In Table 1, I have detailed suggestions for the human resources professional to develop a communication plan around a methodical change model, and focused on overcoming human resistance to change as identified by the resistance pyramid. Key themes in this process are repetition of the change message and future vision, training, and two-way communication.

The more times the message is repeated with consistency, the greater the likelihood that it will become a part of the new organizational culture. The human resources professional can work with the corporate communications or public relations department to make the most of additional channels of communication to repeat the message, such as newsletters, posters, videos, the company intranet, and other means of electronic or voice communication.

Training is used throughout the change effort usually to teach the skills necessary to the employee once the change has occurred, and to that end becomes a vehicle for communication of the future vision of the organization. In order for the training to be perceived as relevant and ensure that the employee is overcoming his or her resistance to the change, he or she must also be given opportunity to use the new skills he or she has learned. This enables reinforcement of the individual’s feeling of security and self esteem in being able to perform the new tasks, and will assist in easing his or her unwillingness to adapt to the changes.

Another recurrence should be two-way communication, essential for its value in helping the individual to overcome change resistance at all levels if used properly. This means that employees will feel as if management is listening to their concerns, and by
implementing employee suggestions, management reinforces this concept by showing the employees that they have been heard.

In authoring this review, I purposely did not detail how to put together employee development plans or performance measures as that focused more on the human resources management area of managing change than on the human resources development area of communicating change. In this case, these were methods of communication rather than methods of management. Although the employee development plan itself is a human resources development effort, the goal is to focus on how the development plan communicates to the employee what their role will look like on the other side of the change. Performance measures help the employee understand the expectations that the organization has for him or her. Both employee development plans and performance measures need to be integrated into the communication plan of the change effort in order to ensure that the change becomes fully integrated into the new organizational culture.

Recommendations for future research

It appears as if much information has been left on the table as still to be discovered by researchers. Though change has existed in industry since its own beginning, society’s understanding of change as a continuum in business is still relatively young, dating back perhaps only to the 1990s. It is easy to assume that the next several decades will bring about further research on change, on communication, and how the two interrelate for success. My recommendations for future research would include the previously mentioned employee perception of communication of change, a comparative
of the success of a change effort and who led the communication plan, and an evaluation of a change effort that heavily relies upon two-way communication.

*Employee perception.* It is necessary to understand how employees perceive the communication they are receiving and participating in during a change effort. Suggestions of paths to explore include perception of or satisfaction with each communication channel utilized. This could potentially help an organization to determine what works best and what works the least in order to focus on what works to communicate with employees. In addition to the communication channel, employee perception of who delivers the message could be explored. Questions for future research might center on determining who is more effective at delivering the change message, for instance if an immediate supervisor is more credible to or more accepted by the employee.

Human resource practitioners should typically focus on doing what is best for employees, ultimately to foster the success and performance of the organization. Therefore, the perceptions of the employees need to be seen as relevant and significant, and can serve as a guiding force for where human resources exerts effort. To do what we think is best without knowing what the employee needs or wants is counterproductive to the success of organizational change efforts.

*Researching the messenger.* A further topic for future research could expand upon the work already begun by Lewis, specifically comparing the relative success of a change effort according to the area responsible for managing the communication plan. For example, some researchers believe that a communication message should never come from the top level of management because employees are inherently mistrustful of senior
leadership (Larkin & Larkin, 1996). The belief here is that only the immediate supervisor can have any significant impact on the employee because that is the person with whom the employee has a close bond or relationship.

To engage in this research would also be to determine the relative success of human resources when it alone is tasked with formulating and / or managing the communication plan. But each of these entities, management versus human resources, needs also to be compared to a joint effort between the two. A potential hypothesis to test is how well a change effort succeeds to meet its desired vision when human resources and management join together to communicate the change vision with the employees of the organization. If human resources showed to be more successful as the communication manager, then it could strengthen the reputation of human resources as a strategic partner to the organization or even show the financial value of human resources. However, the potential negative impact of this conclusion is that management might feel threatened by human resources, rather than seeing it as a partner. Should research show management to be more successful than human resources in communicating the change vision, the significance of what human resources can provide to an organization might be undermined. My hope, should research such as this be conducted, is that we would find greater success in a merging of efforts between human resources and management.

_Evaluating two-way communication._ Research indicates a need for two-way communication as part of a successful change effort (Hargie & Tourish, 1996; Barrett & Luedcke, 1996). Another possible topic for future research is to examine frequency of two-way communication as well as the methods used to engage in two-way communication. For example, an organization may be use town-hall style meetings
where employees are encouraged to ask questions and voice their opinions, a suggestion box may be used to solicit new ideas, a company intranet could house an online bulletin board or chat room to facilitate virtual conversations among employees, and so on. A possible hypothesis to test is that the greater the number of available channels of open and two-way communication, the greater the likelihood that a change effort will be accepted by the employees and lead to its ultimate success. A subset of this research could focus on examining each channel of communication for frequency of use, the employees’ perception on how well their ideas were heard based on the particular channel, and an overall perception on the availability of multiple channels to be heard.

Another hypothesis to test is the difference in impact between face-to-face two-way communication versus virtual means of two-way communication. The assumption is that face-to-face communication will have greater impact in reducing employee resistance to change as well as increase management’s acceptance to employees’ suggestions to enhance the overall change effort.

Conclusion

While there is still much work to be done in change and communication research, there is certainly no shortage of organization change efforts to examine. In the near future, human resources must continue to work towards helping employees to understand and accept the change, and to work towards assisting management with communicating the vision of change itself. Just as there is no one model for change or communicating change to fit all organizations, there may never be definitive research to show what works best. To that end, human resources must continue its efforts and be willing to change as better practices emerge. Human resources development practitioners need to continue to
work together with organizational leadership to be aware of the development that employees may require to meet the future vision, and also to communicate that vision to employees. A state of change may become the new status quo for organizations to remain competitive in today’s global economy; human resources possess the ability to guide employees through the changes that may come by holding leadership accountable for communication and properly delivering the messages.

The final recommendation to human resource development practitioners is to continue in its path and remain flexible to change. As practitioners, we set the example to leaders and employees, acting as business partner and advocate. Human resource development practitioners have the ability to reduce resistance to change for the employee by opening up channels for two-way communication through training, dialog, and through promoting informal conversations between staff and supervisors.

Having an awareness of the levels of resistance an employee may go through will assist the human resource development practitioner in developing an appropriate and proactive communication plan. This plan should serve as a source of information rather than a reactive response; however, the human resource development practitioner must remain aware that, at some point during the change effort, reactive communication may be necessary and thus a contingency plan established as well. Human resource development practitioners also facilitate the change effort for leadership by ensuring communication occurs over multiple channels, that the message is consistent, and by repeating the message of the future vision of the organization after it has been transformed by the change effort. Ultimately, the human resource development practitioner must also hold leadership accountable for disseminating the information
needed by the employees as well as for supporting the future vision and change message consistently throughout the process.
References


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