changing course

The difference is in the details

When it comes to change communication, it’s not as much what you say but how you say it

by Jennifer Frahm, Ph.D.

Despite a wealth of books on the market describing best practices for managing change, there is still a desperate need to improve our change communication strategies. This is particularly important given the rate and prevalence of major change going on in business today—mergers and acquisitions, culture changes, restructuring, the introduction of new leadership teams, and business process reengineering, to name a few. Change can be exciting, but it can also be painful and messy for those involved.

This article considers two case studies written as part of my doctoral research in 2002–2004, to offer some guidance as to why communicating change is so hard, and how styles of communication can affect employees’ experience of change. In particular, does the long-standing advice to just “communicate, communicate, communicate” actually contribute to change fatigue and cynicism among employees? And how can this be overcome?

Seeking a turnaround

The first company in my research was a government-owned corporation service organization, QMI Solutions. Its mission is to transfer new technology to the manufacturing industry (that is, technology diffusion). After 12 years of operation, a new CEO arrived. This CEO had a long history of successful change programs behind him, and he favored highly participative initiatives with an emphasis on teams and employee involvement. Having been brought in to turn QMI Solutions around, his primary focus was to make the company more commercial, to be a “continuously changing” organization. As he said in the early days, “Just because we’re not-for-profit doesn’t mean we can’t be commercially slick.” The transformation took close to four years and consisted of culture change, multiple restructurings, spin-offs of business units and the implementation of new...
accounting systems. When I started my research, there were 72 employees; two years later there were 36.

The second organization was a business unit within a large government-owned utility provider, Energex Ltd. The business unit had a retail focus, yet was still required to meet public service expectations. It, too, had 70 staff members at the start of the study, and was undergoing performance management, new product development and a business process reengineering program. The CEO had just brought in a manager whose mandate was to improve gross margin—in one year. Nine months into the program, the manager was seconded to another urgent project, and one of the middle managers was promoted to complete the turnaround. Energex brought in a dedicated change manager, while QMI Solutions did not.

**Why is change communication so hard?**

Most communication professionals 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, founded on the work of social psychologist Kurt Lewin:

**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, organizational change is rarely this simple. Most of the time, 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 the change, we are doing a good job. With the continuous shifts that companies, industries and nations are facing today, though, three-step programs are not sufficient. We need to adjust the way we think about communication.

The first step is to think about communication **during** change, rather than communication **of** change. It’s a small but critical step. When we start thinking about communication during change, we see that there is much more to change communication than improving the information provision. There is also:

1. Establishing the purpose of your change communication.
2. Understanding your employees’ communicative expectations.
3. Developing communicative competence.
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 an organization, we need to think hard about the
It’s tough work trying to create dialogue if your employees speak to one another with disrespect and are focused on winning battles. The purpose of our communication. 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.

When we communicate for stability, we reduce anxiety and address the information needs of our employees. We develop a clear vision and help them make sense of what is going on. This is where we pay attention to the credibility of the communicator and make judicious choices in the media we use (for example, e-mail, face-to-face or intranet).

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

This is where the concept of organizational dialogues originates. Good dialogues are challenging to start and difficult to maintain, but incredibly valuable for learning and innovation. They demand higher-level skills and capabilities of the participants—we need to be able to listen, and to be empathetic and cognizant of differences. Dialogue was the default position for communication for the QMI Solutions CEO. He genuinely believed that his employees could come and talk with him on a peer-to-peer level, and had no qualms about discussing aspects of the business he was unsure of. He believed that real dialogue would begin only if he was honest and transparent about what he knew and did not know. He expected that all employees would have a similar communication philosophy, and not be concerned by issues of power, loss of face or lack of respect for others.

Introducing a dialogue approach is a change in itself. Communicators 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 organization have with each other. It’s tough work trying to create dialogue if your employees speak to one another with disrespect and are focused on winning battles.

Communicating for change means giving your people skills 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.

By reviewing the purpose of the change communication, you start to recognize that there are many options available to you. The automatic default of the “tell-and-sell” model may not suit your purpose, nor is it as simple as soliciting input to achieve employee buy-in. Making the decision on whether to communicate for stability or to communicate for further change depends on knowing your employees’ communicative expectations.

2. Communicative expectations

Interestingly, in planning the communication strategies and tactics during change, neither the change agent at Energex nor the QMI Solutions CEO considered evaluating the employees’ expectations of change communication. Simple diagnostic tools such as communication surveys, focus groups or employee interviews were eschewed in favor of assumptions about what would be the best way to communicate with the employees. When you seek to understand communication expectations, you should ask:

- What type of communication do they want?
- Do they want to be involved?
- Do they just want to be told what to do?
- Do they want face-to-face, or do they want written memos?
- How much information do they want?
- From whom do they expect to hear?

There were plenty of indications that employees in both organizations had specific expectations. Those at QMI Solutions expected that they would be provided with a step-by-step plan for how things would occur, and they rejected any notion of a highly participative practice (the CEO was paid to think of the future, not them!). In contrast, the employees of the Energex business unit believed they should be included from the very beginning. They mar-
veled at the new manager “because he just listened,” and were disappointed later in the process when no one asked for their opinions. The lesson was fairly simple: Violate the expectations, and you create mistrust and cynicism, even if you have the best of intentions.

The bottom line is, you won’t know what the expectations are if you don’t ask, and the answers may vary from company to company.

3. Communicative competencies
Developing communicative competences is critical to be able to respond to employees’ communicative expectations. Some change agents are particularly skilled at being able to switch styles depending on the individual needs of the employee. They know when to employ an authoritarian, information-based style that reduces anxiety, and they can switch to a softer style that emphasizes listening, engagement, empathy and learning when there is a need to enter into conversations about change.

Most managers have learned the former style. After all, this is what a manager does: sets the boundaries, makes it clear what is to happen and is comfortable with the position of power. It is less 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. To manage ongoing change well, more organizations are undergoing dialogue training, in which management and employees learn how to engage in discussion and learn together. At last year’s IABC World Conference, for example, attenders heard from dialogue expert Peter Nixon on the varied ways that companies are using dialogue training as an intervention to improve employee engagement, sales performance and business outcomes.

4. Engaging with the background talk of change
The final key lesson of my research was the importance of engaging with the background talk of change: the informal conversations going on in the background of the formal change efforts. Some people refer to this as informal communication, gossip and rumor. The background talk is the site of sense making and decision making about the change. It’s a normal and natural communication process within organizations, and an 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 could impede your change efforts. And it can be the site of better ideas.

At QMI Solutions, the CEO chose not to engage with the background talk and, not surprisingly, change took a long time to occur. In contrast, the change agent with the Energex group 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.

So what happened? At last report, QMI Solutions is thriving, a completely new organization with employees that have strong communication competencies. While the environment is still quite challenging, they are much better skilled in managing continuous change. The CEO, satisfied with his work, has since retired.

The Energex unit closed its doors a year after the study. While the employees and management initially possessed much stronger communication skills than those at QMI Solutions, the change initiatives were not sufficient to turn around the business unit amid some pretty volatile industry and organizational changes.