

Bright Ideas



Supporting Organizational
Excellence & Innovation

Communicating change to fellow humans

Change scares most people. This is true even if the change is supposed to make their lives better, largely because humans approach change from a risk perspective more often than a benefits perspective. They are more concerned with what can go wrong, rather than what can go right. So when it comes to organizational change, internal communication has to be done right to avert disaster.

We want employees and other stakeholders to embrace change and engage actively in the change process. But often employee engagement focuses on resisting the changes. Why? Because the change

communicators forget that they are talking to fellow humans.

A mile in the moccasins

Humans are thinking, feeling and acting creatures. Change managers sometimes focus on how they want employees to act in order to achieve certain goals. But actions are mediated by what people think and feel. Before communicating about organizational change, put yourself in employees' shoes and consider what their reactions to the planned changes will be. What are their concerns and fears? What are their hopes? What are their

assumptions and beliefs? What do they expect will happen when change is implemented? What is most important to them? These are the things that must be directly addressed in change communications.

Even when things are not perfect (and when are they ever?), people develop routines that are comfortable for them. A common concern is that they will have to give up old routines and expend extra time and energy learning new ones. They will become less efficient and uncomfortable, at least for a while. They may worry that they will be penalized for a drop in productivity during the transition. Another

typical concern is that they will have to work harder, even after the transition. They may also worry that they will fail to meet new expectations and lose their job, even though they hope for success.

People need to understand the reason for change and how they (not the organization) will benefit from it in the long run. One time, when our organization was about to upgrade software, my staff complained about having to learn new commands and layouts. But when I identified the features that would make writing and editing signifi-

cantly easier for them, they were immediately on board.

Fear of failure and job loss can affect even star employees. It's important to emphasize that management is committed to support everyone through the transition process—that you want them to succeed and will do whatever is in your power to make that happen. If someone is taking on new responsibilities, they need to know that you know some things will take longer or get put on the back burner.

Trust issues

Employees' past experience with managers and with organizational change create expectations about what will happen. When Dilbert's pointy-haired boss starts spouting new buzz words, it does not signal real change. All Dilbert has to do is

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ride it out and everything will stay as it was. There is a self-fulfilling prophecy at work here. If employees expect that the change plan is just talk, they will resist or subvert the change process, with the result that there is no change.

Communicate about change using everyday words. Avoid making up names for task forces, processes and forms that will ultimately be shortened into an acronym or made into a joke. (Remember “rightsizing”?) It is a general rule that change communication should be done face-to-face in groups as much as possible. Key communicators must all come across as fully on board with the planned changes, or their reticence will undermine trust and employee commitment. It’s easier to sound like a committed fellow human with plain language than with buzzwords.

Changes should reflect the stated values of the organization and the lived values of its leaders. When managers don’t “walk the talk,” employees are less likely to buy into change.

We trust those we believe care about our welfare. An organization’s management must consider what is best for the organization in the long run. But an organization’s interests and the employee’s interests are not the same, even if they may be aligned. Initiatives that

grow the organization should also benefit the individuals in it. Internal communications should emphasize the benefits to the employee in terms of improved ease of work flow, personal growth, professional advancement and/or income.

Engagement and innovation

Ultimately, the success of the change process requires that everyone be committed and actively engaged in making it happen. Often leaders wait until they have the details worked out before they roll out the change plan to employees. A disadvantage is that during the time it takes to work out the details, rumours can raise anxiety and send star employees looking for an exit strategy. More importantly, delays reduce opportunities for employee engagement in crafting the change process and reduce their commitment to it.

Some change communicators get defensive when employees question the need for the change or elements of the plan. One manager actually accused someone of insubordination for raising concerns. The manager’s negative response shut down all discussion because it was just not safe. It killed any motivation for innovation in the group.

People need to feel safe in order to be innovative. Start the conversation about change by saying that it’s OK to ask questions. It’s OK

to raise issues or present possible problems. They can express concerns and fears without being seen as negative or obstructive. Then be open and respectful when employees do it. Engage them in exploring challenges and generating solutions.

Many leaders and managers are uncomfortable saying “I don’t know” when asked how an organizational goal will be achieved because it makes them feel less competent. (After all, managers are human, too.) Where trust is low, not having the answers is the kiss of death. But when employees trust their leaders, not knowing the answers can provide a springboard for employee engagement.

Ask employee teams for their ideas. What do they see as possible organizational weaknesses or external threats to the plan’s success? What do they see as organizational strengths and opportunities that could be capitalized on? Who has skills or resources to contribute to the plan? What tasks do they need to release in order to act, and who can take over the essential tasks? What do they need from others in order to move things forward?

Recognizing the need to treat employees as fellow humans when communicating about organizational change can make the difference between failure and success for everyone.

From Where I Sit



Which data are critical?

I had the misfortune this fall of having a system crash on my main computer that left me without access to many of my files for over two months. When people asked me why I hadn’t backed up my business-critical files, my answer was, “I thought I had.”

In fact, I had backed up many files, but had done so selectively according to what I thought was important. The problem was that my definition of important excluded a lot of data that turned out to be important, such as email contact groups and my Christmas list.

My old data are now in my new computer and I back up everything.



K. K. Biersdorff Consulting supports organizational excellence and innovation through an array of planning, research, communication and training services that take projects seamlessly from start to finish.