Library Management

Continuing professional development and workplace learning – 14: Communicating in times of change
Ian Smith

Article information:

Users who downloaded this article also downloaded:

For Authors

If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald for Authors service information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission guidelines are available for all. Please visit www.emeraldinsight.com/authors for more information.

About Emerald www.emeraldinsight.com

Emerald is a global publisher linking research and practice to the benefit of society. The company manages a portfolio of more than 290 journals and over 2,350 books and book series volumes, as well as providing an extensive range of online products and additional customer resources and services.

Emerald is both COUNTER 4 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for digital archive preservation.

Continuing professional development and workplace learning – 14
Communicating in times of change

Ian Smith
La Trobe University, Bundoora, Australia

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of communication during organisational change.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper outlines five key rules for good organisational communication along with a suggested four-phase framework for communicating effectively during times of change.

Findings – The paper finds that the role of communication during organisational change is important.

Originality/value – The paper provides a useful set of rules for good communication during organisational change.

Keywords Organizational change, Communication

Paper type Research paper

Open any management textbook and there will almost certainly be a chapter or section devoted to the importance of communication in organisations. Talk to any practising manager and it is likely that they too will point to effective communication as a key to good management. Engage in conversation with any employee and they will almost certainly say the same thing. Good organisational communication **is** a key factor in effectively managing people.

Effective communication takes on added importance when employees are experiencing the upheaval and dislocation that accompanies organisational change and renewal. This, the fourth in a series of five short discussions of the "people" aspects of organisational change (Smith, 2005a, b, c), examines the important role of communication during periods of change. Five key rules for good organisational communication are outlined along with a suggested four-phase framework for communicating effectively during times of change.

Communication – why it is important

Harvard University Professor and change guru J.P. Kotter, whose research encompasses hundreds of examples of attempted organisational changes, takes the view that poor communication is, in very many cases, the root cause of failed efforts to achieve effective and lasting organisational change. He says:

Transformation is impossible unless … people are willing to help, often to the point of making short-term sacrifices. Employees will not make sacrifices if they are happy with the status quo, unless they believe that useful change is possible. Without credible

communication, and a lot of it, the hearts and minds of the troops are never captured (Kotter, 1995, p. 16).

Effective communication is critical to the ultimate success of any attempt to achieve organisational change. Such communication must be accurate, honest, delivered at the right time and in formats appropriate to the audience.

Communication – doing it well

Enduring change cannot simply be imposed. For change to be effective employees must be involved and engaged with the change process – to have a real sense of involvement in shaping the process and direction of change. Leaders and managers, by demonstrating to employees that a genuine process of listening and two-way interaction exists, can build organisational cultures of trust which support efforts to achieve change. A culture of organisational trust and honesty is a significant contributor to the establishment of an environment in which employees readily listen to change messages, think constructively about change, and generally assist in moving their organisations forward during periods of change.

The literature dealing with organisational change and the role of communication in achieving change is extensive with many empirical research studies underpinning varied prescriptions for effective communication. An examination of this literature reveals core rules that should be followed in order to achieve effective communication in times of organisational change.

Rule 1

Recognise that organisations vary – they are not homogenous entities – and communicate accordingly. Recognise too that individuals and groups at different levels and in different segments of an organisation are likely to react to change in a variety of ways. Messages that are appropriate to the intended audience must therefore be delivered effectively to the right people and/or groups at the right time.

Rule 2

Listen – do not just talk. Effective communication, especially in times of organisational change, is in large part a process of listening and paying real attention to what people have to say. It is vitally important to make communication with employees during periods of change a genuinely two-way process.

A variety of communication methods and consultation processes should be used: written and verbal; large group and small group; team and one-to-one; formal and informal. Feedback loops in the communication process are particularly important. A somewhat unorthodox, but increasingly popular, approach to gathering feedback and disseminating information in times of change is the "rumour board". This feedback method uses a simple mechanism: a notice board (physical or virtual/online). Employees affected by change are invited to post on the notice board any and all rumours that they have heard. Once rumours are posted, designated managers respond to the rumours. It is critical for the success of this method that responses are open, honest and accurate. While this approach to organisational communication may be alarming for some managers it can, handled well, be a powerful tool for identifying and addressing the core of employee concerns during times of change and can build trust and confidence in the managers of the change processes.

Rule 3

Communicate the reasons for change. Employees should be told clearly why and how things are changing, the intended outcomes of the changes and what the impact of the changes may be on individuals and on groups. Explanation of the changes should be made in plain words, avoiding jargon and "buzz phrases". It is especially important that managers wanting to communicate effectively about change do not talk down to employees.

Rule 4

Demonstrate commitment to genuine and open communication at all levels of management and involve all managers in the process of communicating about change. It is important for employees to hear about change from both senior managers and from their line managers. While clear communication from the top is critical in expressing and reinforcing organisational commitment to make changes, communication from line managers and team leaders working at a grass-roots operational level is also important. Communication undertaken at this organisational level can provide tangible opportunities for employees to discuss changes and their impact while also actively demonstrating opportunities available to staff for have direct input into, and influence on, change processes.

Rule 5

Above all, take time to communicate. Because organisational values and behaviours are often deeply embedded, successful organisational change takes time. So too does communication about change.

A framework for effective communication about change – the 4Es

LeTourneau (2004) proposes a four-step approach to organisational communication which encompasses the rules described above and which offers particular efficacy during periods of organisational change. Her 4E framework, which is based on a communication model developed to enable health clinicians to better interact with their patients, consists of four interrelated elements: engaging, empathising, educating and enlisting.

Engaging

Because real change cannot just be imposed, genuine and thorough engagement with employees from the earliest stages of the change process is important if deeply embedded change is to be achieved. Engaging employees with organisational changes requires introduction of the topic of change/s, as early as possible in the life of change initiatives, and active generation of interest and discussion about the changes. Listening to employee's reactions, both positive and negative, is important at all times, but critical in the engagement phase.

Negativity about at least some aspects of change will almost certainly emerge during organisational change processes. It is good management practice to air such reactions and sentiments openly and to do this sooner rather than later. Although doing so may run counter to the instinctive reaction of many managers – to attempt to thoroughly plan and think through changes before making change plans known – bringing on discussion of changes early in the change process may lessen the shock of change. By openly acknowledging the existence of unknown factors in the process of change, and inviting suggestions for ideas and actions, employees affected by the changes may be engaged in examining and dealing with those unknowns. Open

communication early in the change cycle offers a better likelihood of recruiting employees into the change process and engaging them in achieving change. Employees thus recruited are less likely to see change as simply being imposed on them and indeed may ultimately become champions of change in the organisation.

Engagement should be characterised by simple, honest and straightforward explanations of the ideas for change. A mix of communication methods is important: large scale "big-picture" messages from the organisation's leader/s play an important role as do practical grass-roots explanations of how change may impact on individuals and work groups. Team leaders and line managers also need to be part of a consistent change message from the outset of the engagement phase. Change champions – those employees who will, from whatever position they occupy in the organisation, develop (and encourage in others) ideas, energy and enthusiasm about change – often emerge during the engagement phase and they can become powerful ongoing advocates for change.

Empathising
A continued focus on listening is key to the empathising phase of change communication. Issues and concerns raised by those affected by changes should be acknowledged, engaged with, and given due consideration. While some concerns may seem small in the scale of whole-of-organisation change plans, they will be meaningful for whoever has raised them. Such issues and concerns may, on examination, also have wider relevance and importance. Legitimate concerns should be acted on wherever possible, and due credit given to those raising them. It must be recognised, however, that not all concerns may be solved to the satisfaction of those who raise them. What is important is that people feel confident about raising issues of concern and can see that these matters are genuinely listened to and considered. Demonstrating empathy with the concerns raised offers change leaders the chance to strengthen their credibility and to build goodwill. Through genuine listening and empathy managers may build confidence in the capacity of their organisations to find the right solutions and to achieve desired outcomes through change.

Educating
Education – through big-picture briefings by change leaders, in team and group meetings, in one-to-one meetings and in both formal and informal exchanges – should be a core objective of communication with employees when implementing organisational change. Like other aspects of communication, education about change should be a two-way process whereby information about the reasons for, and the nature of, change is exchanged and insights gained into the impact of changes.

As with engagement, education about change should begin early. Managers may wish to hold back from providing information about change until ideas are more concrete – perhaps from concern that releasing early and unformed information may stir worries and galvanise opposition to change. While such things may well happen they are, in any event, likely to occur whenever change plans are announced. Open and early discussion about changes, education about the need for change and gathering of reactions and ideas in response to change proposals may yield multiple benefits. By allowing worries and negative reactions to be aired and to run their course early in the change process, factors that may seriously impact on the progress of changes can be identified early and group attention applied to addressing such matters. Honesty and genuine engagement on the part of change managers can develop trust and confidence on the part of employees. Both of these factors are critical to developing and sustaining a strong support base for achieving enduring organisational change.

Enlisting

Change that is simply imposed in the face of opposition is likely to fail or, at the least, be seriously compromised. Establishing a solid support base for organisational changes, and undertaking ongoing active enlistment to the change effort, are both vital elements in achieving successful and enduring organisational change. Enlisting – the fourth element in the 4E framework, and interlinked with engagement, empathising and educating – is concerned with developing a support base for change. Effective communication plays a critical part in this process: communication with both the change leaders and early adopters and with the cautious employees who need time to gather insights and accurate information in order to work through questions and concerns. Communication – persistent and consistent – is vital also in the (often drawn out) process of enlisting support from the residual cynics and chronic change resisters who are present to varying degrees in all organisations.

Conclusion

Communication – honest, open and two-way – is always an important element in the management of people, the human resources of organisations. During organisational change, when employees are exposed to the upheaval of the old order and a change to the new, effective communication is a critical element in achieving effective and lasting change. The five basic rules for effective change management communication and the 4E framework outlined here offer simple but effective guides and methods for communicating successfully in times of change.

References

Kotter, J.P. (1995), "Why transformation efforts fail", *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 73 No. 2, pp. 12-20.

LeTourneau, B. (2004), "Communicate for change", *Journal of Healthcare Management*, Vol. 49 No. 6, pp. 354-7.

Smith, I. (2005a), "Managing the 'people' side of organisational change", *Library Management*, Vol. 26 No. 3, pp. 152-5.

Smith, I. (2005b), "Achieving readiness for organisational change", *Library Management*, Vol. 26 Nos 6/7, pp. 408-12.

Smith, I. (2005c), "Resistance to change – recognition and response", *Library Management*, Vol. 26 Nos 8/9, pp. 519-22.

Further reading

Barrett, D.J. (2002), "Change communication: using strategic employee communication to facilitate major change", *Corporate Communications*, Vol. 7 No. 4, pp. 219-31.

Daly, F., Teague, P. and Kitchen, P. (2003), "Exploring the role of internal communication during organisational change", *Corporate Communications*, Vol. 8 No. 3, pp. 153-62.

Corresponding author

Ian Smith can be contacted at: i.smith@latrobe.edu.au

This article has been cited by:

1. Ian Smith. 2006. Continuing professional development and workplace learning – 15. *Library Management* **27**:4/5, 300-306. [Abstract] [Full Text] [PDF]