
Communication – the Missing Link in Managing Change

Many organisations are adjusting to an era where they have to make hard decisions in order to survive. The focus so far has been on how to manage the impact in the short term and on introducing the measures that are appropriate for their current circumstances. However, a short-term strategy alone will not be sufficient to sustain the organisation in the long run. As part of a longer-term strategy, organisations need to ensure that their employees are committed to the changes that have to be made. If organisations fail to properly engage their employees about the need for change, thereby actively managing the retention and development of key people, they may find that they are not in a position to take advantage of the upturn. Many leaders are failing to take their employees considerations into account when making decisions regarding the future direction of the organisation.

This is beyond survival; when organisations bring their employees with them on the change journey, they will be in a better position to respond when the green shoots of change begin to emerge.

Engaging in change

While many employees are aware that things have changed in their organisation and the economy at large, it is wrong to assume that they have the same understanding of the environment and its effect on their circumstances. Recent CIPD employee engagement research¹ showed that 42% of employees felt that they are not kept well informed about what is going on in their organisation. Where managers fail to fully explain the context, such as the organisation's longer-term goal and the steps that management need to take to move forward, this can lead to resistance or half-hearted acceptance of the need for change. While this may be misinterpreted as employees being idealistic or unrealistic, it may be simply that they do not understand what is expected of them. This can lead to a stalled or delayed change programme with consequences that damage the organisation's overall ability to survive and thrive.

Defusing the Resistance

The starting point for organisations is to understand the impact that the change is having on their key stakeholders – customer, shareholders and employees. A normal response of many to change is to initially deny that change (Figure 1). Without proper engagement, this can easily lead to active resistance. Resistance can be an entirely natural part of organisational life and is often the result of a lack of understanding and acceptance of the current situation. Organisations need to recognise and define what practical steps have to be taken to move their employees to the same defined state and place. The first step is to acknowledge the employee's concerns; the next step is to communicate to them.

¹ CIPD Working Life: Employee Attitudes and Engagement, Truss et al, 2006

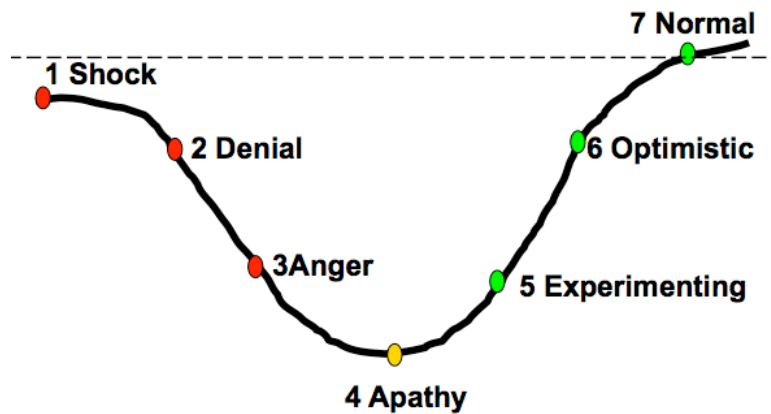


Figure 1 – Kubler Ross Change Curve

Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

Front line managers are the key to communicating with employees regarding the need for change. While leadership from the top is vital, senior executives are too far removed from the front line for the message to have a lasting impact. Employees will look to their direct manager for the lead on change. Organisations, therefore, need ensure that their front line managers themselves understand the message, that their role is to assist in bringing about change and that their leaders will support them. If front line managers themselves are not fully engaged into both the communication and change processes, any momentum gained by senior management will stall.

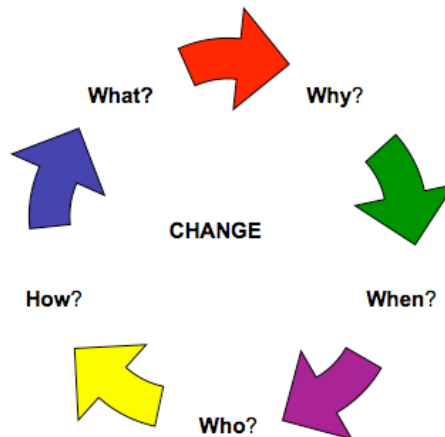


Figure 2 – The Communication Change Cycle

Front line managers, therefore, need to be given the tools to communicate the change message to their staff. In addition, however, they need to be given the complete picture of change so that they address the correct message and not just the immediate impact – such as redundancies or a pay cut. For managers to properly communicate,

they need to be given an understanding of the change that they are expected to bring about (Figure 2) including:

- Why is the change happening in this organisation and why now?
- What will change in the organisation and when will this change take place?
- Who is going to be impacted in terms of losing their job or changes to their roles?
- How will the staff who are remaining be supported in picking up the work?
- How will the impacted staff be involved e.g. training for staff whose job is changing?

How this message is transmitted is as important as what is transmitted. Managers need to remember that people will hear what they expect to hear and that if its possible for something to be misunderstood, it will be². Some of the key steps in communicating change include:

1. *Communication Style*

Not all employees will understand the message if it is delivered in one style. A direct style will not work with an individual who empathises with others; their sensitivities need to be taken into account in delivering the message. The responsibility for adapting their style to the circumstances lies with the manager not those who are receiving the message.

2. *Body language*

Up to 90% of all communication relates to both body language and the tone of the words used. Managers need to match their pitch and pace – as well as their stance – to suit the message that they are delivering. For example, a low pitch and slow pace can be perceived as threatening thus completely undermining the intent of the message.

3. *Consider the context*

The location of delivering the message is as important as the content of the message. Managers need to be aware of the signals that they may unintentionally send out in calling staff to a meeting. A message that is delivered in a manager's office as opposed to a meeting room may take on a different meaning to those called to that meeting.

Steps in Communicating Change

1. Adopt your style
2. Read body language
3. Be sensitive to context
4. Don't ignore the details
5. Listen!

² What You Say, What They Hear, Anne Field Harvard Management Communication Letter Winter 2005

4. *Don't ignore the details*

It is very easy – and dangerous – for managers to assume that their staff have the same understanding of the information that they do. The opposite is normally the case. Without the detail, employees may not accept the conclusions that the organisation has come to – especially where that change impacts upon them directly.

5. *Listening!*

Employees have invested in the success of the enterprise and it makes business sense to create time and space in the communications process to allow managers to listen to the employees in their teams. What do they think about the message? What ideas do they have about how they can contribute to improving the current performance issues? What issues, concerns and worries do they have as they assimilate the message?

Conclusion

Change is not a 50-yard race; it is a marathon³. It is not enough to announce that the change is taking place; organisations need to engage with their employees again and again to ensure that the momentum for change continues. Otherwise employees may be left behind or work against the new organisation. Front line managers are the key to this message but are they delivering it? Employees will look to their own manager to determine the effect that the change will have on them; if the manager does not act as though the change is important, the employees will not believe that it will impact upon them. To bring about lasting change requires a serious engagement by all levels of the organisation not just a series of announcements from the top.

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³ The Heart of Change: Real-Life Stories of How People Change Their Organizations, John P. Katter and Dan S. Cohen
Harvard Business School Press 2002