

Communicating about Change

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Engage employees in change through a focus on Communications.

Without sufficient and effective communications, through a variety of channels, it is difficult to be successful in implementing organizational change initiatives. We all take in information differently. By providing a variety of forums, channels and methods for communicating on change initiatives, we are more likely to engage employees in that change. Engaging employees means your change initiatives are likely to be far more successful than if you do not engage employees. Engaging employees in change means you are making a concerted effort to communicate regularly and openly about the change.

In this Article, Gina Abudi, a Consultant within Leadership, Project Management and Process Improvement, will provide best practices for effective communications to engage employees in change initiatives.

The Complexity of Change

Change today is more complex than in the past. It is impossible to maintain the status quo in an organization. Increased competition, global economic impacts, securing and engaging top talent, increasing customer demands, price sensitivity, increased regulations, and many other factors all require companies to stay alert and continuously adapt to keep moving forward. And guess what...more often than not dealing with the employees and their perceptions of a change falls on the shoulders of Human Resources. The more complex the change, such as a change initiative that...

- impacts most all functions
- requires employees to radically change how they work
- requires a change in the organization's culture and impacts strategies, processes and tools

...the more time that must be spent *prior to* as well as during and after implementation in communication and engaging employees in the change.

Much Drives Change

Change initiatives are not simply launched because someone thinks it will be fun to change. Organizational change is driven by any number of internal and external factors. Some of these factors are,

Internal Factors	External Factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mergers and acquisitions • Senior leadership changes • New Board of Directors • Changes in organizational vision • Employee dissatisfaction • Organizational growth • Business unit/department mergers • Performance failures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New competition • Industry changes • Changing customer demands • Cost pressures • Technology • Regulatory changes • Economic changes • Vendor/supplier changes

We can't understand the complexity of the change, and the impact on the organization and the individual employees until we understand what is driving the change in the organization. Understanding what is driving the change, aids in communicating the right information to engage employees in the change and increase understanding of that change.

Communicating About Change and its Value

Change enables the organization to grow, prosper, and remain viable over the long term. No organization can sustain itself without change. But what about the individual? We often talk about the value of change to the organization – reducing costs, increasing revenue, satisfying customers, getting products and services out the door quickly – but rarely talk about or try to understand the value of change to the *individual employee*.

The best leaders know that to be successful in implementing change, they must communicate the value of change to their teams. This requires ensuring that employees understand *why* the change is important. Leaders should talk to employees about the benefits of the change - not just for the organization but also, and maybe more importantly, for the individual employees.

The more leaders involve employees in change, and highlight the value of the change, the more likely employees will be engaged in the change and ready to help achieve that change.

The willingness and ability to communicate constantly, openly, and honestly about change is essential to the success of the change initiative. The earlier that you communicate about change, the more likely you can identify in advance potential negative impacts of the change and address those negative impacts. The initial communication on an upcoming change initiative should answer the following questions:

- *Who* will be impacted by the change?
- *What* is the change?
- *Why* does the change have to happen?
- *When* will the change happen?

- *Where* will the change specifically take place?

These are the 5 W's – a great tool to use when sharing information about a change initiative. These five questions are often the most pressing that an employee will have about change. Address these questions early on in communicating about the change initiative and you will alleviate many employees' concerns and fears around the change.

Communication Overview Plan

As a best practice, I develop a communication overview plan to ensure communications about the change initiative are well thought out and planned ahead of start of the initiative. That plan includes the following information,

- The sender of the communication
- The overall timing of the communication (e.g., prior to start, at start, etc.)
- The audience who will receive the message
- The primary focus of the communication (its purpose)
- The message content (just 2 – 3 bullets of what should be included in the message)
- The delivery method (how the message will be delivered to the audience)
- The date for delivery of the communication to the audience

Below is a partially completed communication plan as an example,

Sender	Timing	Audience	Focus	Message	Delivery	Date
CEO	Defining change project (prior to start)	All employees	Announce upcoming change	Vision for change Explanation of change What to expect	Virtual all-hands meeting Email follow up	Sep 11
Change leader (sponsor)	Defining change project (prior to start)	Identified change team members	Team responsibilities and team building	High level overview of change project Roles & responsibilities Estimated timeline Team building activities Determine how team members will work	Team meeting (face-to-face)	Sep 18

This high-level overview provides a big picture of communications, ensuring no gaps in communications on the change project. I use this plan to ensure I am regularly communicating on the change initiative via a variety of methods.

Rational and Emotional Sides of Change

In communicating about change, strive for a balance between the rational side and the emotional side, with a bit more weight toward the emotional.

Rational Side of Change	Emotional Side of Change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus is on data, statistics, logic and metrics • A concern for the organization and what is good for it • Shared through formal presentations, charts and graphs, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus is on sharing a vision, outlining individual benefits • A concern for the individuals and the benefit to them • Shared through information conversations, storytelling

We connect more with emotions than we do with logic. Sharing the emotional side of a change enables you to engage more individuals in the change. Consider this story of a change initiative I co-led, working alongside the Executive Director, for a non-profit organization that needed to update how it worked to support their community.

Prior to the launch of a major change initiative, the Executive Director and I held an all-staff meeting. We kicked off the meeting with the following statement: "It is 10 years in the future. Every individual and family who has needed our help has received it. We can claim that we have enabled individuals to receive education to get better jobs. Because they have been able to get better jobs, families have sufficient food and are in homes in safe neighborhoods. In our area of influence, no child is hungry and no family lives on the streets or in their car. Congratulations to all of you for your efforts in making the world a better place!"

Take a moment and consider this story shared. Imagine the power of this story. Imagine you are an employee. You are engaged, excited, thrilled about the future and possibilities ahead. You are ready to begin a change initiative. This is emotional, you connect with it.

The goals of change communications should focus on the individual specifically to:

- Keep those individuals who support the change engaged in the change early on through to implementation and evaluation of the success of the change.
- Convert individuals who are not supportive of the change to become champions of the change.

Remember that individuals resist change for any number of reasons; rarely is it because they are difficult people though certainly it sometimes feels that way! Employees may resist change for reasons, such as:

- A perception of no personal, professional or other opportunities as a result of the change
- Unclear as to why the change is happening
- A perception the change will impact the work and either increase the workload or make for a boring job
- Status being lost in the organization due to the change; individual's expertise being devalued and/or less autonomy in the role

We can address resistance by effective and sufficient communications to engage employees in change, as well as through ensuring:

- involvement of employees in the change through asking for feedback
- plans are in place to allow for training on new skills/acquiring new knowledge

I personally like resisters to change initiatives. Resisters ensure that the end product of the change is a good one! They push those managing the change to make the best decisions. There is often good information to be found behind resistance. Explore further areas of resistance and have conversations with resisters.

Communication Methods/Channels

It is essential to use a variety of methods and channels to communicate about change initiatives. Simply sending emails is insufficient and will not help you to turn employees into change champions. If we use a variety of channels, we are more likely to communicate with a broader group of employees. Consider any of the following methods and channels of value to communicate regularly about change:

- All-staff meetings
- Department or workgroup meetings
- Virtual meetings
- Webinars
- Emails
- Internal website
- One-on-one conversations
- Breakfast events
- Posters in hallways
- Flyers/handouts
- Lunch & learn sessions
- After hours events
- Tabletop in a cafeteria
- eNewsletter
- informal conversations ("water cooler")
- focus groups

For each communication piece, consider a variety of channels to distribute that message. For example, a message about the success of a particular component of a change may be delivered via an email from the CEO, then discussed by managers at department meetings, and then shared via an internal website or eNewsletter. When we use a variety of communication channels to distribute a message, we are more likely to engage resisters in the change effort. This includes surfacing individuals who may be unknown resisters to reduce the impact they may have on the initiative.

Stakeholder Support Committees

Stakeholder Support Committees are another great communication and engagement channel for change initiatives. These committees are comprised of individuals from throughout the organization who are impacted by the change and may have to

overcome their own personal obstacles to change. They carry significant weight with other employees because they have already built trust and have established relationships with their colleagues and co-workers. The benefits of stakeholder support committees include,

- enabling the change leader to stay closer to the employees impacted by the change
- supporting sharing of information from the change leader to all employees and back up the ladder – from employee to the change leader
- serving as a pilot group to test any changes before they are implemented more widely
- providing feedback throughout the change initiative
- having one-on-one conversations with employees to gauge support of the change initiative

I utilize stakeholder support committees for all of the transformation change initiatives that I lead for my clients in order to engage employees from throughout the organization. These committee members are tasked with sharing information about the change initiative, answering questions, and bringing concerns back to leadership to be addressed.

In Summary...

To be effective in change initiatives, regular, honest, open and sufficient communication is necessary to engage employees in change and convert resisters to champions. Communication cannot happen solely at the start of a change initiative. It *must* begin *before* the change project is officially launched and continue through implementation and beyond – capturing data on the success of the rollout and the adoption of the change.

Learn more about Gina's book on [Implementing Positive Organizational Change: A Strategic Project Management Approach](#).

Author

Gina Abudi, MBA has over 25 years of experience providing consulting and education/training with a focus on projects, processes and people to mid- to large, global organizations. She is President of Abudi Consulting Group, LLC and an adjunct faculty member at a number of local colleges and universities.

Gina's work in change management includes strategic planning of change initiatives, project management of change initiatives, and overall collaborating with organizations to plan for successful change through understanding the impact of the change on the organization as well as (and possibly even more importantly) on the individuals in the organization. Gina has worked with executives on determining the best way to manage a large change initiative to keep employees engaged and ensure overall success of the initiative.

Gina writes a number of white papers, case studies, and articles on various management and project management topics, which can be found on [blog](#). She is lead author of *Best Practices for Managing BPI Projects: Six Steps to Success* (J Ross Publishing, 2015) and author of *Implementing Positive Organizational Change: A Strategic Project Management Approach* (J Ross Publishing, 2017.)

Gina has been honored as one of the Power 50 from PMI®, one of 50 executives who have achieved success in proving the value of project management within

organizations. She serves as Chair of the Volunteer Leadership Team of the Association of Change Management Professionals and on the Advisory Board of Project Summit/Business Analyst World.

Gina received her MBA from Simmons Graduate School of Management.