09
Change

What you will learn from this chapter

The vast majority of internal communication is about change in one form or another. You could also argue that most change management is actually related to the skills and competencies of the communication discipline. Communicators are often asked to help talk about change in all shapes and sizes – from the new canteen menu to the complete transformation of an organization.

This chapter highlights some important issues in the discussion of change that concern communicators, looks at the role of communicators during change and explores some approaches to developing plans to support change programmes.

We also talk about the importance of intelligence gathering during change – the subject of Chapter 10.

What is change? Getting the terms right

When people talk about change in organizations they tend to cover a very broad range of things. If the communicator is not clear at the outset of the conversation, they face the prospect of a good deal of frustration and they run the risk of creating more confusion than clarity.

A useful starting point is the distinction made by Bridges and Mitchell[1] between change and transitions or transformations. Essentially, things change and people transition. So a project can involve practical change or personal transformation – or both.

For example, a company introducing a new IT platform will be managing practical change as new equipment and programmes are installed. The company will want people to know that new equipment or software is coming and how to make use of it. It will also want some form of personal transition or transformation as it asks staff to adopt new ways of working.

A communicator in this example would perhaps help support the change by explaining when the new system is arriving and outlining what it will do and the benefits it will bring. The transformation part might need internal communication to explain how people will work differently, highlight the training that is to be provided, talk about overcoming challenges and the incentives for employees to change and celebrate when individuals or teams have successfully adopted the new platform.

Alternatively, think of a company moving offices. There may be practical changes that need to be implemented such as handling the logistics of getting everyone into the new accommodation. But the company may also want to transform behaviours through hot-desking or the creation of a more collaborative mindset. In this example, change is about the move, transformation is about the attitudes and behaviours of employees.

Having this distinction is helpful because it enables the communicator to show the colleagues driving change why some communications activity will not be enough to bring about change. If an organization wants, for example, to completely shift behaviours around safety, then the communicator should be able to point out the need for more than just a newsletter talking about new safety rules. If we keep asking the question 'What do you want people to *do*?' we can develop plans that demonstrate practical change and personal transformation, which will make a real difference.

A word of warning

Change and transformation is one of the areas of consulting that never seems to stop growing. Google will throw up hundreds of millions of hits for terms like 'change consulting' or 'change model' and every practitioner tends to have their own approach to the subject.

A degree of caution is necessary around change methodologies as they are often little more than the wisdom or condensed experience of an individual practitioner, or an academic study based on very small case studies. Postings on specialist websites and fora also deserve a sceptical eye for all the usual reasons connected to internet ramblings.

Some theory

Kotter

The work of John Kotter on change is some of the most commonly mentioned and was the product of many years of research and consulting.[2] First published in 1996, his book *Managing Change* was the source of an eight-step model that is still now widely used.

FIGURE 9.1 Communicator's checklist based on Kotter's model

Sense of urgency
- Have we explained the market or external environment?
- Is there a positive reason for change?
- Is it something employees will care about?

Guiding coalition
- Have we said who is driving the change?
- How will we keep reminding people of who is involved?

Create the vision
- How can we link the vision to what excites employees?
- Have we touched on the emotional reasons for change as much as the rational ones?
- How will we keep repeating the message?
- How can we make it personal and relevant on the front line?

Empower others
- How can we show people what they can do?
- Where do we celebrate their successes?
- Are we gathering intelligence to make sure the change team are realistic about the barriers facing staff?

Short-term wins
- What is our mechanism for communicating immediate successes?
- How will we know what is happening day to day?

Consolidating
- Can we maintain enthusiasm?
- Are we listening to what employees are saying?
- Can we spot where people are tiring or losing momentum?

Institutionalizing
- Can we remind people of how things were before this all started?
- What do employees want to celebrate?
- Can we stop leaders claiming success before regular employees see it?

At each stage of the model there is a clear role for the communication professional, perhaps as the technician delivering media to explain the 'sense of urgency' or laying out the vision of the future direction.

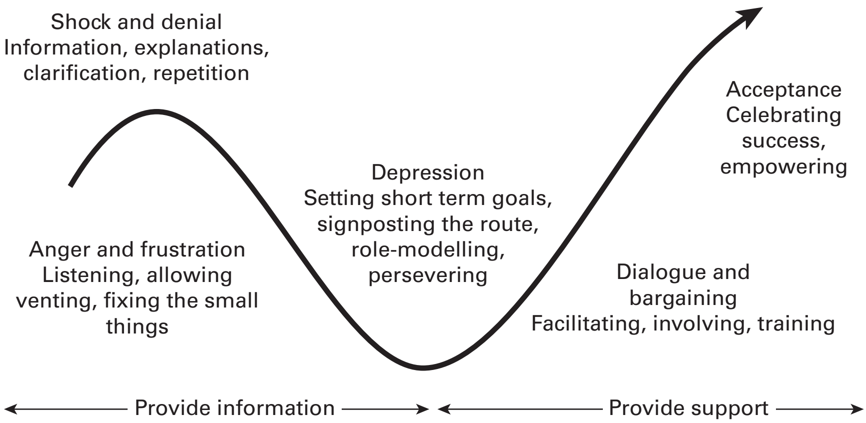
Alternatively, the communication specialist might become a coach for senior leaders as they try to explain their message. Maybe we could help by injecting a note of reality to conversations about change based on an understanding of the audiences?

Kotter's model provides a useful checklist for the communicator who has been asked to help with a change or transformation.

Kübler-Ross's change curve

Sooner or later every communicator will come across the change curve – a model based on the work of psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross.[3] The ideas behind this model have become so widespread that they have slipped into

FIGURE 9.2 The change curve for communications



SOURCE: Kübler-Ross, adapted by FitzPatrick and Dewhurst

everyday language: we have all heard about people being in the 'denial' stage when facing a personal transition.

Kübler-Ross's idea that when faced with change, we personally go through a cycle of emotions, was first outlined in her book *On Death and Dying* and was based on her work with people coping with terminal illness. The core idea has been adapted by a great number of writers – sometimes rather clumsily, so many of our colleagues are a little suspicious of it.

The relevance to communicators is that the change curve explains that people react to news of change in different ways at different times and their attitude will evolve over time.

It helps explain why leaders who have had a long time to debate a change will feel differently from regular staff who are hearing about a change for the first time. While leaders may have moved to the point where they are working out practical solutions, their teams could be struggling at the initial stages to understand what has just been revealed to them.

John Smythe uses the metaphor of a train in a tunnel. He describes leaders as sitting in the driving seat where they can see daylight in the distance and can control the speed of the train, while employees are like passengers with no idea how long the tunnel is and no influence on the speed at which they are being carried.[4]

It is useful to keep the two dimensions of the curve in mind when thinking through a change process. The X-axis is time and the Y-axis is engagement level (or what others would call motivation or energy). Ideally an organization would want to move people quickly through the curve in order to minimize impact and protect engagement, and communication plans should support this as far as possible. Naturally communicators are aware that the psychological process of adapting to change is complex, but our focus should be on maintaining performance during a period of uncertainty, which means providing information and support in a timely manner.

Writers suggest that communication can help people move through the curve by initially providing information. The idea is that in order to pass through the initial stages of the curve people need to understand what they are being told and so have a high demand for facts and data.

To pass through the later stages of the curve, the role of communication moves from an information source to that of providing support and encouragement. It is at this point that the role of local leaders becomes particularly important and the professional communicator should shift their focus to equipping line managers to coach their teams.

A change communications plan starts with identifying the impact this change will have on different audiences as well as tools for delivering news and progressively delivering materials and advice for line managers to use. The plan will acknowledge the need to move at the pace of regular employees who are only just learning about the impending change and not be driven by the impatience of senior leaders who have had many months to digest the need and shape of change.

While this model is particularly useful when describing difficult change such as job losses or site closures, we should be careful of applying it everywhere. Change is actually commonly a positive experience – imagine moving to a beautiful new office or waving goodbye to the awful IT system that has been driving everyone mad for years. People do not always make a psychological transition that rigidly follows the change curve and some of your stakeholders might be puzzled if you start using the language of loss and grieving in a situation that is genuinely positive.

Five principles for announcing change[5]

1. **Leave nothing to chance.** The initial announcement of change is crucial – done well, it leaves a lasting positive impression, do it badly and you'll spend months unpicking the mess. To paraphrase the Duke of Wellington: time spent on planning is seldom wasted.
2. **There are no prizes for coming second.** The person who tells the news first normally has the most credibility and if you delay communication you risk being overtaken by rumours and leaks. When you are left to react to misunderstandings or gossip it is hard not to appear untrustworthy or reluctant to come clean.
3. **Face to face.** Face-to-face communication is nearly always best, especially when the news is difficult. People like people and like to see a human face rather than an anonymous e-mail. Can you gather everyone together or is it clear what managers are expected to do?

Do make sure that people have a further written communication to which they can refer later or share back at home.

4 **This is no time for amateurs.** There are few things worse than being told you are losing your job by someone who lacks any skill at communicating. In your planning, think about how you will prepare or coach the leaders who are to deliver the news.

5 **Why should they care?** At the heart of everything, come back to the question 'Why should they care?' Asking this question continually ensures that you see the announcement through the eyes of the audience and not just through the haze of excitement from the executive team.

Quirke's escalator

In Chapter 6 we introduced Bill Quirke's idea that different communications channels play different roles in driving change. Crudely put, Quirke explained that some tools like memos, e-mails or posters will only at best achieve awareness. He argued that transformation will commonly require some form of involvement on the part of staff.

His essential point is that humans are more likely to understand what is happening if they have an opportunity to discuss and question what they are being told. If we have a say in what is to happen, the chances of us supporting and embracing the necessary transformation are greatly increased, he argues.

For communicators this has a couple of important implications. First, the scale of communication effort needed is directly proportional to the scale of effort needed from employees. A voicemail alone will not achieve significant transformation: a concept that communicators continually find themselves repeating to colleagues!

Second, communications from head office are useful in establishing awareness, but the role of local relationships becomes increasingly important as the change begins to focus more on the personal transformation.

A planning template

Over time we have found it useful to apply a simple five-step model for thinking through the communications needed around change and transformation. The journey planner (overleaf) has evolved from working on a large number of international change projects. It is the product of a very wide

FIGURE 9.3 Your journey planner

Have we explained what we are all about?

- Much workplace communication is just about telling people things – eg the canteen menu, changes to HR policy or downtime of the IT system
- The channels used are normally one-way and much effort goes into making them eye-catching and interesting
- Awareness alone rarely leads directly to action

Do we know if they understand?

- There are many issues where we need to know that employees have understood – eg you need to be certain that employees understand safety messages or that they have got a message about change
- Employees will want to check their understanding at their own pace – perhaps on an intranet
- And they will want to ask questions – ideally of someone who understands their situation… this is where local leaders start making the difference

Have we excited them about it?

- Think about linking the message to something they care about – eg customers, issues like food security, the environment or personal achievement
- One of the most compelling steps at this stage to overcome any resistance and bring staff along with you is to involve them in some way – either in developing the direction of the change or getting them to translate the overall vision into local and personal tasks

Are they able to deliver?

- Crucially, communication alone cannot drive behaviours. People need the tools, skills and resources to do their jobs
- Hold workshops to look at tools and processes
- Provide links to training
- Invite colleagues from other departments to talk about their experiences

Does it feel like the right thing?

- How can we celebrate successes – large and small?
- Make time to celebrate achievements
- Be sure to remind people of how far things have changed
- Get colleagues or customers to talk about the difference they are noticing
- How are you tracking all this?

range of influences including insights from students on courses we have taught and the advice of strategy consultants we have worked with. In other words, we are not claiming that the work is wholly original, but what we have found is that it provides a simple structure to complex challenges – and it gives you an idea of where to start from.

Step 1: have we explained what we are all about?

Every change communication programme begins by creating some basic awareness.

What do we want people to know as a basic minimum? Do we need them to know about the market? Perhaps we have to tell them about the essential background for our change? We certainly need to tell them that change and transformation is coming, what it will cover, when and for whom.

The old journalistic rubric of *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why* and *how* applies here.

It is also worth remembering the importance of context in all communications. Much has been written over the years about the role of the communicator as a 'sense maker', a person who ensures that news and events are understandable. Our role is to ensure that colleagues receive both factual information and the broader context. Basic awareness should therefore include the background to events and change as well as the initial detail of what is being proposed.

If you think back to Kotter's model earlier, it highlights the importance of creating a sense of urgency. Some people call this 'the burning platform', ie the reason why change is unavoidable. So during the awareness stage of change communications you will want to provide data and facts that explain why a transformation is being contemplated.

The communicator will therefore want to ask the following questions of the team planning change (as a minimum) at the start of the change communication journey:

- What are the basic facts of our situation?
- What are the issues that necessitate the change being proposed?
- What is happening in our wider environment (eg the marketplace, among competitors or in government) that could shape our situation?
- What is the aim for change – where do we want to get to?
- What, objectively, might happen if we do not change?
- Who has decided to drive this change?
- Who will be affected by this change?
- When will the change happen?
- When will people know how they are affected?

Typically at this stage, no matter the size of your company, one-way or broadcast channels are at their most effective. Often some kind of official announcement like a CEO town hall works as a launch pad for sharing the news and for larger companies the town hall could be streamed live to the rest of the world. Sometimes senior leader 'stand ups' taking place simultaneously in various locations are also used. The announcement is then commonly backed by intranet postings, social media posts, background data, film, posters or newsletters. If your aim is simply to raise awareness, 'tell' tactics will generally work.

However, in our experience, simply shouting about an impending change is often not enough. At work, people are often happy to ignore the vast bulk of centrally-generated communication. They pay attention when someone close to them tells them to do so. Just posting material on an intranet does not constitute effective communication. You will often need local managers or use a network of advocates to follow up on a global announcement to help translate what this means in a local context.

You should help people read and digest the news in their own time, either via a handout or on an intranet. People will not understand the full rationale or detail on the first time of hearing news of change.

There is an old saying in communication that people need to hear a message at least eight times before it registers. Make the message frightening or challenging and the number of times it has to be said multiplies even further!

At this stage of your communications you need to be ready to repeat yourself beyond the point when you think you are getting boring. Remember also that senior leaders will have had many months to get comfortable with a message and so may need help to understand that regular staff might need many weeks or even months to even realize that something is happening.

Step 2: do we know if they understand?

There is a world of difference between knowing something and actually understanding it. When communicating change or transformation you want to give people an opportunity to check their understanding and, as this is usually a personal process, local leaders have a significant role to play.

Commonly, change is announced at a high level and sometimes it is actually quite conceptual in its early stages. Leaders will often want to share an intention or a general outline long before the specifics of transformation are known. Indeed, labour legislation in many countries requires that organizations announce a potential or a suggested change at the moment when they first think of it.

The result of sharing early for regulatory or other reasons is that some employees may struggle to see how change will affect them or translate the high-level intent into specific actions that they will be expected to follow. A communication manager has to manage the potential vacuum and the resulting impact on performance when everyone stops working while they wait for the full facts to be shared. This is often one of the most difficult situations to manage for communication professionals.

In the context of the change curve we talked about earlier, this is all about the first half of the process, as people work to make sense of what they are being told.

It is good practice to be clear to everyone about dates when things can be shared and to keep repeating the reasons for change in as many innovative or interesting ways as possible. Your role as a communicator is to support leaders with sound advice to navigate and manage engagement levels – and to keep them out of legal hot water.

When the time comes to be more specific, the communication challenge turns towards equipping local leaders to provide the explanation that people need. Making the connection between the high-level intent and the role of individual employees is most effectively done by someone who has an insight into their world, their work and their concerns. People are more likely to understand if someone close to them is on hand to show them how the transformation will play out for them. Also, employees like to have a real person to question. Often this will be their manager or a local leader.

However, beware of the assumption that people always want to hear from their line manager. Work by data expert Angela Sinickas[6] suggests that employees want to discuss change with whoever is the most knowledgeable. On many occasions, this might be the local manager but on others it could be an expert perhaps in HR, IT or an altogether different function.

Importantly we should be wary of placing all of our communication faith in the hands of other people. If you have managers who do not value communication, are not confident enough to deliver the right messages or think they do not have the time for it, you risk leaving clusters of employees in the dark. Whatever the reason, not all managers fulfil the role you need them to, so you have to provide disconnected employees with ways of finding out more or asking questions.

This might be a website where they can ask questions, or a series of face-to-face open meetings – perhaps conducted by a roll-out team that travels to various locations – where the issue can be discussed and people can take on board the news that their managers might be unable to share with them.

You should also consider the value of having colleagues talking to each other about their experiences. Maybe you have bought a solution, like an IT platform, that has been used elsewhere – and some staff could visit their peers in another organization and report back on the intranet. Or perhaps some of the change has been piloted in another office and maybe staff there could be filmed. One of the authors of this book once had colleagues in Sweden doing video diaries where they talked frankly about their personal emotional journey during a change that would later hit 50 other offices around the world. The value of involving employees is that it took away rumours and helped establish better understanding of what was coming.

The communication manager should therefore ask a number of questions at this stage:

- What information do I need to provide managers with in order to help them discuss the issues with their teams? (Chapter 7 on line manager communications should give you some inspiration here.)
- What tools will leaders find useful (eg videos, talking packs)?
- Who is briefing the managers? Are we offering more than an e-mail from the CEO? Where do they get to ask questions?
- Have we fully explained the case for change to leaders – is there a simple statement that all top management will sign up to and which can be shared with local leaders?
- How do we make sure managers are comfortable handling tricky questions? What coaching can we provide?
- If managers get questions they can't answer, who will they turn to for a rapid response?
- What direct route are we providing to staff? Is there a very clear intranet area where they can interact? Have we planned a roadshow to which staff can come?
- What opportunities exist for people to sample or experience the change or transformation? Can you show it working elsewhere and is there a chance for people to talk with their peers about the transformation and the lessons?

TABLE 9.1 Advice to managers about telling it straight

Dos	Don'ts
Acknowledge that it is difficult news to convey. Express regret. Be clear and straightforward.	Sugar-coat or downplay the message, or try to put a gloss on it.
Be specific about details (time, place, impact, those affected).	Make promises you can't keep or assurances that may not come to pass.
Explain **why** the action is being taken and the business rationale.	Be unsympathetic to personal distress.
Tell people where they can go for more information, and what resources are available. Offer your support.	Fail to deliver on the promise, and ignore/avoid it after the meeting because it is too difficult.

Step 3: have we excited them about it?

Change and transformation programmes often falter simply because of a lack of faith in the initiatives.

Anyone who has worked for more than a few years will have tales to tell about multiple change initiatives that were never delivered, or were always heralded as the last chance for the company. You do not have to be around that long to witness change programmes where management have lost interest as soon as the initial cost savings were delivered or were replaced by the next great idea along with the new CEO.

In short, there are plenty of reasons why employees should be suspicious of the latest smart idea from the executive team/strategy consultants/anyone wanting to impress the boss. The communicator has to think long and hard about making the change exciting and compelling, as well as thinking about how they can influence leaders to follow through on their plans and explain the change with integrity.

However, even if the organization is not cynical and jaded, getting people excited about change is not always easy even when everyone agrees the change is for the better. We all have many other pressures in our jobs already and very often we feel that we are doing alright as it is.

The communication manager has a number of specific challenges on the road to making transformation exciting.

Saving the world – data vs emotion

Everyone likes data, but it is emotion that gets us up in the morning when it comes to communication. Clearly we have to have a well-argued reason for change, but we also have to suggest ways of really motivating people.

Writer Tony Quinlan suggests that the most potent motivator is the opportunity to 'change the world' – not literally, but to appeal to people's sense of personal impact. The argument goes that few people go to work just to earn a wage – most of us attach social significance or some form of importance to what we do. Anyone who doubts this should spend time talking to frontline staff: they will very quickly realize that pride in a job well done is a significant motivator.

A communicator should look for the emotional triggers that matter in their organization and ensure that the change story reflects them. Perhaps people care about customers or service users, or being part of a strong team or beating the competition. Whatever it is that gets people excited, the communicator should understand it and be able to explain how the change will support what matters to people.

Essentially, remember that few people feel their pulse racing because of things like gross margin improvements, EBITDA or the operational profitability growth of 'top quartile world-class operations'. But show us how we can make a difference in someone else's life or somehow break the mould and you might just get our attention.

The case for change – from and to

When it comes to personal transformation, people need to have both something to move away from and a destination to move towards. Kotter talked about the idea of a burning platform and a compelling vision. As communicators we need to ensure that both components are reflected in our communications.

We need senior leaders to sign up to that case for change – one of the biggest causes of cynicism is leaders who have different or even conflicting versions of the need to transform. Invest time in working with leaders to get them to say the same thing, perhaps by getting them to agree a statement that they can all sign up to.

Involve me...

Explaining the need for change is not always enough. As far back as the 5th century BC, Chinese philosopher Confucius said: 'Tell me and I'll forget, show me and I may remember, involve me and I'll understand.' Now it seems widely-accepted wisdom that people are more likely to transform if they have some sort of control over how that transformation is to be implemented. This concept is at the heart of Quirke's escalator model that was mentioned previously.

John Smythe has long made the point that involvement comes in many forms and that a communicator should take care to distinguish the particular form they have in mind. At one extreme there is a model of involvement where employees are asked to consider a strategic question and develop responses based on a clean sheet of paper. This model was most famously used by IBM in online 'jam' sessions where colleagues were invited to design everything from business policies to shaping strategic decisions.

At the other end of the scale is the most usual approach which is where employees are asked to decide how a particular policy, procedure or plan is implemented in their workplace.

The lesson for the internal communicator when considering the Excitement stage of change is to ask what scope exists for involvement in the conception or the implementation of the change and to be clear about the extent of the licence being given to employees: if they are being asked to consider the final details of implementation, make sure you do not imply that the whole strategic direction of the organization is up for debate.

Is it about everyone?

Throughout any change, but particularly during the Excitement phase, it is worth asking how wide a population we need to focus on. Do we need to reach absolutely everyone or is there a subset we can concentrate on energizing?

Subgroups are potentially interesting for several reasons. First, you may only need to talk to super-users of a particular process or system. For example, there may be a major change in an IT system used by marketing, which on one level touches the whole organization, but only in a small way. However, there may be people such as planners or data managers who will be affected more than most. You may want to concentrate your efforts on them.

Super-influencers and early adopters

In recent years, writers like Herrero[7] and Gladwell[8] have drawn our attention to a naturally occurring phenomenon. Some people have better networks and are more influential than their peers. Regardless of social status or position in an organization's management structure, some people just make a bigger difference when it comes to spreading the word.

This is a similar phenomenon to that identified by Everett M Rogers in his work looking at the adoption of technology in his famous *Diffusion of Innovations*.[9] Rogers saw that people embrace new technologies at different rates, an observation that most us will recognize. We all know a small number of people who absolutely must have the latest smartphone or gadget and we all have friends or relatives who seem to take pride in being the last person to join Facebook or update their PC. The labels given in the research have slipped into everyday language: we talk about 'early adopters' and 'laggards' often without knowing that Rogers coined these terms.

For communicators, early adopters or super influencers provide a significant opportunity. If we can enthuse these people at the start of a change programme, our task becomes considerably easier. If we have people throughout the organization talking positively and credibly about our message, it will carry more weight than something that the management has decreed on its own.

Essentially our challenge is to find a way to reach these people, perhaps through internal social media or by having our own well-developed network.

Step 4: are they able to deliver?

A communicator who believes that they alone can deliver lasting change is probably deluded and a consultant who promises that a particular channel or tactic can bring about transformation is probably to be treated with suspicion. The truth is that while we might be willing to do things differently, if we don't have the right tools or skills there is not much we can actually do about it. Anyone who has ever facilitated a focus group will have heard people say things like 'I'd love to deliver better customer service but the IT system won't let me,' or 'If we're so keen to be leaders in our field why are our services so poorly designed?'

Thinking about the change curve, this is the point when people need support to test new behaviours and when a transformation programme moves fully from needing information sharing to showing colleagues how to work differently.

The internal communicator has two roles at this stage of the transformation process.

First, we should be asking hard questions about the practical steps that are being offered to help people undergoing change. What training is on offer?

Does the technology actually work as promised? When will people be shown the new processes?

Asking these questions at an early stage ensures that wild promises are not made by the project team and will influence things like the timing of our communication plan. Seeing the change process in terms of the staff experience can help us prevent senior leaders making fools of themselves and causing lasting damage to their credibility.

Second, we can help by making sure that the support on offer is properly signposted and that people understand how to get the most of it. This might involve advising HR on website design, helping the IT team design roadshows or gathering testimonials from colleagues who took part in pilot studies so that their experience and reassurance can be shared.

Step 5: does it feel like the right thing?

In Kotter's change model, the author talks about 'consolidating' and 'institutionalizing'. At a certain point in the journey we have to help people understand that the change has become business as usual, stop them slipping back into old habits and remind them that their hard work so far is showing results.

In our planning at this stage we should be highlighting the reality of change by reporting and celebrating what has actually happened.

Reporting is all about showing people the progress that is being made. At its most basic this could involve posting stories on the intranet as important milestones are reached. Perhaps sharing reactions from customers, service users or stakeholders could be helpful as people can see the difference the change is making.

Essentially, we need to show colleagues that progress is being made and, importantly, that their peers are making headway. The aim is to maintain a sense of momentum and remind people that after the initial excitement behind the launch of the programme things are still happening.

Possibly the most potent way to do this is through the sharing of stories of real people rather than through dry, technical reports from the project office or yet another exhortation from the CEO. As we have said elsewhere, people are most engaged by people: if they can identify with the characters sharing their experience so much the better.

So look for opportunities to put real people in front of their peers in addition to written articles. Video testimonials, problem-solving groups or recruiting 'ambassadors' to walk the floors and help people solve problems are possible solutions. Social media, with a little stimulation, gets people talking in a very potent way.

Celebrating achievement and progress is essential for recognizing the behaviours that matter and encouraging others to act the same. We talk about 'catching people doing the right thing' at this stage and making sure everyone else knows it.

Celebration can take many forms – from small celebrations within the team to full-blown corporate awards ceremonies to simply telling the stories of the teams that are being successful. The aim should be to show that real people are making a genuine contribution.

In your communications plan you need to give careful thought to the way you will celebrate when results come through. Including ideas early on helps you consider how you will find out about the noteworthy actions and avoid the embarrassing situation where you start scratching around for candidates to recognize at the last minute.

Often you can uncover inspiring examples by looking in unusual places or asking colleagues who are normally not seen as the heroes of your organization. If you are struggling to find the illustrations you need, a little lateral thinking may be needed. Are there support functions who can give you examples of where change is actually happening? Perhaps procurement can tell you that the organization is wasting less money? Maybe facilities have tales to tell of the changing patterns of work in the organization because fewer people are staying late?

Remember also that these stories won't just be of interest to other employees. Make sure you share them with the leaders too. This will provide them with examples they can talk about during meetings and briefings and it also gives them the realistic personal perspective of how change is impacting the workforce.

Preparing leaders

How your people perceive change will be greatly influenced by the behaviour of leaders at all levels. A communication manager will want to spend a lot of time thinking about how well prepared they are to handle the journey.

Announcements

As a basic step you should prepare clear instructions around announcements that set out what is expected of individual managers on the day any announcement is made.

A typical guide will follow a basic structure including:

- What happens and who is accountable, eg:
  - briefing external media;
  - handling regulatory announcements;
  - briefing suppliers and customers;
  - briefing senior leaders;
  - when the staff e-mail is sent;
  - what team leaders need to do;
  - when feedback will be collated.

- Key contacts and their details, eg:
  - press desk;
  - human resources;
  - internal communications;
  - regulatory affairs.
- Background.
- Core messages.
- The announcement timeline, eg:
  - when the announcement is agreed;
  - when managers are to be briefed;
  - when the CEO's e-mail will be posted;
  - when team meetings are to be held;
  - when feedback will be collated and a response provided.
- Copies of statements:
  - press releases;
  - customer letters;
  - CEO e-mails;
  - intranet articles.
- Questions and answers.

When drafting sample questions and answers, take care to stress that you are not writing a script to be followed word for word but that managers are expected to adapt their responses and localize them.

Questions and answers do not need to be exhaustive but they should be realistic and honest. It is always likely they will end up being circulated, even by accident, so beware of preparing sample responses that sound evasive or patronizing.

An exercise to help managers handle difficult questions

When faced with the need to discuss difficult change, managers will need support and encouragement to handle questions. If you have time to prepare managers, the following is a useful exercise to help them anticipate the needs of staff, build their confidence and reassure them that their peers are saying the same things as they are.

On the eve of an announcement, bring the group of managers together.

Step 1

Introduce them to the idea that when faced with a question they need to include three key elements in their answer:

- **Acknowledge** the intent and emotion behind the question, eg ‘I can see why you’d be concerned about your job.’ or ‘I think what you’re asking me is whether we’ll need to move offices.’ This reduces the likelihood that they might sound evasive or political.
- **Respond** to the question being asked in the most helpful way with as many facts as they know. It is normally acceptable to say that they don’t know the full answer at this stage – a promise to come back at a later date is normally preferable to speculation.
- **Bridge** to the key message, eg ‘...but we should not lose sight of the fact that we are hoping to grow the business and that means opportunities for you all...’ or ‘The aim of this development is to give service users a better experience.’

Make sure these elements are visible on a wall or big screen throughout the exercise.

Explain that this formula enables them to show they are listening *and* get their point across without sounding like a politician on the campaign trail.

Step 2

Ask everyone to think of the toughest question they are likely to be asked and to write it down on a piece of paper. You may want them to include what type of employee that they think would be asking this question, eg sales, operations, etc. Make them write down two questions. When they have done so, put the paper in a hat or a bowl.

Step 3

The hat is passed around the room and in turn each participant asks the person standing next to him a question from the hat, who then attempts to answer. A full round like this is to be completed without comments to the responses delivered. Warn the group that the answers in the first round are always clumsy and inelegant!

The second round is done in the same way, with the difference that as each question is answered, the rest of the group discusses the answer given and debates how it could be improved. The facilitator ensures that the ACKNOWLEDGE–RESPOND–BRIDGE formula is being followed and that the group doesn’t slip into giving hollow-sounding answers.

Step 4

Immediately after the meeting, write up the questions and the agreed answers and circulate them to the participants.

Keeping communications going through the life of a change

Transformation programmes never happen quickly. At the very least, they take several months and often may last years. Maintaining the flow of communications is a significant challenge over the life of the programme.

Planning for the long haul should be done on two levels – the long term and the six-to-eight week window.

The long-term plan should be matched to the phases of the planned change. For example, a change programme might be broken down by the project team into phases like leadership engagement, development of tools, HR intervention, training, testing and close out. As a first step, the communications plan should attempt to match each of these phases and reflect what behaviours are needed to make each phase successful.

This long-term plan will include things like feedback and intelligence gathering processes. When developing the long-term plan, naturally the communicator will be aware that the plan will change considerably over its lifespan. The transformation programme may change direction, need to respond to external pressures or reflect the feedback from participants. However, there may be multiple changes to the short-term plan that you will need to consider and manage also.

The six-to-eight week window is your statement of what exactly will happen in the coming weeks. It allows you the flexibility to respond as the change programme changes and develops. You will list out things like intranet articles, manager training dates, focus groups and other tactics. The aim is to keep a tight focus on delivery and to reflect sudden changes of direction in the change programme. Most of all, it helps the communication team manage through the frenetic level of activity that normally accompanies change programmes, especially in their early stages.

Where possible in the short-term plan, the programme should be updated weekly. Tasks that did not happen last week should either be dropped or rescheduled.

The key learning points from this chapter

Change and transitions are exciting opportunities for any communicator. Most great careers in our profession have been established during complex change programmes. These are the moments where communicators with skill and competence can truly step up and become that strategic resource an executive team can trust and rely on.

When the change is urgent or important it often allows the communication team the licence to experiment with new techniques, opens access to new resources and most of all allows us to see a real difference to the business as a result of the work we can do. Skilled communicators are able to remove a great deal of uncertainty, which is what most people fear, not the change itself.

When we do a great job we are able to move people quickly through the change curve and thereby reduce the period in which an organization is exposed to low morale. These are the moments when we get noticed and that has benefits for how we get to do 'business as usual' communications.

The key to adding value is simple. We need to keep asking two central questions: 'What do we want people to *do*?' and 'What can communications offer to get people doing the right thing?' Being consistently practical always works: understanding the human motivation and the business strategy are important, but successful communication depends on things actually happening.

Great communicators know that their core skill is to make things of value happen – a skill that is often in high demand and short supply when a transformation programme is launched.

Notes and references

1 Bridges, W and Mitchell, S (2000) Leading transition: a new model for change, *Leader to Leader*, **16** (3), pp 30–36

2 Kotter, J P (1995) Leading change, *Harvard Business Review*, March–April

3 Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth (2009) *On death and dying: What the dying have to teach doctors, nurses, clergy and their own families*, Taylor & Francis, London

4 Smythe, J (2007) *The CEO: The Chief Engagement Officer – Turning hierarchy upside down to drive performance*, Gower Publishing Ltd, London

5 Based on Schmidt, O (2005) The 10-point guide to effective employee communications during a company crisis, *The Business Communicator*, March 2005.

6 http://www.sinicom.com/

7 Herrero, L (2008) *Viral Change*, Meeting Minds, Beaconsfield

8 Gladwell, M (2000) *The Tipping Point: How little things can make a big difference*, Little, Brown, London

9 Rogers, E M (2010) *Diffusion of Innovations*, Simon and Schuster, New York