Communication - you can't change without it

The challenge - for improved business performance

Communication is the life-blood that circulates in all areas of the business. It needs constant attention and improvement. This is a universal truth which we all accept - but is easier said than done. We are too busy to listen; there is a crisis to deal with; we will tell people later. With ever-changing business environments, communicating really well must be a priority for everyone.
The strongest and most consistent message from our recent research into IT-Related Change was the need for more effective communication. One manager commented:-

"Winning hearts and minds"

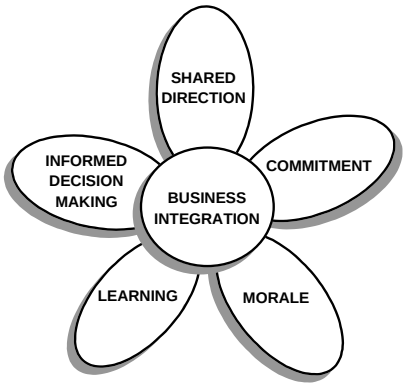
"We put a lot of effort into communication - regular face to face meetings in the department, monthly presentations, a monthly magazine and user representation on the task force. In spite of all this, with hindsight, there was insufficient communication"

On a more general note, researchers asked CEOs in the US "If you could go back and change one thing, what would it be?" The most frequent reply..... "The way I communicated with my colleagues".
Good communication is a powerful and essential facilitator of change, but only if enough thought, energy and resources are invested in it.

Communication speaks to the bottom line

Why communicate? - the payoff

Communication is not just an end in itself. It is vital to achieve business results. It is necessary for:-



- **shared direction**. People need to know how their efforts fit into the whole - when things are moving fast, a shared view of the target holds the change effort together.

Less than half the managers in our own research were very clear about the purpose of the change in which they were involved; and only a few thought that the purpose was very clear to the rest of the organisation.

- **commitment.** Most research about getting people committed has emphasised that involving them in decisions makes the difference.
- **informed decision making.** Effective decisions for High Performance at every level depend on smooth and speedy information flows up, down and across the organisation.
- **morale.** People need opportunities to discuss and resolve their personal concerns about change. They also need the encouragement which comes from acknowledging and publishing successful progress.
- **learning** in individuals and teams and between people across the organisation. There is a need to share experiences from previous change initiatives and to help others to learn from each one as it evolves. There's no point in learning alone. Profit flows from continous improvement by learning from each other.

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- **business integration** across the organisation and focus on the customer. Most change depends on communication across organisational boundaries and the customer ideally only wants one interface. Multiple change initiatives across the organisation also need to be integrated to avoid duplication and to maximise their impact.

Communication is hard, and also soft ..... so enrol the top team

How to communicate effectively - four answers make the difference

1. Actions speak louder than words - behaviour is the key

From the beginning of any change, senior executives need to present a consistent view of the future as they see it. Their behaviour will be watched more closely and have more credibility than the latest corporate video.

So, for example, if the new corporate vision is 'The customer is king', front line employees will soon become cynical about managers who :-

- push old stock when it doesn't match customers' needs
- promote those who demonstrate such behaviour
- indulge in parochial, 'stove pipe' thinking

The vision will wither on the vine. Customers will react to the way they are actually treated. Employees will follow the example set from the top.

Rather than rely on sterile corporate statements, senior executives need to communicate the kind of organisation they want to create by:-

- describing how the organisation will be recognised and talked about in the market place
- demonstrating the behaviours they want employees to follow - 'the way we do things around here'
- keeping day to day decision making - and reactions when things go wrong - consistent with the espoused culture.
- talking about these things consistently and with passion on every possible occasion.

Practice what you preach ..... do what you say and say what you do

2. Face to face is best

Communication during change immediately conjures up visions of corporate videos and newsletters. But research suggests that:-

- 75% of companies using such media believed them ineffective.
- 70% of communication managers referred to their publications as "attempts at the truth" - not that this was deliberate!
- Less than 15% said that the publications reflected the entire truth. Only 20% of one major manufacturer's employees thought that a company publication was 'valuable and believable'.

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- Conferencing, team briefing and teleconferencing come out as the most effective mechanisms.

"The heart has its reasons, which reason knows not of."

"Of course there is a need for some corporate communication. Yet the source of information which employees really trust is their immediate supervisor or manager."

Managers and supervisors need to be primary targets for clear communication and support, at a time when they too may feel vulnerable. To enable them to manage discussions with their staff credibly and with confidence, they need training to develop their own skills in briefing, listening and facilitating planning discussions.

In order to own and add value to the change message, they need the flexibility to tailor it to their own departments. Consistency needs to be maintained by a regular supply of professionally produced material to support them.

Don't shoot the pianists - help them play new tunes

3. Real listening as well as talking

Communication is a two way process. Open channels upwards are just as important as good communication downwards and across the organisation during a period of change.

"Seek first to understand, then to be understood"

Groups and individuals need opportunities to give managers their reactions to what's going on; to know they will be listened to without defensiveness or fear; to feel their contribution is valued and respected; to believe that they are encouraged to 'think outside the box'.

Senior managers need to appreciate and take advantage of the reality that those closest to the customer - and the day to day work - may know how best to implement a change. They need to understand the practicalities of change, by listening to those views and obtaining feedback.

People who's jobs are changing need individual time with their managers (and in some circumstances counsellors) to discuss their personal agendas and the implications for them - and to explore their opportunities.

Open, honest, two way communication needs to be a regular feature of the change process from the beginning.

The meaning of communication is the response which it elicts

4. Plan it, manage it, keep it flexible and evolving

The best examples of major and radical transformation in the past 10 years - BP, BA and BT for example - had significant plans for communication and involvement. The plans covered the total workforce and a significant investment was made in them.

Our own research and experience suggests that not many organisations are making the same kind of investment. Few effective IT projects would be started without a project plan and yet organisations regularly embark on major change programmes - without any similar plan for managing change or communication.

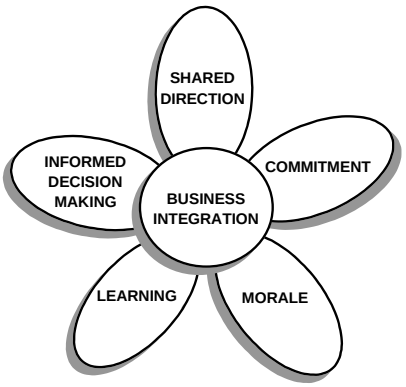
So communication is not just about expensive and flashy launches or even the activities for the first 100 days. To be effective, it requires a sustained programme

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which keeps the message constantly in front of people - on the agenda of routine meetings; formal briefings; videos; newsletters; e-mail; noticeboards; senior executives walking about talking to people etc.

Effective programmes of change are supported by a rigorous Communication Plan

which:



- identifies and addresses everyone internally and externally who has a stake in the change.
- includes milestones and plans for bite sized chunks of activity and early wins so that early successes and individuals who lead the way can be given maximum publicity.
- emphasises methods of achieving reliable feedback of information, ideas and reactions, offering involvement in decision making as well as direction.
- concentrates on face to face communication and on training line facilitators to do it well. It encourages creative use of a variety of media and the use of the professional skills necessary to design it well.
- models the new culture - that new way of doing things, breaking down internal barriers and fiefdoms.
- takes account of different national cultures - and cultures within countries too; recognising that different employees might hear a different message.
- Is flexible enough to change as events unfold, in a culture which allows inevitable mistakes to be acknowledged, rather than pretending that they do not exist.

Would you like to meet others managers to benchmark your communication practices with their organisations?

Please call us

The is a revised version of a paper originally written in 1996 by a respected colleague, Nikki Holland

References and further reading

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Caldwell, R – Jounal of Strategic Change, April 1993
"Communicating Companies" - Lumina report, 1996

Contact us for more information

For more information about this model and ways you can apply it within your organisation please contact.
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