

**Communication
in
Organizational Change**

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Communication is a critical issue in any aspect of corporate life. This is even more accurate in times of great organizational change. Blake and Mouton saw communication as the “formost barrier to corporate excellence” in a survey from 198 companies in Japan, Great Britain and the U.S. 30 years ago (Blake and Mouton, 1968 p. 4). Still today the most pressing organizational challenges- leadership, empowerment, shaping organizational culture, building effective teams and managing change- hinge on communications activities (Auxley, 1996, preface). The present era has dramatically increased the need for change. Warren Bennis’ definition of organizational development in 1969 has stood the test of time, with change at the core. An effective response to change involves a “complex educational strategy” designed so that organizations can adapt at “dizzying rate of change itself.” Michael Mainelli supports through his research that where change has been successfully implemented, a widespread communication of the need to change, by punctuating a *crises-point*- a trigger and justification, has provided the “compelling reason” to change (Mainelli, 1996, pp.123-128). Since, as John Kotter says, “By any measure, the amount of significant, often traumatic change in organizations has grown tremendously over the past two decades,” effective communications must be recognized as the vital component for organizational change. For a complex educational strategy to become engaging to an organization, enough to effect change, careful attendance to communication is essential. According to Stephen Covey, “communication is the most important skill in life.” This is no less true for managerial efforts to invest everyone from the total corporate environment toward change, in these demanding times, on behalf of their organizational life (Kotter, 1993, 1996, p. 3 and Mainelli, p. 1).

In “Shock Waves from the Communications Revolution,” Peter Drucker is quoted in the three navigating questions for any business leader: “What is your business? Who is your customer? What does your customer value?” Yet, the corporate vision that is supposed to answer these questions is more often than not, under-communicated, inaccurate and uninspiring. This results in appalling carnage, including disappointing outcomes, terrified employees, and wasted resources. Though pain is inevitable in any period of change, the significant amount of anguish witnessed in the last decade could have been avoided. Organizations have failed to implement change because they haven’t communicated a sensible vision. The necessary conditions for major change crumbles without “credible communication- without a lot of it, employees’ hearts and minds are never captured” (Kotter, 1996, pp. 4-9). What is credible communication? What is involved in generating a “compelling reason” to change?

The traditional conduit theory- where communication is described as meanings put into words by intention of a sender, then transmitted to a receiver with insights inside the words, then extracted by the receiver who understands the exact meaning of the sender- is primarily responsible for so much misunderstanding. “Uncredible communication” emerges from this “pipeline metaphor,” where it is assumed that the receiver has been transmitted the exact thoughts and feelings relayed by the sender. Yet, nothing could be less accurate. The pipeline metaphor elevates the status of “sending” and minimizes that of “receiving,” such that the illusion of the sender control is taken without critical reflection to be a primary reality. Any attempts by an organization to improve communication skills then centers on “sender skills”- i.e. vocabulary, novel message creation techniques of speaking and documentation etc. But the “great enemy of communication is the illusion of it.” How many times has a manager transmitted information, written or verbal, only to discover that the receiver misunderstood her

meaning, launching into counter productive activities? “Unintended communication is more or less diminished as improbable or simply irrelevant, or both. The reality of communication is that the meaning of our communication is the result we get regardless of the intent” (Axley, 1996, pp. 32-42).

W. Charles Redding defines communication as “those behaviors of human beings, or...those artifacts created by human beings which result in ‘messages’ (meaning), being received by one or more persons.” The sender or their intent is not significant in this definition. Also, communication occurs when someone derives meaning from words, actions, silences, or interactions of any kind including signals outside of conscious intent. The *perceiver* then, is the significant element in communication. The degree of credibility of our communications originates in the sense maker of our message- the *perceiver*. The perceiver ultimately determines the messages communicated (Ibid., pp. 48-64).

This awareness is the core shock wave of the communication revolution, even more so than the technology explosion. Organizations must discover their credibility in customer values rather than their intentions- in the sense that *consumer* and employee make of their messages, rather than the rationality of their flow charts. Redding, Waltzlawick and others offer alternative conclusions concerning the nature of credible communication. These conclusions have significant bearing on management’s ability to generate trust in the sensibility of their vision- the power of which can only be unleashed “when those involved in an enterprise or activity have a common understanding of it’s goals and direction”- including employees and customers (Miller p. 219 and Kotter, 1996, p. 85). Waltzlawick et al. conclude: 1. Meanings are not transferred- they are created in the minds of the perceivers, 2. Anything is a potential message, 3. The message perceived is the only one that counts, 4. Interpersonal messages have “content” and “relational” components, 5. Communication interaction can be either symmetrical or complementary, 6. Effective communication is hard work (Axley, 1996, pp. 53-63).

Though we won’t be able to erase the pipeline metaphor from interactions, we can become mindful of what’s needed to offset its destructive effects. With the constant vigilance that mindfulness lends us, we can bring more self-control over its consequences and move from objectifying people as empty storage bins for messages from managers. To build a culture of trust we need to affirm loyalty and commitment- “the very intangibles that keep the corporate ship sea worthy” (Ibid., p. 47 and Lee, Chris. 1997, p. 31). Perhaps Sam Wals, the late founder of Wal-Mart best typifies this sort of mindfulness as a “human logo.” His mere presence provided for Wal-Mart people (employees and customers), “a symbolic message that triggered a constellation of ideas and feelings in them.” He knew that value creation started with people- that trust was the antithesis of Western management’s view of people as objects. Rather he communicated a simple message, “We’re here to create value,” through a culture that lent itself to valuing- valuing customers and employees as humans with needs, as opposed to objects that might payoff (Ibid., p. 45 and Albrecht, 1994, p. 194).

How can organizations establish history of “square dealing” that inspires a culture of trust? Can managers “help people interpret the grand vision into a focus for action on their levels” (Lee, 1997, p. 35 and Albrecht p. 201)? Kilman stresses the importance of changing culture (i.e. “don’t rock the boat” and “live for yourself” to “always try to improve” and “live for your organizational vision and career”) by changing cultural norms (Kilman, 1989, p. 56-75). Disney offers a creative example of changing cultural norms by working their vision of a show into the “nooks and crannies” of the organization. The metaphor of entertainment replaces

the pipeline metaphor, as the notion of participating in a show constitutes the mutual communication of consumers and employees- the crowd is referred to as an audience who participates in the show with the cast rather than calling them employees, when the cast member is on break, they are “off stage,” then “on stage” at the end of break, the cast wears costumes rather than uniforms, etc. The message communicated is that Disneyland is “fun and fantasy delivered in a theatrical environment” (Albrecht, 1994, pp. 199-201).

To approximate the living vision as Disney has accomplished is a very difficult feat for any enterprise. Effective communication is hard work, as Miller points out. Yet trust and focus for action can only materialize out of cultures based on credible communication. Without credible communication, the workforce will remain rigid, inflexible, and sluggish. It will stagnate with the status quo, bound by outdated structures, forms, rules, roles, and accountabilities. In order to survive rapidly mounting competition, the worker in the force needs to focus on agility, flexibility, and speed- the very capacity for change. Unfortunately most companies are in the unenviable position of having to change in order to develop the capacity for change. They need the very qualities that are absent in order to achieve these same qualities. They need to behave in ways that they have never behaved before in order to generate new behavior. To be specific, a corporation would do the following: minimize time spent on formal planning and maximize action time, worry less about organizational charts and structure and more about how work gets completed regardless of formal structures, give up artificially inflating achievements, and be concerned about and expand on how what degree of legitimate results were achieved, and terminate efforts to shift blame and take ownership of measured outcomes for the sake of continuous improvement. This is quite a change- monumental in fact, but quite necessary to be able to change processes, pricing, brands, products, and services more quickly than a competitor. Change demands credible communication for corporate survival. Dave Ulrich describes such capabilities as *rapid learning*- the ability of an organization to generate and generalize ideas with impact, to create and disseminate ideas with speed and rapidly transfer knowledge through technology, forums, best practice studies workshops, etc. (Ulrich, 1997, pp.194-195).

It seems almost impossible for companies to change so that they can learn how to change. Kotter has designed a strategy for raising the level of urgency in an organization such that the culture is forced to make change- his style of widespread communication of a need to change or crystallizing a “crisis point.” Some of his techniques include: 1. Create a crises by allowing financial loss, exposing weakness, or allowing errors to blow up instead of saving the day at the last minute; 2. Eliminate perks or other obvious examples of excess; 3. Set productivity and consumer satisfaction targets so high that business as usual won't fly; 5. Send more data about weak degrees of performance or consumer satisfaction compared to competition; 6. Insist that people communicate regularly with dissatisfied consumers, vendors, or referral sources; 7. Stop “happy talk” in newsletters and speeches and promote frank discussion of corporate problems; 8. Flood the information loops with the opportunities at hand and the company's inability to capitalize. These example highlight the traditionally unrecognized fact that raising the urgency level can only catapult corporations into productive change through credible communication. The pipeline transmissions of old in no way approach the high impact of these tactics on implementing change (Kotter, 1996, p. 44).

Cohen and Ticht believe that organizations need to offer more than a vision (a mere snapshot of where the organization wants to be) in order to act quickly and decisively. Organizations also must foster motivation and action by creating *stories* with the following

elements: 1. a case for change, 2. an idea where the organization is going, 3. and actions for getting there. The stories are developed from the manager's *teachable point of view*. Teaching the implementation of change from the basis of the manager's experience is another way of describing credible communication. Stories that are linked to experience have four critical elements: 1. *Ideas*- that create value for the customer and linked to the market place; 2. *Values*-articulate and shape values that support business ideas (i.e. constructive conflict); 3. *Edge*- about making tough yes-no decisions, no waffling about people, products business, customers, and suppliers, make decisions based on insufficient data; 4. *Energy*-perceived messages stir people towards action regarding change and transition, face-to-face and through wide spread organizational efforts. After settling on a story that focused on the need for breakthrough performance in an increasingly competitive world, Royal Dutch/Shell created a workshop in which the top executives were asked to write their resignations from the "old" Royal Dutch/Shell to submit to the chairman. After going through the unsettling and eye-opening experience of reading their letters aloud it was the start of each executive internalizing a story for the case for change. They "got it" that they had to embrace the death of the status quo. Unlike the pipeline transmitters, whose memos end up stacked in an in-box on the back side of an executive's desk, along with the rest of last years slogans for change, credible, communicators craft stories with kinesthetic emergence "and take irreversible actions that transform their organizations" (Cohen and Tichy, 1997, pp. 63-64).

How can we communicate from top management through to the rest of the organization? The cost of running everyone through workshops and experiences of guiding a coalition like the one shell facilitated would demand exorbitant cost. Most organizations can't seem to find an acceptable alternative to under communication. "So a gallon of information is dumped into a river of routine communication, where it is quickly diluted, lost, and forgotten." Kotter offers seven principles for the dissemination of clear and focused information towards large groups of people, for the fraction of the potential cost: 1. *Simplicity*- all jargon must be avoided; 2. *Metaphor, analogy, and example*- a picture of experience is worth a thousand words; 3. *Multiple forums*- large and small groups face-to-face laying cards on the table, e-mail, newsletters, electronic bulletin boards and other internet communications; 4. *Repetition*-ideas only reach the deepest levels of awareness when heard many times; 5. *Leadership by example*- incongruent behavior from important people undermines other forms of communication; 6. *Explanation of seeming inconsistencies*- ignoring inconsistency will break the trust and breed apathy; 7. *Give and take*- two way communication is moving, one way communications oppressive (Kotter, 1996, pp. 85-100).

Once compelling reason for change has been initiated, how can credible communication be sustained in an era of reengineering and downsizing of middle management? How can smaller numbers of managers get enough "air time" for the new visions of change? How can managers with more and more people reporting to them, with more projects to monitor make sure that work gets done under the new cultural norms of trust and focus for action? Weaver and Farrel respond with a managerial communication strategy that lends itself to the dissemination of clear and focused information, getting more people to work better with others toward their vision, while sustaining the cultural norm of valuing people and their differences. They propose that small groups take up the decision making slack, with managers as guides, realizing that they can no longer give directions to everyone of their own people on how to complete their work, in any particular way. They must *facilitate* change with rapid learning rather than instruct it with all personnel. "The *facilitator* is the most

important role to emerge in the work place” (Weaver and Farell, 1997, p. 12).

The most critical skill in facilitation is to listen effectively. Active listening is a very powerful technique that raises the *trust* level with people in organizations- a behavior of mindfulness. Processing is the technique used by a facilitator to help the group get its work done or, as Albrecht put it, “help people to interpret the grand vision into a *focus for action* on their levels.” Weaver and Farrel see three fundamental processes to help groups of people focus for action and align themselves with the natural progression of a group’s work: 1. planning, 2. problem solving, and 3. finishing their work. In Managers as Facilitators, they outline an entire set of communication techniques for helping “individuals and groups recognize their expertise with change. Facilitators can call on this experience when individuals or groups feel incapable of successfully dealing with changes. Facilitators most recognize that individuals and groups may not be nearly as inexperienced as they perceive or present themselves.” Implementing change starts with the perceptions of individuals and groups and is generated through the credible communication skills described in this book. The outlook described is a far cry from the downward, one way, vertical pipeline metaphor of the outdated command structure for change.” Effective facilitation is the key to helping groups break through to new levels of productivity” (Weaver and Farrel, 1997, pp. xvii). How can we help people break through and discover their own resources for implementation change? Along with Weaver and Farrel’s detailed approach, another view of personal communication style serves up a key element. Kilman adds that Carl Jung’s frame work of four personality types is crucial in determining the total effectiveness of communication with groups of people- determining whether due time and attention are given to each step of the process. Each personality type has a different way of taking in information and making sense out of it. The four ways of perceiving are: thinking, intuition, feeling, and sensation. Kilman asserts that each person can only be called to focus for action through *their* way of perceiving- their style of communication (Kilman, 1989, pp. 85-89).

As differences in the way people make meaning can be tapped in corporate visions, the successful implementation of change will have a higher probability of occurring. One theme emerges time and time again with respect to communication in larger, more complex systems- the simpler the better. “The essence of complexity theory: Simple agents obeying simple rules can interact to create elaborate and unexpected behaviors” (Stamps, 1997, p. 33).

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