

INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS: COMMUNICATING CHANGE TO EMPLOYEES

INTRODUCTION

Change is a fact of life inside organisations but, when the going gets tough, making it happen in the right way becomes all the more challenging. Restructures, redundancies, leadership changes, business relocation, entering new markets – whatever the change the key to winning support and commitment is to engage employee’s hearts and minds from the start.

Senior managers often celebrate change and revel in the latest Big Initiative, yet change programmes of any sort can create great uncertainty and fear amongst middle managers and frontline employees. This is particularly so if there is a feeling that change is being imposed by others, with little or no opportunity to influence the way it is implemented. As such, much of our communication effort needs to be directed at getting buy-in and winning commitment from employees to the changes that are taking place.

Effective change communication requires us to get beyond basic information sharing and really involve colleagues in shaping the change. At its heart it’s about moving employees from being negative or apathetic, to a place where they appreciate the need for change, take appropriate action themselves and, ultimately, become positive advocates and champions. It recognises that, to be successful, most organisational changes first require a change in the behaviour of individual employees.

COMMUNICATION KEY TO EFFECTIVE CHANGE MANAGEMENT

First things first, it is important to recognise that change communication and change management (CM) are not the same things. The latter has been defined as ‘a structured approach to transitioning individuals, teams, and organisations from a current state to a desired future state’. It concerns the entire process of moving an organisation from one state to another and, as such, is often driven by dedicated CM specialists and organisational development professionals.

Communication is, however, a vitally important component of any change programme and so internal communicators are often required to either be part of the programme management office or steering group, helping guide the overall programme, or simply to take responsibility for the communication work stream.

The management consultancy McKinsey recently undertook a global survey on change management which showed that the most successful business transformations occur when leaders mobilise and sustain the energy of employees, communicate their objectives clearly and creatively, engage hearts as well as minds and paint a compelling picture of the future. These are all areas where those responsible for internal communication can make an enormous difference.

GETTING STARTED:

QUESTIONS TO ASK AT THE OUTSET

When you are first asked to get involved in communicating change (or, better still, proactively spot the opportunity), it is important to quickly understand the scale and complexity of the programme and to scope-out the potential communication requirements.

The following questions provide a useful starting point:

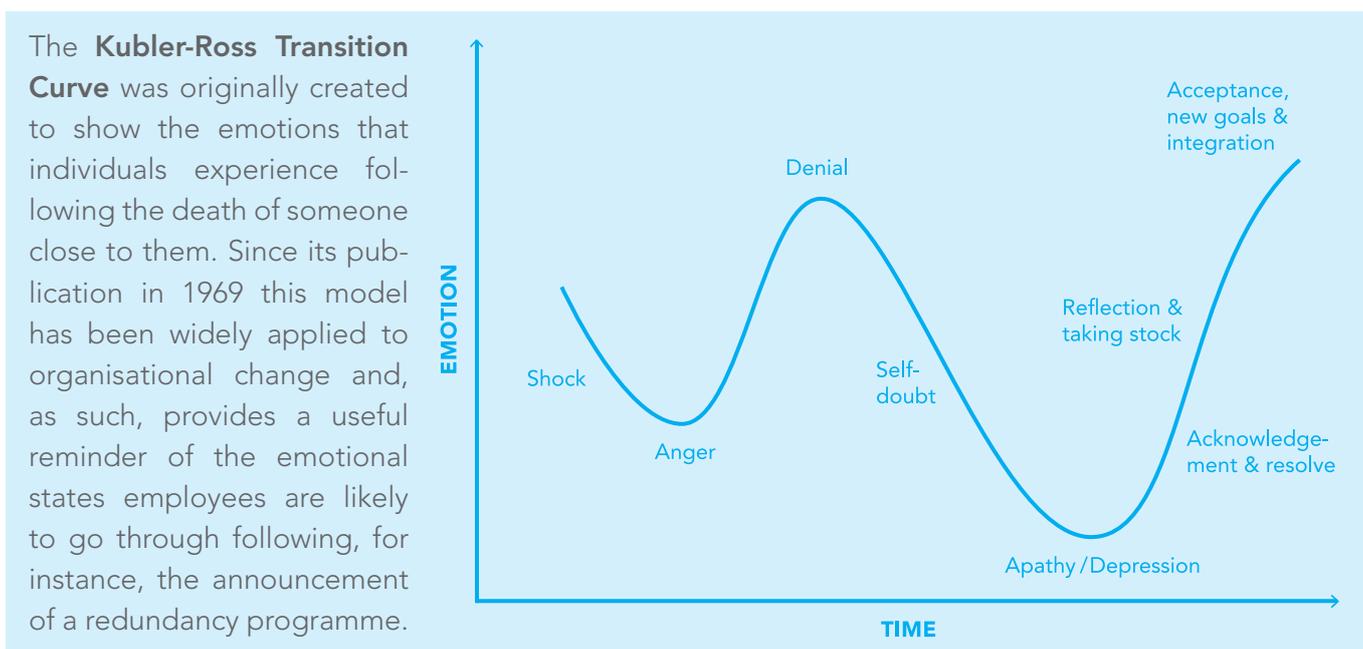
- 01** Why is the change taking place?
What prompted the need for this change?
Are there any consequences for not making this change?
- 02** What is the current environment and history for the impacted areas?
- 03** What are the business objectives for this initiative?
- 04** How will you know if you have achieved your objectives?
- 05** What measures are already in place or going to be put in place?
- 06** Communication is only one part of a change programme – what other pieces need to be in place to make this initiative a success?
- 07** Who is directly or indirectly impacted by the change?
What specifically do these groups do?
Are their skills in demand within our organisation and sector?
- 08** How will communication help to achieve the goals of the initiative or mitigate some of the anticipated negative outcomes?
- 09** What do you need people to think, feel or do for this to be a success?

Running through these basic questions is not only a good way to get leaders to think more widely about the people aspects of the change, but will also provide you with the raw materials you need to begin planning.

RIDING THE CHANGE CURVE

How and what you communicate will ultimately be determined by the scale and complexity of the change – and by its likely impact on individuals. Some of the most common organisation changes are redundancies, restructures, off-shoring and cost cutting programmes of various kinds.

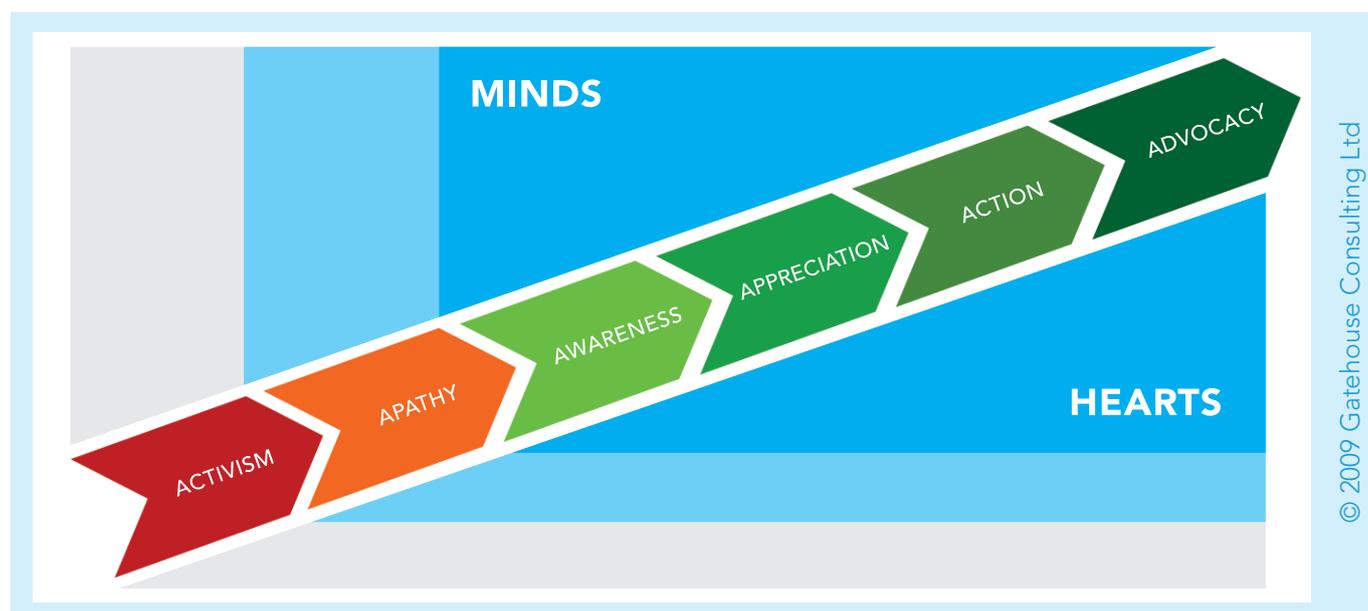
These activities can have a direct and negative impact on individuals and it is therefore important to consider how employees will respond to what is happening.



Of course, the main reason people fear or oppose change is that they often find it threatening or confusing. Strong and focused communication is key to ensuring employees have a clear understanding of why change is taking place and how it is likely to affect them, personally.

THE 6AS: A FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNICATING CHANGE

Moving employees from being largely passive observers to being genuinely engaged and, for some, proactive advocates and supporters of your programme is what effective change communication is all about. The model below, developed by the employee communication consultancy Gatehouse, shows change communication as a journey from awareness (or, in some cases, apathy) towards advocacy. This is a useful tool for thinking about change communication and can be used to help you identify objectives and segment your audience.



Whatever the focus of your communication, you will inevitably have employees at each and every stage of this journey. Some will be apathetic to your message – switched off and disengaged. Others will understand and support what you’re trying to do but will perhaps lack the motivation to do anything about it – they will appreciate your messages but not take action. Others will be more dangerous and difficult to deal with – the small number of highly negative activists we find lurking inside many organisations.

What the model also shows is the importance of engaging the hearts and minds of employees. Put simply, the more buy-in and behaviour change you require the more you will need to address the emotions.

Linked to this is channel choice. Moving people from a state of appreciation to one of action requires quite different tactics to moving them from a basic level of awareness to appreciation. The former demands a high level of face-to-face communication and active support from leaders and line managers, whilst the latter can be achieved more easily through channels like email, the intranet and employee publications.

Using models like the Transition Curve and the 6As to think about and plan your change communication programme will inevitably pay dividends further down the line.

CHANGE COMMUNICATION PRINCIPLES

As you think about the role communication will need to play in supporting the change programme, also use the following overarching principles to guide your planning:

- // **Be respectful** of the past and present whilst focusing on the future
- // **Be timely** with your communication – when you've got something to share, share it
- // **Be honest and open and communicate the facts** (and don't hide the negatives!)
- // **Use a variety of channels** (face to face, electronic, print, workplace) to engage people
- // **Listen, listen, listen** – ensure feedback mechanisms are included and use research to understand what your audience is thinking, feeling and doing
- // **Bang the drum for change** – communicate progress and celebrate successes
- // **Enlist the support of the influencers inside your organisation** – recruit highly connected people at all levels to shape the programme, champion it and spread the word
- // **Champion the changes in action as well as words** – get leaders and managers to demonstrate behaviours you are seeking in others

ANNOUNCING THE CHANGE: GETTING THE CONTENT RIGHT

At the start of a major programme of change there are a number of topics that need to be proactively addressed in your communications.

- // Context and rationale is one – why is the organisation embarking on the change and what are the factors (economic environment, competition in the marketplace, etc) that have prompted it?
- // As well as addressing the now, it is essential that leaders present a clear vision of the future – what will tomorrow look like and how will it be different/better? Another vital piece of content is around timing and milestones – what is going to be happening when?
- // It is also important to be clear about the nature and scope of the change – but be careful not to obscure the negative consequences (e.g. redundancies). Remember that the number one question for employees will be 'what does it mean to me?' – so be as clear as possible about the likely impact of the change on your audience.

Make sure these points are addressed in your communications.

WHY SOME CHANGE INITIATIVES FAIL

Organisations face many issues when implementing and communicating change and, as a result, many such initiatives fail to deliver the benefits first envisaged. As a communicator you need to watch out for these and take appropriate action if you spot the warning signs.

// **One of the main reasons for failure is not establishing a strong enough sense of urgency** – communicating the so-called ‘burning platform’ for change. Research has indicated that the urgency rate is high enough when about 75% of an organisation’s management is convinced that continuing as they are is unacceptable. This is a key area in which to focus communication during the early stages.

// **Another potential problem area is lack of (or under communication of) vision** – not painting a clear enough picture of the future. So it is important to work closely with leaders to ensure they communicate the end goal clearly, consistently and in a compelling way, bringing it to life and making it relevant for employees.

In order to maintain momentum it is also important to show how the change is delivering benefits as the programme progresses. This means identifying quick wins and regularly celebrating and trumpeting successes.

CONCLUSION

Communicating change is a complex subject and this brief paper has merely scratched the surface. The guidelines provided here will, however, help ensure you approach the challenge in the right way and incorporate the right elements in your communication plan.

THIS GUIDE WAS PRODUCED BY **LEE SMITH** FCIPR, GATEHOUSE CONSULTING BEFORE BEING UPDATED BY THE CIPR IN 2014.

Lee Smith FCIPR is an award winning communicator and one of the UK's leading bloggers on internal communication. In 2006, he co-founded the UK-based internal communication agency, [Gatehouse](#), which provides employee engagement and behavioural change advice and consultancy to organisations ranging from large businesses through to the government sector and charities. He holds an MSc in Corporate Communication & Reputation Management and is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations.



Downloading and reading this skills guide is worth **5 CIPR CPD points.**