

Towards a New Construct for Communication During Organizational Change

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Abstract

Grief, resistance and resentment are significant psychological reactions presenting in employees who have experienced major workplace change. Previous employee communication research has examined how such reactions to organizational change can be ameliorated. However, researchers have started from the premise that change directions are always set by an organization's leadership.

This paper hypothesizes a construct for employee communication that would apply before change directions are set. The paper argues that the application of the construct would enhance employee ownership of change outcomes and correspondingly reduce reactions such as grief, resistance and resentment. The construct applies public relations paradigms to a recently developed change management model based on complexity theory. Communication during a substantial restructure of a major Australian government agency, the Civil Aviation Authority, in the 1990s, is used to illustrate the construct.

Keywords: Organizational restructuring; change management; complexity theory; employee communication

Introduction

Radical organizational change, especially when it involves workforce reductions, is traumatic for staff and the managers who must implement it. (Jordan, 2004: 456-471; Kegan & Lahey, 2001: 85-92; Strebel, 1996: 86-92) Nevertheless, successful organizational change requires support from the staff. Thus a priority task for leaders is to apply effective communication to inform staff about new directions, and to help them come to a positive understanding that the board and management have carefully thought through the change objectives. Kotter (1995: 59-57) describes this as "particularly challenging" and "tough" especially when downsizing is part of the change vision. Public relations practitioners are normally responsible for implementing this priority task for which they often modify employee communications programs already in place. A change to the employee communication paradigm to reflect what is presented in this paper, would allow organizations to address issues of resistance to, and resentment about, organizational change at the earliest stage of the process and for employees at all levels to contribute to change directions. Dynamic leaders engaging in two-way communication recognise how effective this would be in resolving competing interests, reducing resistance, scepticism and grief about change outcomes while change directions are set. This means greater transparency that will enhance employees' sense of control and inhibit the process by which uncertainty generates anxiety (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2002: 1-19).

This paradigm shift would improve the ability of organizations to deliver successful change by creating an empowered whole-of-staff team with the ability to make something happen and act on a new vision they helped to create, in a process that would remove structural or human resistance (Kotter, 1999: 16). In this way, the entire staff of an organization would become

Kotter's "people who want to act" as they would be given an opportunity to help frame, and thus own, the change directions. Laroche (2004: 19-21) suggests why this might be so. He notes that sustained cooperative behaviour requires a high degree of consensus about organizational goals. Effective two-way communication *before* change directions are set, as suggested by this hypothesis, would help to deliver that consensus.

Research in a number of disciplines has sought to understand the process of organizational change. Psychological researchers have studied employee reactions to change, and those in the management and public relations disciplines have identified and explained how employee communication and management techniques can assist dominant coalitions to generate staff support for their change objectives. The key message from the literature on employee communication *during* change is that the primary aim is to generate staff support for objectives *already set* by an organization's leadership. Alterations to change objectives based on employee suggestions are made within a frame already determined by dominant coalitions. This approach has led, for example, to recommendations for how to use "secret change agents" (Pascale & Sternin, 2005: 73-81), or have "honest conversations" with staff (Beer & Eisenstat, 2004: 82-89), or apply strategic employee communication to support change initiatives (Barrett, 2002). There are also recommendations on revising personal compacts with employees as part of change (Strebel, 1996: 86-92), and using "diagnostic tests" to identify and resolve "competing commitments" which sometimes produce resistance to change (Kegan & Lahey, 2001: 85-92).

Pascale and Sternin propose that companies use "positive deviants" or "secret change agents," as champions of change in organizational restructuring. These employees, who are on the periphery of their organizations, are innovators whose practices and behaviours "... enable them to better find solutions to problems than others in their communities" (p. 74). Hamel (2000: 69-82) argues that the pro-change revolutionaries in every company should be given a voice in strategy-making. Other researchers have developed what they call a "strategic fitness process" to help corporate leaders have "honest conversations" with employees about strategic directions, including "painful truths" about what is wrong with the organization, to enhance the capacity of organizations to change (Beer and Eisenstat, *op. cit.*). This fitness process, involving a task force appointed by senior management to discuss issues with staff, enables senior managers to "... reduce cynicism, increase trust, and develop selfless commitment" (p. 89). However, it is implemented once change directions are set.

Communication with stakeholders *during* change is high on the list of factors that predict success, second only to participation by the main stakeholders (Gillis, 2004: 8-9). Barrett goes further: in her view, effective employee communication is the glue that holds an organization together - and the glue becomes even more critical in a time of change (Barrett, 2002: 219-231). Senior management must make the change to integrate employee communication into a company's strategy because it can facilitate and drive change (Barrett, p. 219-220). To be effective, internal communication must occur in three directions: top-down, bottom-up and horizontally (Recardo, 1995). An effective communication strategy would (a) communicate the desired future state, (b) solicit employee input during the design process, and (c) identify employee concerns and unresolved issues during implementation (*ibid.*)

My hypothesis builds on these views by arguing that when dominant coalitions are contemplating structural change, effective employee communication *before* change directions are set will enhance the chances of success. Yet this is more than a simple change in timing. It is a proposition that seeks to add greater meaning to employee “consultation” on change directions and it therefore needs more research to test its validity.

Toward an Alternative Approach

By moving the employee communications paradigm during change in the manner proposed in this paper, organizations would enhance the prospects of dominant coalitions and employees reaching what Dozier and the Grunigs have described as the normatively ideal “win-win zone” as they build relationships through two-way, or mixed-motive, communication (Grunig, 2001: 11-30). Working in the win-win zone means cooperative, accommodating and compromising relationships in which dominant coalitions and employees jointly determine change directions, and the processes by which those directions can be achieved. In short, the frame in which these relationships operate would be that management seeks ideas about change directions, rather than establishing them before seeking employee support.

Best practice holds that most employees prefer to hear news about the organization directly from their immediate supervisor via interpersonal means as part of continuing communication programs. That approach reflects two-way or mixed motive communication (Grunig, 2001). During structural change that is likely to involve staff reductions, effective interpersonal communication between management, supervisors and staff that builds on extant programs is essential no matter what other mechanisms are used to provide information to employees. Interpersonal communication leads to honest, open and trusting relationships between management and employees (Jo & Shim, 2005: 277-280), exactly the relationship needed for a change program. The present hypothesis holds that such relationships make it easier for management to approach staff about change directions and that honesty, openness and trust will help both parties to identify not only where the process should lead, but also whether staff reductions need to be made.

Organizational change always has winners and losers. Implementation of this hypothesis would mean that all employees, not only the champions of change and organizational revolutionaries, would be included in the earliest phase of the decision-making process. That paradigm shift from communication about change directions *after* they have been set to an inclusive approach that is used to help to develop directions, would ameliorate psychological reactions associated with change outcomes precisely because employees would share ownership of the change directions with the dominant coalition.

Barry’s research (2001) into why planned interventions to re-align corporate culture and structures so often fail, suggests that the approach discussed above would be successful, and provides a theoretical base for an employee communication paradigm shift. Barry uses complexity theory to explain how organizations change. Complexity theory, which deals with mathematical computation, suggests that all systems, natural and man-made, are continually changing, often in small ways. Hence the interest of engineers, physicists and computer scientists in “robust and adaptive systems”: how do they work and what lessons can we apply to other systems from studying them? Barry argues that organizations are complex systems and that change is a continuum of small, every day events that collectively change the whole entity. He argues that in this continuum, one of the most important elements of

successful cultural change is for planners to identify the personal and professional factors that are important to individual staff members. These factors are not only among the significant drivers of organizational culture, but they can inform the process of identifying goals and objectives for corporate directions. Barry's research demonstrates that when these factors are acknowledged and utilised in organizational re-structures, there is a greater chance that an intervention will succeed. The complex nature of organizations means that this process should be iterative: Barry suggests an annual review.

The hypothesis proposed in this paper is that senior managers seeking staff support for organizational change are more likely to be successful if they utilize formal employee communication in a new way. That would involve applying best practice employee communication at a new entry point - when the need for change is identified, *not* when the directions that it will take have been decided.

The paradigm shift means management uses existing best practice communication techniques, but applies them in a coordinated way immediately to engage in employees in conversations generated by questions like:

- We think we need to change because
- What are we doing now that we don't need to do?
- How do you think we could do things better around here?
- What resources would we need to do that?

Management should resume the conversation with employees after it has developed draft change directions by providing information and asking questions like:

- Based on the information you gave us, this is where we think change in our organization should be heading.
- What do you think about these directions? Will they work?
- What do we need to do to make this happen?

Of course, there is a need to bring this primary conversation to an end and to decide directions. This is the point at which employees are historically first consulted about change. I hypothesise that by beginning the primary conversation before this point is reached, the chances of successful change are enhanced.

Lessons from a Case Study

The new paradigm flowing from my hypothesis applies two-way, or mixed motive, employee communication *before* change directions are set to reduce the likelihood of the reactions described by Nash and Roper occurring. One Australian case in the early 1990s was an attempt to pursue this approach, at least part way.

For most of 1991 and 1992 Australia's Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), then responsible for both establishing and maintaining Australia's air safety regime and its air traffic services network, underwent a radical restructure that resulted in a realignment of functions and a planned halving of the more than 7,000 staff. The re-organization followed the Authority's transition from a Division of the Australian Department of Transport and Communications to a full "government business enterprise" (GBA). This meant that it would no longer receive government funding (then c. \$650 million annually) for its operations save for \$72 million contract with the Federal Government to provide aviation safety services. The change, initiated in late 1990 and early 1991 by the new Chief Executive and Managing Director, Frank Baldwin, was billed as a "review of resources."

Baldwin joined the CAA when the aviation industry was depressed as a result of an international recession, a downturn in the Australian tourism industry and as airlines were recovering from the 1990 Australian pilots' strike. It was also a time of grave difficulty with staff morale. The organization had been through two years of change as it was translated from a public service entity to GBA as part of the Australian Government's micro economic reform program in the transport sector. Aside from the safety contract funding, the CAA's future income was to be earned from direct charges on the aviation industry for air traffic services. Nevertheless, before the "review of resources" the CAA had kept most of its staff, all of whom retained their public service terms and conditions.

In his first address to second and third-tier managers, Baldwin made it clear that his agenda included radical change and that the pace would be rapid. His management by objective approach would centre on a review of the whole resources of the corporation - its equipment, buildings, staff, and locations - to develop a strategic plan. Managers were urged to use a blank whiteboard with their staff to list options for all the resources of the CAA, almost as though the organization was starting from scratch. This would ensure "... we continue to ask ourselves my favourite question: 'Can we do this better and more cost-effectively?' The answer is always 'yes'; then let us use our initiative as to how, and do it. Secondly, it makes us all communicate, talk positively with, listen and work more closely with our customers." (Baldwin, 1990: 2)

Baldwin told managers that they needed input from staff and that they might be surprised at what this process would identify. In his first column in the staff newsletter, Baldwin (1991a: 3) wrote that he would be encouraging staff to work as a team as well as to eliminate barriers between different skill sections. "There should not be any barriers," he wrote. "It is a management AND a staff responsibility to ensure that everyone works as a team, respecting each other's skills and specialist abilities." (*ibid.*)

Thus Baldwin was attempting to include employees in the development of change directions *before* they were made. Yet, he was reluctant to provide staff with details of proposed changes while the review proceeded. For example, half-way through the review he told staff, "At this stage we cannot predict what impact the review will have on staff. The picture will not become clear until the draft plan for consultation is complete. At that stage there will be full consultation with union representatives and staff groups – from where other options, ideas for improvement are likely to come." (Baldwin, 1991b: 5) Change decisions were made in secrecy by the senior management group while Baldwin's public pronouncements to staff continually stressed the need for the CAA to be "cost-effective and efficient". This process meant employees regarded the "review of resources" as a mechanism for staff cuts. This is not surprising given the fear that senior management comment about change often induces in staff who regard "change" as code for "... something nasty: a wrenching restructuring or reorganization" (Hamel, 2000). It is critical that employee communication avoids constantly surprising employees (an approach that creates anxiety and fosters mistrust) and that it not promise what cannot be delivered (Recardo, 1995).

Employee pride and commitment can be undermined if the re-introduction of corporate values after a restructure involves trivialised versions of things staff believe are important (Nash, 1995: 7-13). Similarly, new identities must be potentially consistent with core organizational values to

avoid conflicts arising from incompatibilities between target publics, and a failure to ensure this could mean the loss of public identification with an organization, followed by lost legitimacy and long-term viability (Roper, 2005: 139-148). Many CAA employees saw the review and its focus on “cost-effectiveness and efficiency” as a threat to long-standing shared core organizational values that stressed aviation safety. This was especially the case among those who had spent specialist careers in the Authority developing, and regulating, aviation safety standards. In a reflection of Roper’s and Nash’s findings, one senior technical staff member said of the Authority’s executives, “They include managers with little or no managerial training, management methods decades out of date, an unwillingness or incapacity to make decisions and the failure of senior management to listen to workplace staff and their own field management ... For years under the old administration equipment, staffing and morale were allowed to deteriorate. The CAA now purports to show me a shining new future. Promises and platitudes though are insufficient.” (Harvey, 1990: 2)

This view illustrates the resentment that deeply motivated employees are likely to display when the organization fails to fulfil strongly held needs which are based on the values and identities people use to make sense of their work and the problems they face (Laroche, 2004). Many CAA employees demonstrated this by interpreting the Authority’s role, and how it might change, in a vastly different way to those conducting the change program.

Rumour also played a part in the reactions of CAA employees to the secrecy in which the review of resources was conducted. Employees who are anxious about their job security may believe rumours about downsizing because they match attitudes of distrust towards the organization. The uncertainty inherent in organizational change can mean employees experience a reduced sense of control that leads to anxiety (DiFonzio & Bordia, 2002). These reactions can be exacerbated if staff reductions cannot be confirmed by those responsible for employee communication, most often the public relations staff (*ibid.*). During the CAA review of resources, public relations staff, who were responsible for formal internal communication, including an electronic newsletter designed to answer employee questions about the changes, were not permitted to publish anything about the direction that the review was taking; information was limited to Baldwin’s comments and technical answers from senior and middle managers to questions from staff about entitlements.

The emotions of employees during change, often linked to dysfunctional conflict that occurs during the process, require micro-level management (Jordan, 2004: 456-471). The change process benefits when managers can identify factors that moderate resistance to change (Jordan, 2004). Taylor (1999) argues that in “a change-focused environment” it is no longer acceptable to see restructures only in terms of organizational missions and priorities. Christen’s (2005: 239-251) discussion of procedural justice in her restructuring case study led to a view that negative employee reactions could have been mitigated by involving staff in change planning especially by explaining layoff procedures immediately following a restructuring announcement. In the CAA’s case, there was concern about psychological reactions to the changes once they were announced and steps were taken to ensure that counselling was available for employees experiencing difficulties. In addition, the announcement of the changes was programmed so that all employees heard about them from their managers at a staff meeting on the same day. Each employee was given a substantial booklet about the changes

that also contained details of assistance for those who would eventually lose jobs. Although no individuals were identified in this document, numbers by which the total staff was to be reduced over time, and in which areas and categories, were given. The process of staff meetings and the distribution of the booklet was designed to ensure that everyone in the Authority knew what the changes would be, when they would occur, and why they were being made and to facilitate answers to their initial questions. Employees were thus able to make an educated guess about whether their positions would be abolished, leading to relief for some but increased stress for those who would no longer have jobs. While this process was an effective way of communicating important information in a timely and consistent manner, it was not an effort at consultation: it was the final word on re-structuring at the end of several months of organizational re-design that occurred with little or no input from the total staff.

The present hypothesis would help to overcome negative reactions to change generated by compulsion from dominant coalitions that staff accept new directions. While leaders set objectives, they cannot achieve change by demanding that staff comply with a set plan (Delbridge, 1991). Compelling people to change does not work in the long term because staff could become disaffected at being manipulated and many will actively oppose the process regardless of the long-term benefits, particularly if traditional ways of doing things are to be changed. If the long-held values of the organization and its staff are challenged by the change process, and those required to implement the changes do not share the enthusiasm which senior management has for the new ways, there is a risk of opposition to re-engineering. Application of the approach discussed in this article would lead to a recognition by staff that they have been given an opportunity to contribute to the ways in which traditional approaches might be revised, thus removing a need to impose change. Resistance to change is the most critical issue that must be addressed for any initiative to be institutionalized (Recardo, 1995). In a reflection of this view, Hamel (*op. cit.*) argues that senior executives assume that employees are against change and that only a “hero-leader” can bring about change (Hamel, 2000). Employees’ competing commitments sometimes lead to resistance to proposed change, but such resistance does not necessarily reflect opposition (Kegan & Lahey, 2001). Kegan and Lahey suggest employees should be asked to question beliefs they’ve long held close, perhaps since childhood, by admitting to painful, “even embarrassing, feelings that they would not ordinarily disclose to others or even to themselves.” (p. 86) Questions of this nature reflect Barry’s view that management should identify the personal and professional factors that drive employees. The present hypothesis would enable a symmetrical discussion about why this questioning needs to occur and about how such personal values impact on organizations. In short, they would at least identify the factors that motivate them to work for the organization.

Employees do not always resist change (Kegan & Lahey, 2001; Recardo, 1995) and some emotional reactions can actually help to manage it (Taylor, 1999). Employees often conduct an “unconscious cost-benefit analysis” of what change would mean to them personally (Recardo, 1995). Thus, in the CAA some employees found that the proposed changes presented opportunities either to enhance careers within the organization or to take redundancy. These employees did not resist change. The employee communication paradigm shift proposed here would provide a mechanism to

utilize these employees in managing the change process because it would give them a formal voice in the dialogue.

Implementing a dialogic approach to employee communication would not be easy, and convincing senior management that it ought to engage with staff in this way would perhaps be the most difficult step. Kent and Taylor (2002: 21-37) suggest, however, that dialogic communication has a place in internal communication despite the criticism, among others, that it could be "...easily exploited by one group or the other". Despite the difficulties, and notwithstanding the criticisms, the principles of a dialogic public relations theory as outlined by Kent and Taylor support the hypothesis discussed here especially if their procedural approach was used to create organizational mechanisms for facilitating dialogue.

Making a Paradigm Shift

While senior management sees change as an opportunity, it is neither sought nor welcomed by many employees and middle managers (Strebel, 1996). Many middle managers regard change as disruptive, intrusive and as a process that upsets the organizational balance (*ibid.*). Senior managers consistently misjudge this gap as well as the effort needed to gain acceptance of change, and need to understand how change looks from the perspective of their middle managers (Strebel, pp. 86-87). Regardless of cultural context and to avoid frustration and resistance, leaders must take charge because without that leadership employees will distrust management and remain sceptical of the vision for change (Strebel, p. 92). At the CAA the leaders took charge as the change directions were set by Baldwin and his next level management team. Some third level managers were consulted during the process, but most did not know the broad direction of the outcome, even for their own areas, until they were briefed on the day before the restructure was announced to the entire staff. The present hypothesis provides a framework for senior management to demonstrate leadership, include all levels in the change dialogue and to therefore build and enhance trust.

The historical approach to best practice employee communication during change holds that the processes by which the new directions for an organization are explained and implemented must begin well before decisions are made and they should not end as soon as the new approach is announced (Morley, 1991). The present hypothesis does not alter that, but proposes that the timing of employee communication is crucial. That means embedding employee communication as the first phase of the change process. Effective two-way communication in this first phase would help senior management to identify employee concerns and unresolved issues, or sometimes their competing commitments (Kegan and Lahey, 2001). But it also means organizations need employee communication processes that are developed with the same "analytical rigor" that is applied to financial and operational components of change programs (Barrett, 2002) because poor internal communication is one reason individuals resist change (Recardo, 1995; Kotter, 1995, p. 64).

Making this paradigm shift does reduce the power of the dominant coalition to control change, but, as Pascale and Sternin argue, maybe leaders should "...relinquish to the community the job of chief discoverer", a difficult decision for many leaders who would need to set aside their egos to become the "chief facilitation officer" (p. 81). That approach is consistent with the concept of two-way, or mixed motive, employee communication and would be

enabled by the proposed paradigm shift. Management can still influence the outcomes because the process is a dialogue.

Conclusion

Much of the public relations literature on employee communication is based on case studies of successful programs. Research in this critical area of communication appears to be neglected and there is little work that offers frameworks, models and constructs to help guide employee communication programs (Freitag & Picherit-Duthler, 2004: 475-482).

Management theorists have taken a bolder approach and sought to explain how change can be successful. For example, Pascale and Sternin argue that change management is all about bridging the gap between what is happening in an organization and what is possible (p 73). Beer and Eisenstat urge senior management to find out what is happening in their organizations by forcing what they describe as “honest conversations” with employees at all levels using a process of advocacy and inquiry (p. 84). Barry’s proposition that successful change occurs when the leadership seeks out and acknowledges personal factors that are important to employees, reflects these approaches.

Best-practice employee communication should support this discovery process, perhaps using the dialogic approach discussed by Kent and Taylor, by bringing staff into conversations about organizational transformation *before* change directions are set. In this way, organizational leaders will build a consensus on change directions (Laroche, 2004), reduce employee uncertainty and anxiety about change (DiFonzio & Bordia, 2002), and create the trust needed for successful change (Jo & Shim, 2005).

The weakness of the hypothesis is that it is drawn in part from the outcomes of a case study that illustrated only some elements of what is required for it to be an effective paradigm shift in employee communication practice. Researchers may regard the hypothesis simply as a sleight of hand, a change in timing of little consequence in the grand scheme of management theory and public relations practice. Thus more research is needed to test the validity of the notion that engaging employees in two-way conversations about how an organization might change *before* directions are set will achieve the success that so often eludes change programs. My thesis is that it will.

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