

114 Flagg Hill Road
Boxborough, MA 01719
Phone 978.263.2545
nancy@guidedinsights.com
www.guidedinsights.com



Communicating in Times of Change

By Nancy Settle-Murphy

*Keeping communications clear, candid,
and relevant helps pave the way for
greater receptivity to change*

Regardless of who stands to gain and who stands to lose, most people are uncomfortable with change. Whether the change is truly life-altering, as in the case of a merger or acquisition, or whether it's likely to disrupt people for a relatively brief time, as in the case of a new information technology roll-out, effective communications can help pave the way for a successful transition.

Initial communications planning

"Change is not made without inconvenience, even from worse to better." –Samuel Johnson, English lexicographer

"Eloquence is the power to translate a truth into language perfectly intelligible to the person to whom you speak." –Ralph Waldo Emerson

- ☑ Test prevailing perceptions with key stakeholders. Don't just make guesses based on anecdotal evidence, chance hallway conversations, or what people said they thought of the *last* change. Actively solicit people at all levels for their concerns, questions, and issues. Make it comfortable and safe for them to answer openly, which may mean bringing in someone from outside the immediate organization to lead this effort. Make sure you can honor any promises of confidentiality.
- ☑ Perform a stakeholder analysis. Doing this in a workshop setting with people representing different audiences and levels will ensure a balanced view. Identify key audiences, especially those who are most likely to block change, and those who can be the most influential and credible champions. For each audience, indicate what messages you most want *them* to hear, what messages *they* most want to hear, the best ways to reach them, as well as how often and when communications should take place, and by whom. Make sure that all important assumptions are stated out loud. Some may prove to be erroneous, which could undermine the success of your entire effort.
- ☑ Involve a broad cross section of employees and managers in your planning efforts. Make sure to include those who may offer the greatest resistance, along with the ardent champions of the change. Organizations most likely to be affected by the change should be core team members, with people from other interested organizations as members of the extended team. To ensure that real progress can be made as quickly as possible, the core team should probably not number more than a dozen or so people.
- ☑ Create principles that will serve as the foundation for your communications plan. Do this in a workshop setting, and be prepared to spend some focused time on the effort. Principles can help you make tough decisions, evaluate trade-offs, and guide the creation of messages all along the way. Make sure everyone understands the rationale, and accepts the implications that follow.

Consider how the following examples might influence the direction of change communications efforts:

Face-to-face communications will be the centerpiece of our communications program

“When you are in a receptive state of mind, things can be easily understood. But unfortunately, most of us listen through a screen of resistance...with daily worries, desires, and fears. And with these fears for a screen, we listen.” –J. Kirshnamurti, Indian philosopher and writer

Rationale:

- ◆ Personal communications carry the most weight and credence
- ◆ Particularly important in early phases, when dialogue and exchange of ideas are critical
- ◆ Allows for true dialogue
- ◆ Has sense of immediacy

Implications:

- ◆ We will help front-line managers to be successful and powerful communicators by providing an excellent support system
- ◆ Project team will practice face-to-face communications with our key stakeholder groups

We communicate even when the truth may be tough to take

Rationale:

- ◆ The rumor mill works best when the worst is assumed
- ◆ Most truths are more bearable than any communication void
- ◆ Spirited discussions are preferable to silence and apathy

Implications:

- ◆ We communicate the truth clearly, and welcome others to do the same
- ◆ We provide rationale for our decisions, and articulate the implications
- ◆ We invite others to discuss their perspectives by providing forums to do so

Creating the messages

“You people are telling me what you think I want to know. I want to know what is actually happening.”—Creighton Abrams, Commander of Armed Forces in Vietnam

“The worse the news, more effort should go into communicating it.”
—Andrew Grove

- ☑ Let your audience’s concerns, questions, and perceptions be the guide when considering what messages are most important to convey first. What *you* think is most important may never be heard if your audience has something else in mind which, if not resolved, can block real listening.
- ☑ Be direct, honest, and clear. The surest way to destroy credibility is to use indecipherable language that forces your audience to guess at the *real* meaning. For example, if the change means lay-offs, or the dissolution of some product lines, say so. In the absence of clarity, a skeptical audience will assume you’re trying to hide something—and they will usually be right. A good test: Ask yourself if this message could end up in a Dilbert cartoon. If yes, start over.
- ☑ Acknowledge that different audiences have different needs and concerns, and reflect those differences in your communications. For example, senior managers, first-line supervisors, and other employees are likely to have their own concerns. Target communications—messages, format, timing, and frequency—to your key audiences.

“The concept of progress acts as a protective mechanism to shield us from the terrors of the future.” –Frank Herbert, science fiction writer

- ☑ Avoid the “too many cooks” syndrome. When too many people are involved, each representing different interests, your messages are likely to end up sounding diluted, vague, insincere, confusing, and sometimes downright silly to your intended audience. Agree up front who will have a hand in the creation and review process, and make sure those people can make decisions on behalf of everyone.
- ☑ Balance the need to keep sensitive information proprietary while keeping employees informed. While it’s true that any disgruntled employee can forward an email or voicemail to a newspaper reporter or web site, it’s also true the vast majority of employees can be trusted with sensitive company information. Think about which information is best kept out of print, and make sure that managers are prepared to convey those messages verbally.
- ☑ Validate and test your messages before wide-scale rollout. What sounds good to a group of tired people behind conference room doors may sound lousy to the intended audience. Before you launch a company-wide campaign, test concepts and messages with representative members of your targeted audience. Consider testing messages with people outside the organization who might give a more neutral perspective. Invite criticism, solicit better ideas—and use them to make a difference.

Repetition and variety reinforce effective communications

“The challenge is to develop messages that further people’s understanding, commitment, and productivity. It’s hard work that requires clear thinking, careful planning and organization, and well-considered delivery. Small wonder that people would rather focus on the ‘gee whiz’ aspect of media or technology than on the process of disciplined communication.” – Roger D’Aprix, Communicating for Change

- ☑ Consider a host of variables when determining which vehicles, formats, and timing will best convey your messages in ways your audiences is most predisposed to receiving them. For example, web postings might be great for FAQs that provide details about a new product strategy, but such postings are not the best way to announce a new compensation plan that will affect a large number of employees and managers.
- ☑ Communicate important messages multiple ways. Some people absorb new information best by examining the written word, some learn best by listening, and others need to see graphics or models. Make use of a variety of communications methods, even if it means duplication. Repetition will help reinforce key points.
- ☑ If your audiences span more than one geographic entity, take into account cultural differences and the need for translation. Don’t assume that a message that’s suitable for an audience in the northeastern US will be well received by an audience in Tokyo or Paris. Factor in the time required to have a trusted source in the local office make sure that the intended messages are recast in such a way that audiences in other countries will hear them. A simple, direct translation from English, without regard for subtle nuances of cultural and linguistic differences, can have disastrous results.
- ☑ Make sure to spend at least as much time on two-way communications as you do on communications that you or senior managers send across and

downward. Establish “listening posts,” feedback loops, and safe methods for employees to ask questions, surface sensitive issues, and get direct and speedy feedback. You need to maintain a pulse on your audience to learn if your communications program is effective, and to help you learn for next time.

Regard front-line managers as key gatekeepers

“It is ironic, that in this age of electronic communications, personal interaction is becoming more important than ever.” –Regis McKenna, marketing consultant and writer

“The exact words that you use are far less important than the energy, intensity, and conviction with which you use them.”
–Jules Rose, former vice president, Sloan Supermarkets

- ☑ Whatever other communications methods you may employ, your front-line managers and supervisors are generally regarded as the most credible and trusted source of information. If they remain skeptical or confused about a change, their concerns will be obvious. And if they are unconvinced that the change will bring good to themselves and their employees, then all of the glitzy newsletters and videoconferences in the world won’t dispel a generally negative perception.
- ☑ Position managers to be effective and credible communicators by keeping them up to date on changes, as well as the likely implications for their organizations. Make sure they understand the business rationale and decision-making criteria for the changes ahead, as well as important milestones and success criteria. Provide forums for them to ask questions without fear of retribution; in some organizations, this may mean ensuring their anonymity.
- ☑ Provide a “communications kit” for managers that’s updated regularly. Make sure to include a variety of media that they can customize easily and use in a variety of forums. For example, you might include scripted presentations, FAQs, conference call outlines, handouts, posters, and suggested web content. Request feedback and ideas for improvement.
- ☑ Ask managers to supply you with frequently recurring questions they receive, and make sure to include the answers in your next round of communications.

Summary

“All things are ready, if our minds be so.” – William Shakespeare

With change comes some measure of resistance, even by those who stand to gain through change. Resistance creates communication barriers and filters that you need to understand, and address through careful communications planning. If you create your plans assuming that your target audiences have some skepticism, concerns, and trepidations, you’ll have a more credible and persuasive communications program. And that’s the surest way to accelerate the time through the transition to your desired end point.

114 Flagg Hill Road • Boxborough, MA 01719-2108

978.263.2545 • 978.263.3833(Fax)

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