

changing course

Taking the wheel

Traditionally, communication professionals have been asked to communicate *about* change. But they can communicate *to* change as well

by Jim Shaffer, IABC Fellow



Managing communication to change is a proactive approach: It correctly assumes that communication breakdowns cause people to do things that hurt performance.

As the head of internal communication, Shawna Todd helped improve Honeywell's billing cycle by 10 days and eliminate more than 1 million steps in various processes throughout the company.

At FedEx Express, Terry Simpson, manager of internal communication, led a large change process that generated a 23 percent increase in U.S. exports and a 1,400 percent return on investment.

And Heather Sandoe, communication manager at ITT Corp.'s Lancaster, Pennsylvania, operation, played a key role in an effort to reduce scrap and rework.

These are just three examples of communication professionals on the front lines of change leadership in their organizations—not just delivering information about changes that are taking place. This type of broad-scale change management is not a functional or discipline-specific activity. It almost always requires knowledge and skills that cross organizational boundaries in order to get better results.

Executed well, change management is a systematic approach to transitioning people, teams and organizations from where they are now to where they need to be to succeed. It includes tools, techniques, processes and theories, most of which are time-tested. Some change management initiatives focus on the technical aspects of an organization—measures, formulas and strict standards. Others address the cultural aspects, focusing on driving change in leadership, communication and learning processes. Although the technical and cultural approaches are equally important, in my experience, an integrated technical-cultural approach is critical if improvements are to be sustainable over time.

The role of communication

The traditional role of the communication practitioner has been to communicate *about* change. The new role, however, is to communicate *about* change and to communicate *to* change.

Communicating about change focuses on explaining why the organization needs to change, what's been done or is being done to change, and what people need to do to help make the effort a success. It's a reactive approach



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to communication management.

Managing communication to change is a proactive approach: It correctly assumes that communication breakdowns cause people to do things that hurt performance. Quite simply, the objective is to find and eliminate the communication breakdowns so that performance improves.

Here's an example of communicating to change:

When Anna Roach headed internal communication for The Earthgrains Co., a St. Louis, Missouri-based baking conglomerate, she helped manage a change process in a newly acquired baking facility. Working directly with the plant manager, she and I targeted an industry measurement known as overuse, which is defined as the percentage of the total cost of materials and ingredients that are wasted in the production of fresh bread. (In your kitchen, this might be the

flour that falls out of the bowl onto the floor.)

At an initial team meeting, the bakery manager shared information about overuse and its annual cost with representatives from the bakery's bread lines. After mapping the production process, it was clear that the overuse was caused by at least four communication breakdowns:

- Lack of information about the nature and size of the problem
- Lack of clarity about how bread should be made
- Lack of opportunities to get involved in identifying root causes and potential solutions
- No "what's in it for me" when problems are solved

These fundamental communication defects were causing overuse and high costs. A simple root-cause analysis led to solutions that the team agreed to implement. In just a few weeks, the bread line employees had reduced overuse by nearly 20 percent.

By managing communication to change, the size of the problem was reduced.

A primary reason that communication practitioners are adding the "communicate to change" role to their portfolio is the pressure that's coming from business leaders who insist that every person and every function increase the measurable value they add to the organization. Communicating to change can do just this.

So how do you get started?

The change process

Change management processes are similar. The best ones are driven by leaders with a clear, shared business strategy; improve results that matter to the organization's success; involve people in the process; and align systems and processes to promote sustainability. They include the following steps, though they may be described a little differently.

STEP 1: GATHER INFORMATION

First, you need information about the external and internal environments in order to make fact-based decisions about where you're going and how you plan to get there. Start by assembling information you already have about your business, customers, suppliers and employees. Get copies of your annual strategic plan, formal or

informal market or customer surveys, employee survey results and current performance data—that is, how the business is doing against the financial and operating plans. This may seem intimidating at first, but persevere. Try to enlist people in other functions to get the information you need. They can save you time and give you valuable insight, often becoming actively involved in your effort. Remember, change management knows no function. Neither does communication. Both are ubiquitous in an organization.

Leadership interviews can provide overall project direction. Leaders can define what success looks like and help you better understand any obstacles. Existing employee survey data might need to be supplemented with new information from informal surveys or focus groups.

STEP 2: CLARIFY STRATEGY AND PERFORMANCE TARGETS

Leaders need a clear, shared vision and business strategy, and they need to agree on key performance measures that reveal the organization's health on any given day.

Strategy clarification isn't the same as strategy formulation. Strategy formulation is the process of determining the right courses of action for achieving organizational objectives. Strategy clarification interprets the company's strategy by defining actions that the strategy requires: "When we say this about strategy, this is what it means we must do." In this step, we're trying to find out if the leaders are on the same page.

Many communication people skip this step. They start by using formal channels to communicate the strategy, which may do more harm than good if the leaders' individual messages are inconsistent. When you ask five leaders to explain the implications of a piece of the business strategy and you get five even slightly different answers, the strategy hasn't been clarified, despite the leaders' protestations to the contrary.

At Honeywell, Shawna Todd and I helped her leadership team clarify its business strategy. The process uncovered a major area of disagreement among the leaders, which spared them significant embarrassment.

Performance targets communicate what's important. Leaders need to agree on the critical drivers of success and how they'll be measured.

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Communication improvements need to focus less on “messaging” and more on the down-and-dirty fixing of the business—helping people do their jobs better.

It’s important that this step include some rigor because when these measures are cascaded into the organization, they will drive what real people actually do.

STEP 3: CREATE THE CHANGE STRATEGY

A change strategy directs human energy. It either spreads the energy in multiple directions, such as through self-serving organizational silos that pit people against one another, or it directs energy, laser-like, onto things customers and shareholders care about.

The strategy should include specific projects that improve performance, build momentum and model the new ways to do work. It also needs to align systems and processes with the business strategy so the energy is focused and improvements are more sustainable. The following are key systems and processes that need to be aligned.

Leadership: Creating and connecting people to an exciting vision, bringing clarity and meaning to people’s lives, challenging the way it’s always been done, acting as a role model and enabling others to succeed—this is what great leaders do.

Since good leadership is key to winning, it’s one of the most important organizational systems. Inside the system are three elements that must be managed together:

- Leadership roles need to be clarified. In many organizations they’re obscure, squishy or not taken seriously.
- Leaders need to be assessed regularly on those agreed-upon roles. When leaders know they’re being evaluated, they’ll be more apt to do what they need to do to get good assessment scores.
- Leaders need to be held accountable through selection, promotion and the incentive plan. How you make the numbers is as important as what numbers you make.

Communication and involvement: The communication system in its broadest sense drives success or failure. But communication is more than newsletters and podcasts. It includes all the ways we send, receive and process information. It involves people in the change management process.

The information-gathering step should have revealed opportunities to improve communication management—places where communication

breakdowns are causing underperformance. The change plan must address those issues or the effort won’t be perceived as sincere. Communication improvements need to focus less on “messaging” and more on the down-and-dirty fixing of the business—helping people do their jobs better. To do that, people need to understand:

- **Context:** the business case for change
- **Vision and strategy:** what we’re trying to become and how we plan to get there
- **Stake:** what’s in it for me/us when we succeed
- **Roles:** my/our role in the change process
- **Support:** the resources I/we need to achieve the vision and implement the strategy

Communication management also needs to focus on engaging people—that is, creating a condition where people identify with the organization’s values and mission and are willing to use their discretionary effort to help the business improve. Communication plays four roles in helping to increase engagement:

- **Line of sight:** It links people and what they do to the results they can create.
- **Involvement:** It gives people control of outcomes that influence the goals.
- **Information sharing:** It provides the right information when people need it to make the right decisions.
- **Reward and recognition:** It gives people an incentive to improve.

Work processes: Work processes communicate whether we’re serious when we say we want change, and can either facilitate improved performance or impede it. If you say you need to improve quality but permit a lousy work process to create scrap, you have a say/do gap.

Work processes should be efficient and free of waste. Waste is any motion, step, activity or process that doesn’t add value to the customer.

Measurement: Measures need to be aligned with leadership goals and what is needed to be successful. They need to link people to the business strategy. Performance results and opportunities to improve need to be regularly communicated so people know where to focus their improvement efforts each day. Measurement needs to be balanced. For instance, overemphasizing productivity

about the author

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can create quality problems.

While Bob Kula, now vice president of corporate communication at Kiewit, was with ConAgra, he and I were asked to help improve quality at a large distribution center. We discovered that 80 percent of the leaders' goals were weighted toward productivity, with 20 percent weighted toward quality. This disparity encouraged the distribution center management to take shortcuts in forklift operator training, which resulted in shipping damaged products. Quality took a hit because the measurement system communicated that productivity was more important than quality. By better balancing the measures, we improved quality by 65 percent and productivity by 16 percent.

Rewards and recognition: Reward and recognition systems communicate volumes about what's important. What gets rewarded and recognized gets done. Rewards need to encourage the right behavior. But recognition is vastly underused in most organizations. Any winning sports team will tell you that you don't need a budget to recognize someone for scoring a goal, making a touchdown or getting a base hit. Nor do you need a recognition budget to get someone to do something right by the customer. Employees just want a simple "thank you."

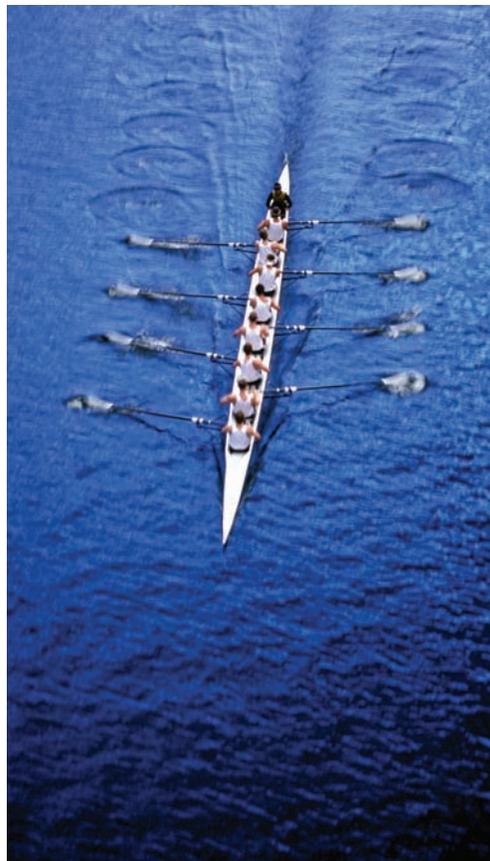
Skills and knowledge: Sometimes called competencies, skills and knowledge are important to close the gaps in what the organization needs to do well to succeed.

Building business literacy among a workforce can provide an immense lift because people have the information they need to make smarter decisions in light of the organization's financial status.

Successful change requires that the right people in the right roles have the right skills and knowledge to make the needed changes. It also requires organizations to make sure that people have learning and development opportunities that improve the organization and themselves.

STEP 4: IMPLEMENT AND ALIGN THE ORGANIZATION

This is the step where the strategy is implemented, and all the systems are aligned to drive energy in as common a direction as possible. Activities that take place in this step are based on the earlier steps.



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STEP 5: CONTROL AND REPLICATE

After the strategy is implemented and systems are aligned, it's critical to monitor performance daily and to continuously improve performance.

Omitting this step is the major reason why change management efforts fail in the long run. The change effort is perceived as a program with a beginning, middle and end. When the "program" ends, continuous improvement stops. Employees become cynical and within days people start referring to your beautiful change effort as another "program du jour."

Successfully managing organizational change isn't easy or everyone would be doing it. There's a large seat at the proverbial change table for communication practitioners. But as FedEx's Terry Simpson says, "It doesn't matter that you're at the table. It matters what you do when you're there."

For communication people, change management offers ample opportunity to get to the table and add value while you're there. ●