

Poor communication can also be the result of an inadequate choice of media or channels – where change messages are not delivered in the right format, through the right channel and at the right time. For example, posting a generic change message on the company intranet that is buried under a mass of unrelated information is unlikely to get the attention or interest of its target recipients. The absence of proper structures and procedures for dialogue and feedback is also symptomatic of a poor communication strategy – where there is no inbuilt capacity for shared understanding and negotiated meaning around the proposed change.

As can be easily inferred from the above discussion, the reasons underlying poor communication are often interconnected and form a complex causal web that is difficult to disentangle in practice. For example, autocratic change leaders will favour a top-down approach to change, disseminate information to a select few who share their interests and discard the possibility of opening direct lines of communication with employees as a means of avoiding negative feedback or resistance and strapping a protective belt around their own interests.

Consequences of poor communication

The box on the right side of Figure 8.2 contains a list of the potential consequences of poor communication:

- A lack of transparency and shared understanding around the purpose of change.
- Perceived inequality in access to information vital to effective change implementation.
- Loss of **employee voice** by being denied access to the decision-making process relating to important change issues and courses of action which might have a significant impact on the quality of work life and their career prospects.
- Feelings of isolation resulting from employees' perception that they are not treated as valued members of the organisation which can in turn cause high levels of anxiety and emotional distress.
- Erosion of employee motivation, commitment and engagement that can trigger negative forms of resistance to change, lead to high labour turnover and have an irreversible impact on overall performance and productivity.
- A climate of silence where employees in turn withhold potentially valuable information that could affect the change initiative primarily because of their distrust in change agents. Organisational silence is a complex phenomenon that is given a deeper treatment in a later section.

The potential consequences of poor communication described above are also interconnected and difficult to isolate in practice. However, the most important point here is that if persistent, the negative consequences of poor communication can easily spin out of control and prove extremely costly to both employees and the organisation – and should therefore not be treated lightly.

CASE STUDY 8.1

Nike: Showing agility in tackling a communication crisis

As one of the most powerful brands and the most successful producer and seller of athletic footwear, clothing and equipment, Nike needs no introduction. The company is renowned for its high-quality products but even more so for its creative marketing strategy which aims to establish a connection and a durable relationship with its target customers which is based on the notions of ‘emotional branding’ and ‘product intimacy’ – where customers develop an attachment with the brand and a deep liking for the utility and quality of the product with less concern for its price.

While Nike is able to effectively communicate and connect with its customers, it recently faced a major internal communication crisis which showed that this was not the case with regard to its employees. In 2018, Nike’s female employees spoke out against the company’s patriarchal, male-dominated and toxic culture that condoned workplace harassment and discrimination and a leadership team that was out of reach and out of touch with what was happening. A ‘renegade survey’ was undertaken by a group of employees to expose and confirm this state of affairs, the findings of which were then forwarded to the company’s CEO. The survey revealed, among other things, a general lack of trust in HR, limited scope for bottom-up communication and a leadership team who claimed to be unaware of the situation.

Nike took swift measures to address this internal communication crisis including firing top executives who were held accountable, conducting mandatory training for managers and commissioning a comprehensive review of its HR procedures and internal communication structures to enable a move towards a more open and inclusive culture. It seems that the gravity of the situation left Nike with no other choice than to show some agility in tackling this internal communication crisis head-on. Nike would have landed itself in an ‘ironic situation’ if its highly reputed ability to communicate and connect with its customers did not apply to its employees.

Source: Slotosch (2021)

Questions

- 1 What were the causes that led to the internal communication crisis at Nike?
- 2 What lessons are to be learned from the way Nike addressed this problem?

8.5 Clampitt et al.’s typology of communication strategies

While change agents cannot communicate everything to everybody all the time (Myers et al., 2012), choices have to be made in relation to what should be communicated, when and at what level of detail. Clampitt et al.’s (2000) typology maps out five key different communication