

Communicating for Managerial Effectiveness

Challenges | Strategies | Solutions

6th Edition

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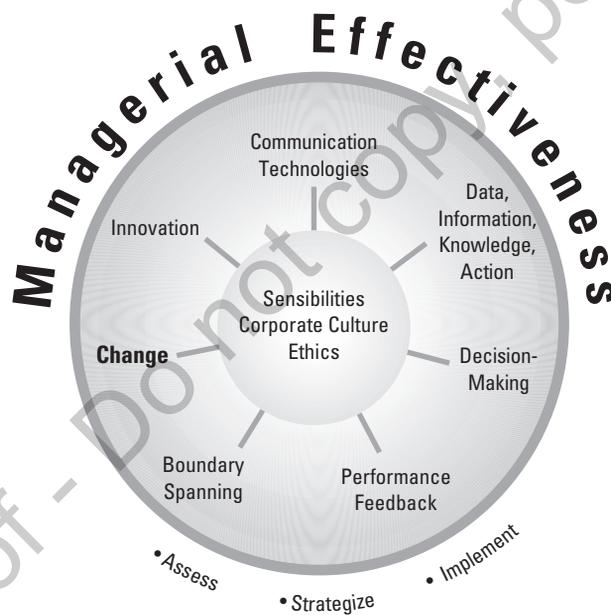
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Communicating about Change



There is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies in all those who profit from the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in all those who would profit from the new order, this lukewarmness arising partly from the incredibility of anything new until they have had actual experience of it.

—Machiavelli

Failure is never fatal, but failure to change might be.

—John Wooden

Most organizations are far more adept at evaluating their financial position than they are at measuring the effectiveness of their change efforts. Perhaps executives find it easier to manage budgets and measure rates of return than to manage and evaluate the rate and degree of acceptance of a change effort. Regardless of the reason, change management practices can almost always be improved. In fact, our research indicates that more than 60% of employees believe that their organizations fail to learn from their change management mistakes.¹

Take your pick of managerial buzzwords: *green technology, empowerment, lean manufacturing, alignment, Six-Sigma, or scalability*. Each notion implies a change and requires a major communication effort. Employees do not just accept an idea because it sounds progressive. For example, an underlying assumption of empowerment is that employees want to be empowered. Yet we have interviewed numerous employees who freely admit that they would prefer to be told exactly what to do. Often, major organizational changes require employees to take on new duties. How are they convinced to do so? In short, regardless of the organization's motive for implementing change, leaders need to develop a proper communication plan. Ironically, almost all of the founders of movements like lean manufacturing or green technology recognize the importance of communication, but few develop a systematic communication plan.

“TEDDY” ROOSEVELT

1858–1919

Theodore Roosevelt may well have been the most adventurous president in the history of the United States. After all, early in life he climbed one of the most perilous mountains in Europe, the Matterhorn. And then, later in life he descended a treacherous and unexplored river in South America known as the “River of Doubt,” enduring starvation and attacks from poisonous snakes. Yet few people would have predicted that the baby born in 1858 would ever be known for his vigorous spirit, valiant military exploits, and love of the “strenuous life.” The reason? He was a sickly child who suffered such severe asthma that he had to be propped up in a bed so that he could sleep. What was Theodore’s unconventional remedy? Rigorous exercise, such as boxing, rowing, and hiking, augmented with exotic adventures and hunting in the great outdoors. In fact, he shot and killed well over 1,000 animals, ranging from deer to tigers to elephants. Yet his most legendary act in the wilderness was to spare the life of a small, helpless bear. Numerous political cartoons soon spread the news of this act of kindness. And the association between Theodore Roosevelt and bear cubs quickly fused in the mind of the public. Soon thereafter, in a spontaneous tribute to the 26th president of the United States, stuffed toy bears were nicknamed “teddy bears.”

As president, Roosevelt changed the country in profound ways that we still enjoy to this day. For instance, he was instrumental in getting the Panama

Canal completed. He advocated the “speak softly and carry a big stick” foreign policy, still invoked by politicians around the globe. Yet his least frequently mentioned accomplishment is the one enjoyed by millions of vacationers every year. He created five national parks, 18 national monuments, and numerous national game preserves. His executive orders saved American treasures like the Grand Canyon, Pelican Island, and the Petrified Forest. One biography commented, “In seven years and sixty-nine days, Roosevelt (as President) had saved more than 234 million acres of American wilderness. History still hasn’t caught up with the long-term magnitude of his achievement.”²

How did this change champion accomplish so much? First, he knew when bold action needed to be taken. For example, he abruptly resigned his post as Assistant Secretary of the Navy to voluntarily lead the “Rough Riders” into battle during the Spanish–American War. Given his family’s wealth, he could have easily lived a leisurely life of luxury. Instead, as he remarked early in his political career, “I should be quite willing to barter the certainty of it for all the possibilities of the future.”³ Second, he knew how to successfully work with a wide range of people. A big-game hunter like Roosevelt would seem to have very little in common with a poet like Robert Frost. But they admired and respected one another. A military hero would appear to have very little in common with Harvard naturalists. But they collaborated on various projects. Finally, President Roosevelt knew how to inspire others. He once heartened a group of engineers laboring on the Panama Canal by remarking, “From time to time little men will come along to find fault with what you have done. . . . They will go down the stream like bubbles, they will vanish; but the work you have done will remain for the ages.”⁴ This is precisely the sentiment that champions for change need during tough times. Roosevelt respected “those in the arena,” as he eloquently explained in a speech at the Sorbonne in Paris:

It is not the critic who counts: not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error or shortcoming, but who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself for a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows, in the end, the triumph of high achievement, and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who knew neither victory nor defeat.⁵

Approaches to Change

All organizations, either explicitly or implicitly, have an orientation to change that defines for employees who can suggest, institute, and drive change efforts. Three typical patterns emerge: (1) top-down, (2) bottom-up, and (3) integrative.

Top-down

Traditionally, top management assesses the need for change and dictates implementation through the chain of command. Some organizations, out of necessity, adopt this approach because of a turbulent business environment or rapidly changing conditions. For example, after the tragedy of September 11, 2001, President Bush and leaders of Congress reorganized and realigned various government agencies to form the Office of Homeland Security.

Change may also be instigated at the top when a CEO or a manager has a bright, new vision of how the organization should be positioned for the future. Former secretary of state Henry Kissinger wrote perceptively on statesmanship:

A nation and its leaders must choose between moral certainty coupled with exorbitant risk, and the willingness to act on unprovable assumptions to deal with challenges when they are manageable. I favor the latter course. . . . The statesman's duty is to bridge the gap between his nation's experience and his vision . . . The qualities that distinguish a great statesman are prescience and courage, not analytical intelligence. He must have a conception of the future and the courage to move toward it while it is still shrouded to most of his compatriots.⁶

CHAPTER 10: BY THE NUMBERS

70%

of initiatives fail to have a lasting impact

80% to 90%

of a typical change leader's time is devoted to planning communication tactics versus strategy

4%

of senior managers claim they are "very well prepared" for the changes in the next decade

52%

of employees think their colleagues are overwhelmed by the degree of change in the organization

88%

of highly effective organizations explain the reasons behind major decisions to all employees

Likewise, some prescient executives see beyond the sights of their colleagues and predict future trends with astonishing regularity while leading the company in that direction. Amadeo Pietro Giannini of Bank of America was such a man. As the corporate founder, he was one of the first to introduce advertising by banks, bank cards, and a host of other novel ideas. By leading the way, visionaries ensure that the organization has a stake in the future.

Yet an overly zealous top-down style can be problematic. Researchers have found that "leader-centric" change can have an adverse effect on implementation and stifle the innovative spirit of employees.⁷ In short, top-down mandated change can go awry. For example, researchers have found that less than 50% of mergers and acquisitions actually end up adding value as intended.⁸ Why? One major reason: Often the agreements are hammered out with senior executives but without involvement of others who will actually execute the merger. Then, implementation gets handed off to less senior personnel not privy to the original discussions. It resembles the angst that many children face when merging into a new family with stepsisters and stepbrothers. In fact, some thoughtful commentators suggest consulting the literature on divorce, remarriage, and stepfamilies

before initiating a merger.⁹ Change of this sort often proves emotionally traumatic for all involved. In short, top-down visions of a value-adding merger or other significant change do not always translate into reality; they may be mere delusions.

Bottom-up

With the bottom-up orientation, ideas for changes and innovations percolate up through the organizational hierarchy.¹⁰ Employees are encouraged to provide input into changes and methods of implementation. Leaders who use this approach often find it highly motivating because employees who participate in the decision-making process are more likely to wholeheartedly accept, understand, and implement the change.

Advocates of this approach recognize that lucrative opportunities may be lost when employee ideas are ignored. A kind of collective blindness can occur with an excessively top-down orientation. Ralph Lauren, for example, tried for years to sell his superiors and colleagues on his unique fashion concept. He failed. But he struck out on his own, becoming one of the most successful retailers in the world, creating the distinctive “Polo look” in clothing.¹¹ The voice of a solitary prophet in the wilderness may be more trustworthy than the chants and choruses of the multitude.

Not all changes can be initiated at the grassroots level of the organization. The very element that makes grassroots change so uniquely enlightening also acts as a conceptual blinder. Employees with a grassroots viewpoint usually focus on grassroots problems, which often preclude a clear understanding of the changes needed at other organizational levels. For example, the supervisor of a print shop may have excellent suggestions on how to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of that department. However, the supervisor’s boss, who manages the printing, purchasing, and maintenance departments, may ask a more fundamental question: Can the organization as a whole function more effectively by having material printed by an outside vendor? Few print shop supervisors would recommend this change. Indeed, scholars studied this issue and found that when HR specialists were asked to suggest changes in their own jobs, the specialists typically came up with fewer than 30 minor changes.¹² Yet their managers came up with a list of more than 100 ideas involving substantial change to enhance the personnel job.

Integrative Approach

The critiques of the two previous approaches suggest a third, Dance manager–like approach to managing change. Effective leaders avoid focusing exclusively on *who* champions the change. Instead, they determine if the situation (e.g., who, what, when, and where) warrants a top-down approach, a bottom-up approach, or some combination of the two. There is no single best strategy for coping with change, just as there is no single best form of transportation. It all depends on *who* you are traveling with, *what* you intend to do, *when* you plan to leave, and *where* you intend to go. Likewise, thoughtful managers do not ask, “What is the best approach?”

Labeling this approach *integrative* is not incidental. Both approaches are needed in an organization. Successful leaders integrate the two approaches in a logical and meaningful way, just as our left eye compensates for the distortions of the right eye. Employees need to understand why certain changes are appropriately and necessarily made at different levels of the organization. There is an added bonus: binocular vision, which produces depth perception. And almost every organization could benefit from a deeper and clearer vision.

Selecting the Degree of Communication

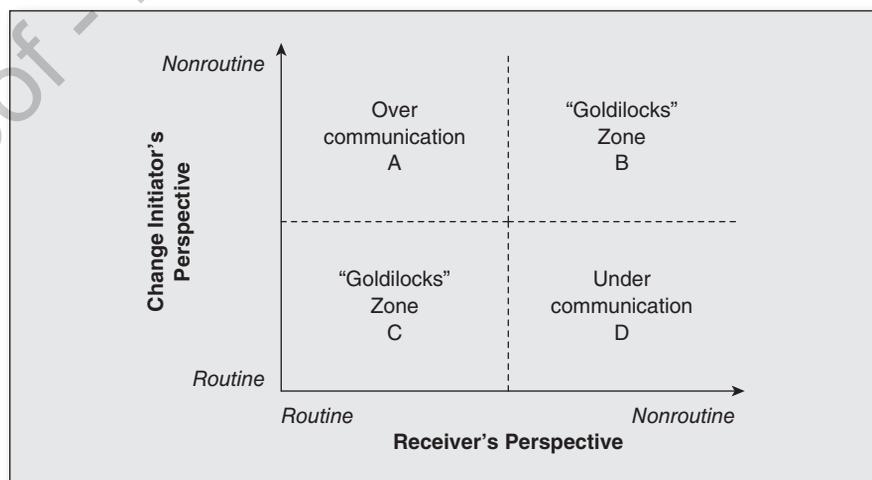
Effective managers create unique communication strategies based on the degree of change. Changes can be described on a continuum from routine to nonroutine. For instance, financial institutions routinely change their interest rates, and airlines regularly change their rates. On the other end of the continuum are major changes involving reorganizations, mergers, new product lines, staffing reductions, new technologies, or new corporate strategies.

But everyone does not share the same perspective about the magnitude of change. Figure 10.1 illustrates how the change initiator's and receiver's perspectives interact to create different communication scenarios. Effective managers avoid undercommunicating or **overcommunicating**. Just like Goldilocks, they seek communication that's "just right": not "too much" or "too little."

Undercommunicating

Often those instituting changes underestimate the impact that the change will have. A frequent result: **undercommunicating** (see Quadrant D of Figure 10.1). A committee, for example, might devote weeks to studying a new office procedure.

FIGURE 10.1 Selecting the Degree of Communication



Committee members will become familiar with all the arguments and counterarguments for various perspectives through numerous discussions back and forth. Unconsciously, they will transition through various difficult **reaction stages**, leading to the proposal's acceptance. Yet they will devote little time to communicating on these matters and instead only communicate the final proposal. They will communicate as if it was a routine change. It *may* be to the committee but *may not* be so from the audience's perspective.

Overcommunicating

Occasionally, employees will overcommunicate and provide their colleagues with more information than they desire (see Quadrant A of Figure 10.1). Unfortunately, the ease of forwarding e-mail encourages those who fail to understand others' priorities and information needs. More information does not necessarily equal better communication.

"Goldilocks" Zones

Ideally, change initiators should understand the perspectives of their intended audiences. Routine changes should be treated as simple information-sharing situations and should conform to the principles discussed in Chapter 6 about managing data, information, knowledge, and action (see Quadrant C of Figure 10.1). Nonroutine changes would be seen as a time for strategic communication and conform to the principles discussed in the remainder of this chapter (see Quadrant B of Figure 10.1).

Reactions to Change

Major changes usually involve a temporary loss of employee productivity. As seen in Figure 10.2, there are two dimensions of the drop: (a) the depth and (b) the duration. An effective communication strategy seeks to minimize both the depth and the duration of the loss.

In addition, employees often experience a loss akin to bereavement. Few scholars know more about this process than Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. Her keenly perceptive work *On Death and Dying* presents a theory about the psychological stages that terminally ill patients go through in learning to cope with their impending death:¹³

Stage 1—Denial and isolation

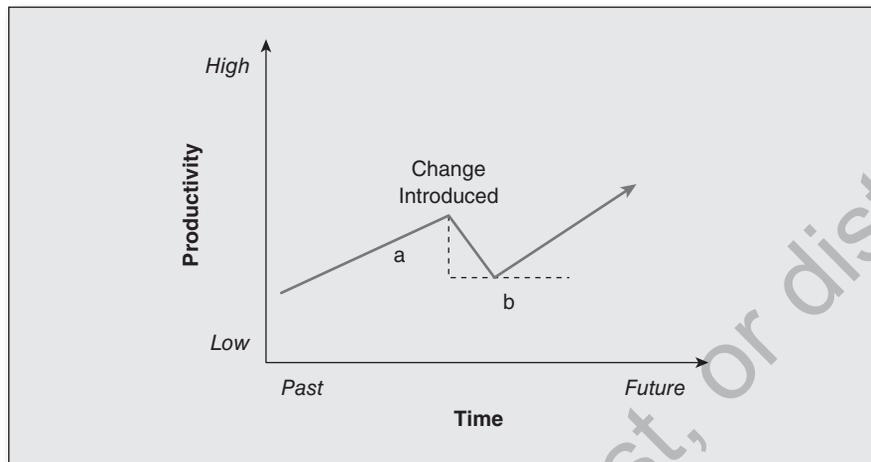
Stage 2—Anger

Stage 3—Bargaining

Stage 4—Depression

Stage 5—Acceptance

FIGURE 10.2 Impact of Change on Productivity



Her approach focuses on easing the natural pain, stress, and trauma of the situation by using communication strategies that are compatible with the patient's stage in the coping process. Such efforts require a deep sensitivity to the patient's unique psychological makeup. There are no pat answers, only some general principles to follow (see Table 10.1). Kübler-Ross makes the important point that how well a patient handles the situation depends to a great extent on how effectively the doctors, nurses, and family members communicate.

When faced with major changes, many employees will go through similar stages of reactions. The manager's skill in guiding employees through this process greatly affects the smoothness of the transition, limiting the depth and duration of productivity loss. Sensitive managers discern the stage of employee reaction and communicate accordingly.

In denial and isolation (Stage 1), employees often react with comments such as "Oh no, not here" and "It can't happen like that, not with my job." The deeply insightful social critic Eric Hoffer probably best captures the emotional state of some employees facing a drastic change:

We can never be really prepared for that which is wholly new. We have to adjust ourselves, and every radical adjustment is a crisis in self-esteem: we undergo a test, we have to prove ourselves. We need inordinate self-confidence to face drastic change without inner trembling.¹⁴

In the denial stage, the manager should communicate clearly and calmly the particulars of the change while providing as much factual material as necessary. An employee may react emotionally, but the manager should realize that this is a normal reaction. The wise manager allows the denial to take its natural course by providing the employee opportunities to make sense of the situation with fellow employees.¹⁵ On encountering the initial emotional reaction, some managers

TABLE 10.1 Communicating Change at Different Reaction Stages

Stage	Identifying Actions	Appropriate Actions	Inappropriate Responses
Denial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Not showing up for meetings ● Being overly busy with routine tasks ● Less socializing ● Procrastinating 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Discerning actual points of resistance ● Discussing the positives and negatives of change ● Legitimizing concerns ● Discussing the rationale of the change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ignoring the resistance ● Ridiculing the person's denial
Anger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Being irritable ● Contemplating sabotage ● Being confrontational ● Appearing "short fused" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Staying calm and professional ● Clarifying the details of the change ● Showing understanding of the anger while firmly emphasizing the need for change ● Allowing some ventilation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Escalating into a relationship conflict ● Threatening others ● Blaming others for the change ● Taking anger personally ● Ignoring anger
Bargaining	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Trying to make deals ● Trading favors ● Promise making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Being flexible with inconsequential items ● Being firm with the basic position ● Focusing on long-term benefits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Rejecting suggestions briskly ● Giving in to employee demands ● Fostering impressions of agreement
Depression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Being nontalkative ● Appearing apathetic ● Missing work ● Appearing listless ● Looking somber 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Showing concern ● Providing "space" ● Encouraging discussions with others who have fully accepted change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Pressuring for full acceptance ● Jesting about feelings ● Being overly happy or giddy
Acceptance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Fully implementing change ● Returning to a normal atmosphere 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Encouraging auxiliary suggestions ● Resuming "normal" communication ● Giving praise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Saying, "I told you so" ● Joking about previous reactions

unwisely back off or sugarcoat the change and, as a result, do not fully inform employees of the change. Others try to browbeat or ridicule employees into acceptance. Either approach undermines the change acceptance process.

Stage 2 involves a kind of anger over the "whys" of the change: Why did this happen to me? At this time? Little incidents can set off major emotional outbursts. Employee behavior may seem inexplicable. Not taking the anger personally wards off exacerbating the difficulties. Effective managers acknowledge the anger while

gently guiding the employees’ attention to the real source of their anger and helping them work through it.

Bargaining, Stage 3, occurs when employees attempt to make various exchanges to forestall the impending change. Creativity abounds when one is faced with an unpleasant alternative. Employees attempt to make deals—even some outside the normal chain-of-command structure—as they seek to alter the course of events. Yet making small concessions, yielding on inconsequential issues, and experimenting with alternative ideas may be appropriate as long as managers sustain the driving principles behind the change.

In Stage 4, depression, employees display signs of listlessness and depression, but they begin to accept the inevitable. Just allowing the employees to voice their concerns or feelings at this point can be helpful. At other times, sensitive silence or a gentle touch may be most effective. Sharing sadness with an empathic person starts the healing. An insensitive “Hey, it’s not that bad” stops short any natural healing.

In the acceptance stage (Stage 5), employees resign themselves to the situation by accepting or even endorsing the change. Managers should show respect for the employees and not chide them for their initial reactions. Even seemingly innocent verbal jousting may be deeply but secretly wounding. The wise manager preserves employee dignity.

This may sound like a fairly drawn-out process. But these reactions can take place in the span of hours or extend over several months, as in the case reviewed in Table 10.2. Doubters, such as the Arrow manager, may even question whether an employee really goes through those reactions. Circuit managers, however, may become overly sympathetic and actually delay acceptance.

But there is an important factor to keep in mind: *Effective change agents never forget that they are often at a different stage in the process than their employees.*

TABLE 10.2 Case Study: Reaction Stages to a Change

<p><i>Situation:</i> Smith’s Solid Waste, a small, family-owned disposal company, is being bought out by B.L. Disposal, a larger disposal company. Smith’s owner and two managers are aware of the pending sale. They are preparing to tell the employees about this change in ownership. The owner and two managers plan to stay on as supervisors, but there will be some changes in the operations. More office staff will be hired, and the way records are kept will change. Drivers will be required to keep more accurate records and submit more reports to the office staff. In the past, very few records were kept, and drivers had a lot of freedom about how they ran their routes.</p>
<p>Chronology of events</p>
<p><i>Day 1:</i> Mr. Smith calls a meeting for all drivers and announces the sale of Smith’s Solid Waste to B.L. Disposal. All drivers will be required to reapply for their jobs with B.L. Disposal. He distributes the applications and tells the drivers to turn them in within 1 week so he can send them to B.L. Disposal.</p>

<i>Days 2–10: No activity</i>
<i>Day 11: Mr. Smith notices that no one has turned in an application. He asks all the drivers why he has not received any of their applications. They respond, "We were unsure if we had to. We didn't think you were really going to sell." Mr. Smith replies, "B.L. Disposal is buying this company. I will still be your direct supervisor. However, you must reapply for your jobs within the next week; B.L. will not wait for these applications forever. I will be handing over whatever applications I have in 1 week."</i>
<i>Analysis: The employees are clearly denying that the company is going to be bought out and avoiding anything that would dispel the myth. It is a game of "mutual pretense." Mr. Smith's response might seem appropriate because it gives employees maximum flexibility and avoids conflict. But it fails to deal with the reasons for the denial. Moreover, all the aspects of the change have not been fully explained. The abruptness of the supervisor's comments on Day 11 adds to the tension.</i>
<i>Day 18: The workers tell Mr. Smith, "If you want to sell out, you should just tell the owner of B.L. that we are all good workers and if he doesn't agree to keep us, we'll all quit. Then he'll have no workers."</i>
<i>Analysis: The anger stage is clearly in full swing. Providing a rationale for why the applications need to be filled out as a formality is a little late at this stage and should have been done earlier. Furthermore, Mr. Smith still has not explained how this sale will affect the drivers. He assumes that the workers should not be concerned because he will still be their direct supervisor. The threats only exacerbate the situation until it builds into an interpersonal conflict.</i>
<i>Day 20: Mr. Smith and B.L. Disposal's VP agree to meet with the employees to discuss how the change will affect them and to answer any questions.</i>
<i>Day 21: Employees want guarantees that everyone will get to keep the same job and responsibilities. The new owners assure them that they will all keep their jobs if they turn in their applications. But new workers will be brought in as well, mainly to do administrative work in the office. The workers are happy to hear that they will keep their jobs but confused about why office workers are needed.</i>
<i>Analysis: This is a textbook example of the negotiation or bargaining stage. The workers are promised their jobs if they turn in their applications.</i>
<i>Day 24: The drivers ask Mr. Smith why more office help is needed. He tells them that they (the drivers) will need to complete more detailed route reports so the business can bill and manage time more effectively. Additional office workers are needed to process these reports. The drivers are furious that they will have less freedom than before with these new responsibilities. The result: They do not turn in their applications.</i>
<i>Analysis: They revert back to the anger stage. The drivers still feel lied to and do not trust the new owners.</i>
<i>Day 26: Mr. Smith and B.L. inform the drivers that if their applications are not submitted in 1 week, they will begin to hire new drivers.</i>
<i>Days 28–36: Hesitantly, the drivers turn in their applications. The drivers will not talk to Mr. Smith or the other managers because they feel betrayed. They barely talk to one another.</i>

(Continued)

TABLE 10.2 (Continued)

<i>Analysis: The depression stage has set in. Most likely, the employees are silent because they are bitter. Mr. Smith may have done the wise thing, given the current situation.</i>
<i>Days 36–50: The name “B.L. Disposal” begins to show up on the dumpsters and on the customers’ invoices. The drivers are given the new forms they must complete and hand in every day to the office staff. Everyone begins talking again, and slowly relationships return to normal.</i>
<i>Analysis: Acceptance, finally. Maybe not wholehearted acceptance but acceptance nevertheless.</i>
<i>6 months later: All the drivers are filling out the correct forms.</i>
<i>1 year later: In the break room, the drivers discuss how easy it is to do the route sheet and how much less customers complain about mistakes on their billing statements.</i>

They straddle two worlds: one of their own acceptance and the other of their employees’ denial, anger, bargaining, or depression. They realize that their own acceptance emerged from numerous discussions and imperceptible psychological adjustments that their employees never can be privy to. Consequently, they avoid “cheerleading” employees into the acceptance stage. They also know how to strategically communicate about major changes to hasten employee acceptance and boost productivity. Doing so requires a thoughtful analysis of the situation, as suggested by the model reviewed in the next section.

The “Iceberg” Model

Most of an iceberg’s bulk lies below the surface. Ships that ignore the ice below the water are in mortal danger. Likewise, organizational change efforts may flounder because of a lack of strategic communication planning—the “below the waterline” issues (see Figure 10.3). This model outlines a strategic approach to communicating change based on four levels of planning:

1. **Contextual analysis**
2. **Audience analysis**
3. Strategic design
4. Tactical preparations

The model is fluid, focusing on asking the right questions in the proper order. The specific action plan emerges from the dynamic interplay of critical communication principles and the answers to these core questions. These questions are presented in Table 10.3.

FIGURE 10.3 The “Iceberg” Model



TABLE 10.3 Thought Process for a Strategic Communication Plan

Contextual analysis	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How have employees assimilated other changes? 2. How congruent is the change with the culture? 3. How noncomplex and manageable is the change? 4. How advantageous is the change over past practices? 5. What benefits will be readily observable? 6. How will key relationships be affected?
Audience analysis	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the major groups of employees that will be affected by the change? 2. How will each group be affected by the change? 3. Who are the key opinion leaders (“the lions”) of each group? 4. What are the communication or channel preferences of each group? 5. What does each group know or think they know about the change? 6. What are the most likely concerns of each group?
Strategic design	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the tentative communicative objectives for each of the audiences? 2. What are the common objectives shared by all the audiences?

(Continued)

TABLE 10.3 (Continued)

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. What is a unifying theme that energizes and motivates employees? 4. Based on the audience analysis, how should the communication resources be allocated? 5. What should be the general sequence of stages or phases for achieving the objectives?
Tactics	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What channels should be used? 2. What are the key messages? 3. What are the “safety valves”? 4. What should be the timing of the various communications? 5. Who should communicate the messages?

Most companies spend 80% to 95% of their time and resources dealing with issues such as the following:

- Should we publish a brochure or issue a company-wide e-mail?
- What day of the week should we release the announcement?
- Who should communicate about the change?

These are the “above the waterline” tactical issues concerned with determining the content of a message and its timing, channels, and spokespeople. These are all legitimate questions, but they need to be addressed at the proper time. They are, in fact, indicative of a tactical rather than a strategic approach to communicating change. My experiences suggest that resources should be allocated in precisely the opposite direction. Between 70% and 80% of resources should be devoted to the first three levels of planning: (1) contextual analysis, (2) audience analysis, and (3) strategic design. Once these issues are resolved, the tactical decisions are usually fairly simple and straightforward.

Contextual Analysis

Gravity beats a rocket every time. Eventually, rockets run out of fuel and succumb to gravitational fields. In a similar way, a great message will always succumb to employees’ field of experience. As Distinguished Professor Emeritus Lee Williams of Texas State University put it, “Change leaders can create messages about the change but employees control how they interpret those messages and determine their ultimate meaning.”¹⁶ The background knowledge about the organization serves as a base for understanding how the change might be perceived. Planners must know about the written and unwritten organizational rules of the organizational culture. These historical communication patterns set the context of interpretation for employees. In fact, one researcher has shown that employee reactions to

change can be traced back to an organization's founding conditions. The company's origin somehow deeply imprints employees, even those subsequently hired.¹⁷ As Sir Winston Churchill put it, "The longer you look back, the farther you can look forward. This is not a philosophical or political argument—any oculist can tell you it is true."¹⁸ If change initiators fail to understand the context, the change effort may be crushed by the weight of the status quo.

The president of a small manufacturing firm related the following story. He was concerned about the rough financial times his company was experiencing and decided to implement some cost-saving measures. The president considered himself a moral and straightforward person. Therefore, he felt that he had an ethical obligation to inform his employees of the news. In due course, he called a meeting of all employees to discuss some of the difficulties ahead as well as the requisite changes involved. In good faith, he mentioned that there were no plans for layoffs and employees would be dealt with "as fairly as possible under the circumstances." So far, so good. Or so it seemed.

Within a few days, the entire plant was buzzing with rumors about an impending plant closing and wage reductions. In fact, there was not a grain of truth in either rumor. The president was completely bewildered. How could such vicious rumors spring from such noble intentions? Weeks of meetings were required to quell the fears. Still, for months, morale and productivity suffered.

On deeper probing and a year's worth of hindsight, it became abundantly clear why the employees came away from the meeting with precisely the opposite message from the one that the well-intentioned president had so sincerely sought to communicate. The president had never before held a company-wide meeting to discuss any issue, much less this kind of anxiety-producing news. Hence, the employees legitimately, although incorrectly, reasoned that "things must be really bad" if the president "had to" call a meeting of this type. There was the feeling that management "must not be telling us all they know." Like a virus in an unhealthy body, rumors and inaccurate inferences naturally flourish under such conditions. Had meetings like this been held on a regular basis, the possibility of such an interpretation would have been minimized. The context of the situation spoke louder than the actual message. The president was bewildered because he had focused on the inner message—his actual words—and had no understanding of the context in which the employees interpreted the words. Both the employees and the president erroneously focused on only one part of the actual communication event. Pure intentions do not always guarantee perceptions of integrity.

The moral of the story is that when instituting a change, managers must carefully consider the context in which employees will interpret the message. This incident suggests that to institute a change, management may need to acknowledge past errors in failing to communicate effectively and repair the damage. A successful future can only be built on the firm foundation of the past. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, a strategy professor at Harvard, noted, "If the foundations will not support the weight of what is about to be built, then they must be shored up before any other actions can take place."¹⁹ Thus, contextual analysis focuses the change initiator's

attention on possible resistance points. We use the following questions to guide the discussion of the contextual issues.²⁰

How have employees assimilated other changes? The previous scenario clearly demonstrates how history affects the speed with which changes are assimilated. Organizations that have successfully assimilated past changes tend to absorb new ones more efficiently. Why? The employees have learned how to effectively manage the change process with all its emotional strains and setbacks. Without that kind of history, employees need to assimilate the change as well as learn about the change process, doubling the duty but clearly not doubling the fun.

How congruent is the change with the culture? Changes seen as an extension of the culture are more likely to be embraced. For instance, the term *lean manufacturing* or *process improvement* may induce resistance because employees see this as a radical departure from the “way we do things around here.”²¹ But if the planners use another label—one more in line with the culture—resistance might be minimized. In one situation, we renamed a lean manufacturing project as “Our House” because employees recently became partial owners of the company. If employees see changes as alien to the culture, change initiators would do well to reconsider the endeavor or, at the very least, find ways to make the change more hospitable to the culture.

How noncomplex and manageable is the change? More complex changes are often resisted. Faced with complex change, effective leaders break down the task and make it appear more manageable and attainable. These tactics include the use of planning charts, outlines of key project phases, and scaled-down models of new products or processes.

How advantageous is the change over past practices? For several reasons, change initiators find this one of the more difficult questions. First, they must deal with employees who may feel that any change represents an indictment of their past work practices. In a manufacturing plant, we helped introduce a major structural change of reporting relationships that created more accountability. One of the consistent refrains was “We made our numbers in the past, we’re achieving our goals now, why do we need to change?” Ironically, the very managers who said this were those who had consistently complained about the general lack of accountability at the plant. Their lament was, basically, “If it ain’t broke, why fix it?” Even the verbally skilled have a difficult time effectively communicating what often appear to be contradictory messages:

- a. In the past, the systems worked effectively.
- b. In the future, the systems will not work. Therefore, new practices are needed.

The second problem involves differing perspectives. Who benefits from the change? The employee? The organization? All too often, changes are introduced as

benefiting the organization at the expense of certain employees. Sending work off-shore to workers in another country may add to the company's bottom line, but what about the current employees' job security? Thus, change initiators need to carefully consider how to balance these sometimes competing perspectives.

What benefits will be readily observable? Many advantages are conceptual in nature and often prove the least persuasive to employees. Instead, they need to see tangible and visible evidence that the change will provide benefits. Therefore, change initiators may have to provide a physical demonstration of the benefits. Advertisers tend to be skillful in demonstrating readily observable benefits to consumers. Change initiators might think about how their favorite infomercial spokesperson or product endorser would communicate the benefits of the change.

How will key relationships be affected? One of the least discussed potential resistance points involves changes in social relationships. Modifying the physical layout of an office may alter interpersonal relationships. Those employees who routinely see one another for casual conversation may not have such opportunities with a new office plan. Organizations that are moving to "virtual offices" often find this issue impinging on the ultimate success of the venture.

A strategy will begin to emerge as these questions are discussed. The responses may indicate that small modifications in the change initiative, such as renaming it, need to be made to facilitate acceptance. In other cases, more aggressive responses might need to be initiated to address the concerns. For instance, organizations that are heavily reliant on telecommuting may create quarterly retreats for those employees "residing" in their virtual offices. This could be a mechanism to overcome concerns about alterations in personal relationships or "feeling disconnected."

Audience Analysis

What one person finds persuasive or problematic, another may not. This is the fundamental principle of audience analysis. Change planners should start the analysis by determining the groups of employees who will be affected differently by the change. Determining the key groups of employees will vary with the type of change. There are a lot of ways to slice the audience pie. For example, when an organization alters a benefits package, age may be the key variable. With a job redesign issue, the critical variable will most likely be job classification. A flextime proposal might affect employees with children differently than those without children.

Discerning *all* the groups affected may not be easy or apparent. For instance, many downsizing efforts have failed to reach long-term productivity goals because organizations have not planned the communication to the "survivors," those employees left after the cutback. These employees often have deep fears about their future security, which may decrease their effectiveness.

After the key groups have been isolated, five critical questions need to be answered. The questions move from the more factual to the speculative.

1. *How will each group be affected by the change?* The final Halloween of the last millennium was scarier than usual for Hershey Foods. They didn't deliver enough Hershey Bars and Peanut Butter Cups treats to their regional suppliers. How did this happen? Hershey couldn't pull off the ultimate trick of successfully integrating a \$112 million computer system into their operations. They were supposed to modernize and expedite the entire order and distribution process, but they did not. There were technical problems. But there were also communication problems.²² Hershey failed to understand the implications of the change for their various audiences and neglected to ask critical questions such as "How would the new computer system affect suppliers? Distributors? The ultimate consumer?" Wise managers anticipate how different groups are likely to interpret the change by asking, "What will it mean to them in terms of their job duties, as well as their emotional well-being?"

2. *Who are the key opinion leaders ("the lions") of each group?* "Lions" rule the tropical as well as the organizational jungles. Influence is unequally distributed in an organization and is not necessarily tied to job titles. Often, the viability of a change will rest on the reactions of key opinion leaders. Therefore, change initiators should identify the lions and think about how best to influence them. The lions, once convinced, will in turn influence others. They often provide the lens through which other employees view the situation. That's why successful change initiators use this question as a springboard for answering all the others.

3. *What are the communication or channel preferences of each group?* Different groups may prefer to receive their information in different forms or through different channels. Introverts, for instance, like to study documents before responding, whereas extroverts prefer discussing issues face-to-face. Statistics might prove a proper way to make an argument for employees in the finance department, but those in the marketing department may be more persuaded by stories or critical incidents.

4. *What does each group know or think they know about the change?* During times of change, misinformation, rumors, and speculation pervade organizations. This mishmash of impressions greatly influences employee interpretations. In fact, one study found that a key predictor of ineffective change efforts involved the number of inaccurate rumors; the more the rumors, the more ineffective was the implementation of the change.²³ Therefore, change initiators must be prepared to counter both misconceptions and pent-up emotions. Thus, successful change initiators describe the beliefs each audience has about the change, no matter how silly, odd, or misguided they may be. For example, during one cost-cutting initiative, the change planners identified a tiny but vocal group who believed that "the drive to increase profits is unnecessary because the company already makes enough money." Management, however, judged profitability more objectively—namely, by comparing their performance against the industry averages. This difference in perception of the facts needed to be dealt with. Note that, at this point in the planning process, the planners are describing, not evaluating, the beliefs.

5. *What are the most likely concerns or resistance points of each group?* Employees are often willing to discuss their concerns. Typically, they will discuss generic issues such as economic loss, inconveniences, loss of wages, job stability, and workload shifts.²⁴ But they are often hesitant to bring up other concerns that are more emotional in nature, such as perceived loss of status, social disruptions, reduction in influence, anxiety over the unknown, or insecurities such as “Can I really do this new job?” These concerns may surface in a dysfunctional way in the form of vicious rumors. Change initiators cannot assume that employees will be able to identify and articulate all of their own concerns. In fact, some scholars have identified another set of latent potential employee concerns based on the developmental stage of the organization (see Table 10.4).²⁵ Wise planners take all the possible concerns into account and then select the most salient ones for deeper consideration.

Several cautionary notes: First, *resistance* may be too strong a word. *Concern* may be more appropriate because it reduces the evaluative connotation. Managers may label a comment as resistance, but the employees may not perceive it that way at all.²⁶ For example, I attended a meeting where a number of employees shared their concerns about a new corporate initiative. After about 20 minutes of this sometimes passionate debate, a visibly upset executive said, “Clearly there is no support for this initiative.” And he walked out. For 5 minutes, we all sat there in

TABLE 10.4 Organizational Stages and Related Employee Concerns

Organizational Stage	Identifying Characteristics	Possible Employee Concerns
Birth and early growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Emphasis on entrepreneurship ● Heavy influence of “founding fathers” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How will the CEO react? ● Will the change diminish the CEO’s control? ● Will the change shift the corporate vision?
Maturity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Creation of standard operating procedures ● Institutionalized vision ● Solidified departmental responsibilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How will different departments react? ● Will departments protect their turf instead of embracing the change? ● Who will control the resources?
Decline or redevelopment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Downturn in competitive environment ● More bureaucratic structure ● Quest to reshape corporate vision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Will employees enthusiastically embrace the change? ● How will the change affect established careers? ● Will the change affect power relationships? ● Is a crisis the only way to motivate change?

stunned silence. He never returned, nor did the initiative. The employees were not resistant to the idea; they merely had some issues that they felt had to be addressed first. As one colleague quipped, “I’m not resistant to change. I’m resistant to change without new resources or a shift in priorities.”

Second, by labeling it *resistance*, we may be setting up a self-fulfilling prophecy and not reacting to important underlying anxieties, misperceptions, and correctable problems.²⁷ In short, the issues *perceived* by management as possible concerns may not be the *actual* concerns of employees. In fact, employees may not even recognize or mention the real source of their angst.

Properly “slicing the audience pie” and answering the questions above influence the entire communication strategy. We used this approach successfully when we developed a communication plan for a paper manufacturer that was going to offer a collective-bargaining agreement to union members. As our team addressed the audience analysis questions above, a flash of insight emerged as to the challenge our team faced. We called this challenge “The Wheel of Interpretation” because it summarized all the likely reactions various groups would have to the contract offer (see Figure 10.4). Some would see the offer as “The company sold us out,” others as “We can get a better deal.” We knew that the employees—not management—were the ones spinning the wheel. But management and union leaders could *influence*—though not *control*—where it landed. Therefore, the strategy sought to increase the probability that the employees would view the contract as “the best we could hope for.” How do you craft such strategies? That is the focus of the next section.

Strategic Design

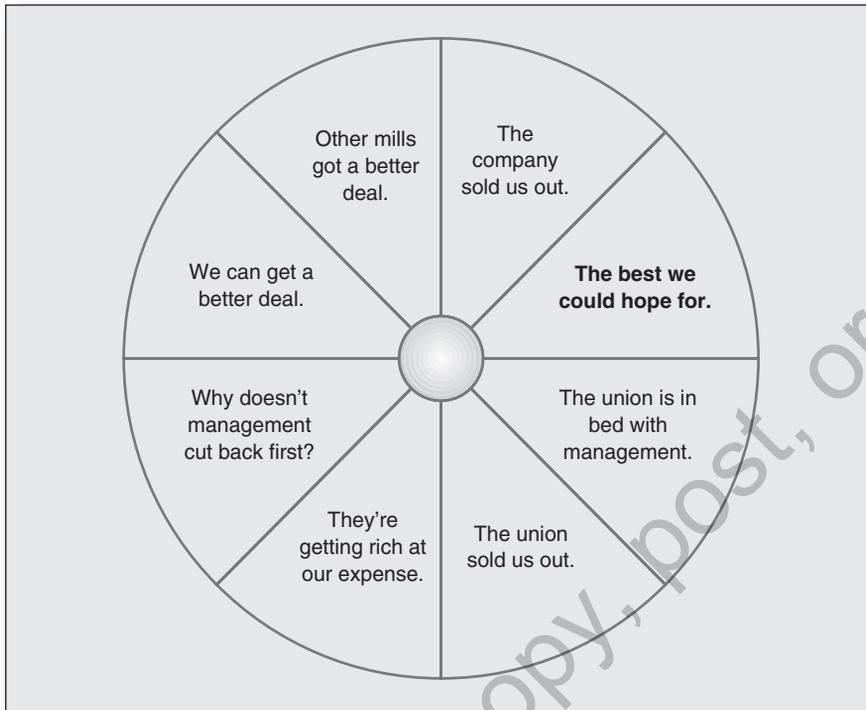
The well-known military historian B. H. Liddell Hart once wrote that “in strategy, the longest way round is often the shortest way home.”²⁸ Communication strategies are no different. Planning a strategic communication process takes both time and effort; it is the “long way round.” This section discusses five steps that increase the probability of successfully implementing a major change.

Step 1: Develop Tentative Communicative Objectives for Each of the Audiences

Table 10.5 provides a worksheet we use to summarize the audience analysis phase and start the strategy-making phase. Strategy involves designing an overarching blueprint for the communication process: setting global communication objectives, selecting primary messages or themes, and developing a general timetable. Skillful strategists make astute choices based on a thorough analysis. In particular, the impressions and concerns revealed in the Change Planning Work Sheet (Table 10.5) imply some specific communicative objectives for each group. Note the double line separating the last column; this signifies the first strategic decision.

Consider the following situation. A small medical clinic with seven branch offices decided to update its phone system. Under the old system, patients called a

FIGURE 10.4 The Wheel of Interpretation



specific office, and any available employee answered the phone. It often took several iterations before the patient was connected to the appropriate person. The new system would allow patients to call a single clinic number, answered by a dedicated operator, who would then connect the caller to the appropriate personnel. This was designed to improve office efficiency and provide more convenient patient care. We anticipated that not everyone would see it that way. Therefore, we split the audience pie into the affected, unequally sized groups and created unique objectives for each audience. Table 10.6 presents a shortened version of the planning work sheet. Note that although we identified unique objectives for each audience, some overlapped, which nicely leads to the next step.

Step 2: Determine Common Objectives That Are Shared by All the Audiences

Scrutinizing the objectives for each group often reveals common issues that apply to most of the audiences. In the case of the medical clinic, the global objectives of the communication campaign were fairly obvious:

- Provide reassurance that medical care will remain the same or improve.
- Demonstrate the ease and efficiency of the system.

TABLE 10.5 Change-Planning Work Sheet

Audiences (Groups)	How Will the Group Be Affected?	Who Are the "Lions" in the Group?	What Are the Channel Preferences of the Group?	What Do Group Members Know or Think They Know?	What Will Be the Group's Likely Concerns or Resistance Points? ^a	Communication Objectives for the Group

a. Rate each concern on a 0 (low) to 10 (high) scale.

TABLE 10.6 Audience Analysis of Medical Clinic Technology Change

Audience	Concerns	Communication Objectives
Older patients	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Will I have the same access to care? ● Will I be able to adapt to the new phone system? ● Will this group be able to break out of their old habits? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide reassurances that care will be the same or improved. ● Demonstrate the ease of the new phone system. ● Restore confidence in their ability to handle changes. ● Show how the new phone system is more convenient by providing them quicker and more direct access to the desired staff.
Younger patients	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Will I have the same access to care? ● Will this make scheduling office visits more efficient? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide reassurances that care will be the same or improve. ● Underscore the efficiency of the new system.
Medical staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Will I be able to get my job done more efficiently and effectively? ● Will the transition to the new system be burdensome? ● How will this affect patient care, particularly for the elderly? ● Will I be able to learn the new phone system? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Demonstrate the efficiency of the new system. ● Highlight the employee's role in the transition. ● Describe the specific benefits and potential concerns for elderly patients. ● Discuss the training that will be provided.
Physicians	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Will I be able to get my job done more efficiently and effectively? ● Will the transition to the new system be burdensome? ● How will this affect patient care, particularly for the elderly? ● Will I be able to learn the new phone system? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Demonstrate the efficiency of the new system. ● Underscore the support system for the change. ● Describe the specific benefits and potential concerns for elderly patients. ● Discuss the training that will be provided.

These objectives, in turn, suggest a starting point for making all the decisions about what to communicate, how to inform people, and when to do it. The objectives also set up the next strategic step.

Step 3: Develop an Underlying Theme or Core Message

The theme or core message needs to tap into the driving principle for change. Consider how Todd Herbert, the former director of field training for Northwestern

Mutual, engineered a cultural shift in his unit. The background: His 24 direct reports were responsible for the training resources used to instruct more than 7,000 field representatives. The trainers developed and oversaw the implementation of well-packaged training courses but viewed assessment and follow-up as someone else's job. The challenge: Expand the role of the department to include assessment, follow-up, and program promotion. In fact, Todd wanted the trainers to act more like internal consultants. His vision was clear, but he needed an energizing core message that did not disparage the previous departmental approach. Todd's response: He worked with a team to develop an acronym that symbolized the new mission. What did they come up with? PIRA, "Promote, Instruct, Reinforce, Assess," which became the new departmental mantra.²⁹ Todd and the "PIRAManiacs" burned through resistance, while transforming their department and the organization. Silly? Maybe. But very effective. Note how the message accomplished three important goals. First, it legitimized previous practices; the department had always delivered "instruction." Second, it set a broader agenda for the department that went right to the heart of the transformation that Todd envisioned: promotion, reinforcement, and assessment. Third, it was memorable (or "sticky"), motivating, and actionable.³⁰ Such are the characteristics of well-crafted themes or core messages.

One note of caution: Catchy slogans are not enough, as one company discovered when it launched a HR initiative designed to improve career options and training. Without the benefit of a thorough audience analysis, the change initiators chose "Career Pathing" as the moniker for this endeavor. Think about how the terminology limits, and perhaps ostracizes, certain audiences. What about employees who are happy with their current job and do not want to "move up"? Are they considered less valuable than those on a particular path? This was not the message the company wanted to send, but many employees thought that a reasonable inference. So, eventually, the company started using a new term, *career enhancement*, which was more inclusive and motivated all employees to improve their skills, even those not on a "path." As this example illustrates, effective change leaders contemplate the potential inferences drawn from the theme. They realize that employees need to personally relate to the theme in a way congruent with the contextual analysis, audience analysis, and strategic goals.

Step 4: Allocate Communication Resources according to the Audience Analysis

For change to be sustained, three questions must be answered affirmatively:

1. Is there a *need* for the change or initiative?
2. Is this the appropriate *remedy*?
3. Have the major *drawbacks* to the initiative been resolved?³¹

Because audiences have limited attention spans, choices need to be made about what issues to emphasize. If their concerns are not met fairly quickly, the initiative

could stall at the denial stage. Consider a company concerned about the rising cost of health care. They may want to change the benefit package, while employees are satisfied with the status quo. In this case, the change strategist must first establish a need and alert the employees to the staggering financial burden of the existing medical plan. In another case, when employees are already convinced of the need, the focus of the communication should be on the remedy—the choice of new plans available—and how potential obstacles have been resolved.

Applying this simple notion can prove challenging. For instance, the change strategist might discover that five groups do not believe that any changes are needed, three groups recognize the need for change but are concerned about the remedy, and several other groups are focused on how to resolve the inherent drawbacks in the initiative. What to do? These are matters of process considered in the next step.

Step 5: Formulate a General Sequence of Stages or Phases

Persuading employees is a process. One “persuasive” mass e-mail or cleverly designed brochure will not be enough. Employee “buy-in” emerges over time and after many communicative actions. Expect this to be a rather helter-skelter and messy enterprise. As previously discussed, employees have a fairly standard set of reactions to change, starting with denial and ending with acceptance. Yet different employees and groups may be experiencing those emotions at various times during the change process. Thus, change leaders must respond flexibly to various groups and should carefully consider how the groups exert influence on one another.

Setting up the appropriate stages of the communication plan requires insight, creativity, and shrewd judgment. How do change leaders integrate all these pieces from Steps 1 to 4? Consider this question as a starting point: “In what order should we pursue the objectives gleaned from Step 2?” Often, a natural progression of objectives will emerge. For example, in some cases, we discovered that objectives could be grouped into three fairly distinct phases: (1) alert, (2) analysis, and (3) proposal. In the *alert* or *awareness phase*, the major objective is to convince employees of the necessity for the change or initiative. Change theorists often characterize the specific objectives at this stage as “building awareness” or “questioning tradition”³² The *analysis phase* focuses on convincing key audiences that the issue has been properly analyzed. Or better yet, ask opinion leaders to assist in the necessary analyses. Change leaders need to let others understand their thinking and shape the discussion. How was the need detected? How was the situation analyzed? What alternatives were considered? Once these questions are answered sufficiently, the change initiators can move on to the *proposal phase* and discuss the specific proposal. This phase presents a special challenge because many employees will still be skeptical of the underlying need for the change. *In fact, many change initiators are astonished at how frequently they must repeat the rationale for the change, thus returning to the alert phase.* Change initiators should be prepared to till that soil one more time. But cultivation pays off. This phased strategy increases the odds that the change will develop deep roots in the organization.

A more difficult issue involves planning the rollout to various groups that have different concerns about the initiative. Ideally, the communication messages would be rolled out to all groups at the same time to prevent the spread of misinformation. But that may not be possible or even wise. Some groups have sway over others. Some will be more resistant than others. Therefore, change leaders should plan the strategic phases with various groups in mind. Successful change strategists build momentum, working with groups that will more quickly “buy in” and can be used as leverage over other groups. As any successful strategist knows, convenience or happenstance should not dictate the order.

Tactical Preparation

The tactics are the “how-to’s,” the operational plans that emerge from the strategy. There are five areas to consider in developing tactics. Some standard rules of thumb in developing each tactic are highlighted as follows.

Channels

Several principles guide the communication channel choices of effective change leaders.

They typically use multiple channels. Why? Using multiple channels increases the probability that employees will hear about the change. In addition, each medium has its strength and excels at featuring different aspects of a change. For example, oral channels can be more useful in fielding employee questions, whereas a print medium can better show a new office design. Finally, the redundancy helps continually remind employees of the vision behind the change.

They seek to use rich channels. Rich channels, such as face-to-face meetings, allow for rapid feedback and quick adaptation to employee concerns.³³ Assume that a company announced a major initiative via a memo (a lean channel) sent to employees’ homes and did not use any follow-up communication. How could change initiators ascertain the reaction stage of the employees? Eventually, responses might filter through other avenues, but by then, opinions and conclusions may have hardened into deep resistance. Rich channels encourage a more fluid dynamic that allows change initiators to help employees move more rapidly through the reaction stages.

For example, we assisted a leadership team at a Fortune 500 company tasked with announcing a major restructuring. We wanted to build in opportunities for employees to ask questions and voice concerns but were constrained by the number of sites involved. So we eventually opted for a two-stage process. First, the executive team used a videoconference to make the announcement to the thousands of employees at all sites. (We used all the principles discussed throughout this chapter when making the “announcement.” For instance, executives discussed the need for the initiative, proposed a remedy, and discussed potential drawbacks.) Second, the

executive team made a commitment to fly to all the sites within the week to review the initiative and answer employee questions face-to-face. In fact, the very expense of this process sent a powerful symbolic message that management cares about effectively communicating with employees.

Message

Effective communicators use many principles in constructing messages, but several are particularly noteworthy at this juncture.

Link messages to the audience's preexisting thinking routines. For example, when leaders at one company discussed the need to reduce costs in the company health care plan, they compared the situation with that of a family managing its personal finances. The leaders oriented their communication around this analogy: "As a parent, what would you do if your children were in the habit of buying clothing from an expensive store and you knew that they could shop elsewhere to get similar clothing less expensively?" Most employees could easily relate to this comparison. This proved particularly persuasive because the audience analysis revealed that most of the employees had teenagers and their leisure activities were oriented around family matters.

Always discuss the upside and downside of the change. Some change leaders oversell the change by only stressing the benefits. However, in the long run, a reasonable discussion of the downside proves useful. Why? Because it provides a more realistic assessment of the change and allows employees to adjust their expectations. Also, communicating the downside is beneficial because employees may be in the perfect position to mitigate or resolve some of the potential problems. Communicating the downside also demonstrates that the change leaders have devoted some time to thoroughly studying the issue. Sharing these concerns builds confidence in the decision-making process and cultivates a climate of trust. As scholars have documented, this approach expedites the process of moving from denial to acceptance and eases the pains of implementation.³⁴

Directly address likely concerns or resistance points. The more nonroutine employees perceive the change, the greater the probability that there will be some resistance (see Figure 10.5). Successful change leaders know this and anticipate the various concerns. And they often offer a point-by-point response to each potential objection. The CEO of a small marketing firm used this approach in announcing a plan to change the marketers' responsibilities. In one part of his speech, he said,

Some of you may be concerned about wages under the new system. This is a legitimate concern. But let me assure you that there will be no wage reductions under this new plan. In fact, our projections show, with the added revenues, your salaries will actually increase. Others of you may be concerned about layoffs. This has never even crossed my mind. In every single change we've

instituted in this company's twenty-year history, we have always ended up adding personnel.

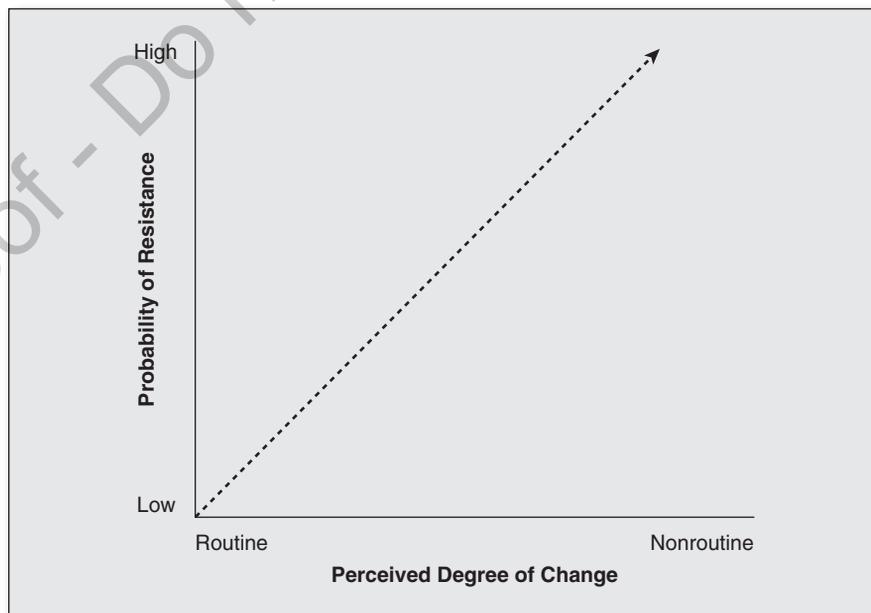
Note that the CEO accomplished three important objectives in this excerpt. First, he identified the potential employee concerns, while legitimizing their anxieties. Second, he categorically denied each one and offered evidence that exactly the opposite would happen. Finally, he provided evidence to back up each of his claims. The speech must have worked because the CEO reported that this was the most smoothly implemented change in the company's history.

In a variation on this theme, some companies issue a "Frequently Asked Questions" document about the initiative and then provide answers to each item. Both approaches counteract resistance and build support for a change.

Remind employees that not "everything" is changing. Employees often panic if they perceive that the "entire world is turning upside down." They may even start behaving like victims. Employees need anchors of stability and a sense of personal control. Mooring or linking the change to the company's established organizational values, customers, or mission statement helps. So does reminding employees that they have sailed in these kinds of waters before. Employees, like sailors, seek inspiration from their past successes.

Publicize initial successes. Change initiators who demonstrate success early in the process persuade others to jump on the bandwagon. It doesn't take much—an

FIGURE 10.5 Probability of Resistance to Change



article in the newsletter, a phone call to a key person, an informal chat in the hall—any little nudge of encouragement. These simple acts signal that the change initiators are building a coalition to institute the change while whispering to the bystanders, “Get on board.”

These principles provide the broad brush strokes for an effective message. But what about the specifics of the message? Our research on communication about a decision, which we term **decision downloading**, provides a glimpse at the answer. Decision downloading involves how decision-makers communicate a decision to those who were not involved in the decision-making process. The communicators cannot, for whatever reason, keep everyone informed in real time about the decision-making process.³⁵ Often, major changes such as mergers or divestitures involve decision downloading. Our research suggests that highly effective decision downloaders craft messages that address the following points:

- What the decision is
- How the decision was made
- Why the decision was made
- What were some of the rejected alternatives to the announced decision
- How the decision fit into the organizational mission and vision
- How the decision affects the organization (**WIFO**—What’s in It for the Organization?)
- How the decision affects the employees (**WIFM**—What’s in It for Me?)

In fact, when the message contains all seven attributes, it doubles the likelihood of employee acceptance. Sadly, this rarely occurs. Often, change leaders fail to discuss the rejected alternatives, thereby missing an opportunity to help employees understand the macro decision-making factors. The other missed opportunity involves properly balancing WIFM and WIFO. Too often, change leaders focus on WIFO, leaving the hallway conversations to devolve into inference-making about WIFM.

A similar approach works with other nonroutine changes. But remember, all seven issues should be addressed. For example, employees always listen to announcements with ears tuned to two channels: (1) WIFM and (2) WIFO. Change leaders often make the mistake of broadcasting only on the WIFO channel. The temptation to do so often increases when they have news to announce that would negatively affect employees. Yet by avoiding the WIFM channel, change initiators undermine their credibility, leading employees to seek out other sources of information. As mentioned above, effective change leaders acknowledge both the upside and the downside of the change while discussing WIFO and WIFM. Why? Because they know that if they don’t shape the messages on the WIFO and WIFM channels, then they will be filled with rumors, prejudices, and fears.

Safety Valves

No matter how persuasively the initiative has been advocated, some employees will have doubts and will voice some concerns regarding parts of the plan. Change

initiators should harvest the dissent, which means proactively soliciting worker concerns in a supportive environment. Silence is decidedly not golden in this case! If management does not harvest the dissent, others will. In one dairy plant, the plant manager announced major policy changes on bulletin boards and in plant-wide meetings. He was perplexed that “nothing [he says] ever gets done.” The reason for this was that he never harvested the dissent—he would not entertain any significant questions on the new policy. This was a perfect opportunity for a few malcontent union workers to harvest the dissent themselves—in a nonconstructive manner—and stymie change efforts.

Therefore, effective change leaders include safety valves in the process and allow employees to express their concerns. Consider this simple but powerful technique: (a) ask employees to voice their concerns in a meeting; (b) record the concerns in a nonevaluative fashion on a flipchart; (c) when all issues have been recorded, lead a discussion or debate on the most important ones; (d) transform the list and discussion into a “Question and Answers” (Q&A) document; and (e) distribute the Q&A document to all employees in a timely manner.

This process limits misunderstandings and creates a vehicle by which employee concerns can be managed. The result: Employees’ concerns are *legitimized*, *depersonalized*, and *de-emotionalized*. So what? This helps move employees out of the denial stage, limits the role of emotion in forming opinions, and encourages thoughtful inquiry. Some change initiators, inspired by their visions, resist this seemingly sloppy, nonlinear technique because it appears to tarnish their idealized vision. In essence, their egos become too entangled with their ideas. Yet wise change leaders do not seek kudos for their vision; rather, they focus on garnering quick and full acceptance of the change.

Timing

Timing may be the least studied and understood facet of effective communication. When making timing decisions, change leaders need to rely on their intuitions and the following guidelines.

Take into account the other initiatives the organization is pursuing at the time. In a deeply insightful article, David Nadler and Michael L. Tushman suggest that

successful long-term changes are characterized by a careful self-discipline that limits the number of themes an organization gives its employees. As a general rule, managers of a change can only initiate and sustain approximately three key themes during any particular period of time. The challenge in this area is to create enough themes to get people truly energized, while limiting the total number of themes. The toughest part is having to decide not to initiate a new program—which by itself has great merit—because of the risk of diluting the other themes.³⁶

These theorists suggest that change leaders might be best advised to delay an important initiative while the organization digests other changes.

Develop a schedule or method so that most employees are informed about the initiative during a similar time frame. Why? It creates an impression of fairness and partially limits destructive grapevine activity. It also signals that everyone has an important role in the change process.

Allow time to harvest and respond to dissent in a meaningful way. Harvesting dissent involves actively soliciting employee concerns about the initiative. Announcing a major initiative on the last day of a workweek or before a major holiday inhibits meaningful dialogue. Employees will naturally want to talk to others in order to make sense of the announcement. (Recall “The Wheel of Interpretation.”) Family members and friends may provide comfort, but they do not have all the facts to engage in meaningful dialogue about the initiative. And these are precisely the people to whom employees will turn on the weekend or during the holidays. Ideally, change leaders create opportunities for discussions about employee concerns the day after a major announcement.

Schedule follow-up communications. These may take the form of small-group meetings, brochures, mass e-mails, or surveys assessing the general organizational climate. Redundancy and repetition facilitate the acceptance process. Moreover, follow-up communications allow for midcourse corrections in the strategy or message. Remember that a single communication event may grab employee attention, but it rarely persuades—just ask any advertiser.

Spokespeople

Who communicates the change may be as important as what they say. Those perceived as more credible (the “lions”) will be more persuasive. Therefore, change initiators need to carefully select who will announce and sponsor the changes. In a medical clinic, we asked all the physicians to be involved in the announcement of an organizational change. They were not all equally skilled presenters. However, demonstrating solidarity among the physicians was more important than oratorical performances. We arranged for the physician with the greatest charisma to begin the presentation. A physician who was very precise and detail oriented explained the actual process and stages of the change. We unexpectedly discovered that this multispeaker approach allowed us to address the rational and emotional components inherent in the change.³⁷ The charismatic physician attended to the emotional concerns, while the others were more adept at responding to the rational issues.

In other strategic situations, different choices might be made. A professor of business strategy at INSEAD, Quy Nguyen Huy, theorized that different types of change require different sorts of change agents.³⁸ An organizational restructuring might require a “commander” as change agent, whereas redesigning work processes might call for an “analyst” as change leader. Likewise, a “teacher” advocate might be suited for communicating about changing the corporate culture, whereas a “facilitator” might be more appropriate for changing social relationships. In sum, effective communication emerges from a sound strategy, but it must be executed by those best suited to the task.

CONCLUSION

Although management often initiates change, only employees can sustain it. From personal experience, I have learned that change advocates often feel as if they are living through a nightmare. They frequently encounter resistance, wild speculation, emotional tension, political gamesmanship, and personal attacks. But skilled change leaders realize that this is all part of the process of creating acceptance. They hasten that process along by thoroughly planning a communication strategy that emerges from the contextual and audience analyses. Then they assist on the tactical level by crafting compelling messages, selecting the proper channels and spokespersons, developing thoughtful timetables, and creating safety valves. Consequently, the obstacles slowly fade into hindsight, as the initiative progresses from one person's vision to *our* collective commitment to the "way it always was" or "should be." What will eventually be seen as inevitable can only begin as an inconceivable dream.³⁹

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"DRILL DOWN" EXERCISES

1. List three typical reasons why change initiators resist "harvesting the dissent." Provide a counterargument to each reason.
2. Describe a situation when change was effectively communicated. Describe another situation when change was ineffectively communicated. What were the major differences between the two situations?
3. Construct a dysfunctional dialogue between two coworkers discussing the company decision to move their office to another city. One employee is at the anger stage and the other at the acceptance stage. Point out the dysfunctions you illustrated in your dialogue. How would you correct them?