

Article

The Six Faulty Assumptions about Change Communications

(Task I.E.9)

This article identifies the six faulty assumptions and practices that limit the effectiveness of change communications. Are these occurring in your organization? If so, try these strategies to correct them.

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In the last decade, leaders have come to realize the importance of good communications during change. Many have come to this realization because of the pain and chaos created in the absence of communication, or when their traditional communications have not worked.

Communications is now an expected component of most change management plans, which is a step in the right direction. However, there is still a long way to go beyond standard communication to create *effective change communications* that can actually drive change in your organization. To produce good change communications, leaders must upgrade their old assumptions and practices. Here are the six most common faulty assumptions leaders (and communications specialists!) make about change communications. Are any of these occurring in your change efforts?

First, leaders often think, “If I just tell people the new direction, they will get on board.” They deliver one-way, tell-oriented communication, which they assume is adequate. With this mindset, they use talking-head presentations or videos, newspaper articles, information-heavy PowerPoint shows, or email blast announcements, and expect these to suffice to get people’s buy-in. But these vehicles alone are not effective. When change impacts people deeply, they need an opportunity to ask questions, go home and think about the message of the communication, talk to their peers to discuss the impacts of it on them, and perhaps ask more questions. Only then will they really integrate and understand the message. Only then will it penetrate their concerns or fears. Communications is not successful because the message was delivered; it is successful only when it is heard, understood, and used. And this requires two-way dialogue.

Secondly, leaders assume that the corporate communications group can handle change communications, since they don’t know that the

two types of communication are different. Most corporate communications almost exclusively rely on one-way communication vehicles such as those named above, and are frequently trained to communicate key messages in “safe” language. Communicating change messages through traditional vehicles, and watering down the urgency or magnitude of change, sends an underlying message that nothing is really changing.

Typically, corporate communications are wired to inform, not engage. If your changes are major, then your communications require—demand!—methods that get people’s attention and engage them in the change dialogue. Corporate communications people are trained to write good copy, but are not skilled in the organization effectiveness approaches that promote employee engagement. Since change communications must engage people, partner your communications with your OD/OE professionals to integrate communications with an employee engagement strategy for the change.

Thirdly, leaders assume that communication is an event... “I already made that announcement, didn’t I?” In reality, it must be treated as a *process* to be effective. Just because you delivered the communication (an event) does not mean that you are done. A communication is complete only when the receiver has integrated, understood, and applied the message. This often requires you to deliver the message multiple times using different vehicles, including face-to-face meetings where people have an opportunity to ask questions and openly wrestle with the impacts of the message. After each communication, follow up with feedback and discussion, supporting people’s level of understanding as well as their emotional reactions. Plan a week or two between face-to-face communication events so people can surface their concerns and have an opportunity to address them during the next meeting. Make sure each event moves the communication process forward.

Fourth, leaders assume that communications can be planned according to a predetermined timeline. But change is so dynamic that you will never know with certainty exactly when you have something valuable to communicate.

Consequently, much of your communications will need to be far more spontaneous than those you have predetermined on your timeline. If your change efforts are complex and transformational in nature, then you will need a change communications person “attached at the hip” to the “roller coaster” of your change. This person must be capable of picking up on the unexpected, sensing people’s fears and concerns, and able to respond quickly to rumors, course corrections, and surprises. Some of your most important communication events will emerge as the dynamics of your change unfold.

Fifth, leaders assume that they should only communicate when they have a decision to announce. During transformational change, more is unknown than is known. In the absence of clarity, what do you do when you don’t have answers, but people are expecting and needing you to communicate? It is far better for you to fill the void than to allow people’s fears and rumors to fill it. Continue to communicate, sharing the questions you are working to answer, the process you are undertaking, the criteria you are using, and then the hoped for timeline when actual answers will be known.

Sixth and last, leaders assume that their “talk” will speak louder than their “walk” (but it never does!) Many leaders communicate one expectation for change to the organization and then continue to behave in the “old state” ways, as if the organization must change, but not them. Talk about sending a change-stopping mixed message! When change is major, leaders’ credibility is built or destroyed based on their ability to demonstrate the new ways in word and action. One of your most powerful communications is when your senior leaders walk the talk of the

new directions themselves, first, and consistently. Then people know the change is real. Remember, leadership behavior is a vital and extremely overt form of communication.

To set your change efforts up for success, make sure that your senior leaders understand the importance of sound, credible, and change-evoking communications. Help them recognize if they hold any of the preceding faulty assumptions or practices, and then provide new ways to communicate that will help drive the success of your efforts. Your investment in good change communications is worth its weight in gold!

About the Authors

Dean Anderson and Linda Ackerman Anderson are the co-founders of Being First, Inc., a results-oriented change leadership development and transformational change consulting firm working with visionary leaders of the Fortune 1000, government, and large non-profit organizations. For twenty-five years, Being First has been assisting executives to maximize their ROI from change, transform their cultures to high performance, and build their organization's change capability. Being First provides a complete change solution, including change strategy development, change methodology and tools, training, coaching, consulting, and hands-on change project support. A Deloitte and Touche research study once named the Being First Change Methodology the most comprehensive in the world.

Mr. Anderson and Ms. Ackerman Anderson are co-authors of two cutting-edge books on change, *Beyond Change Management: Advanced Strategies for Today's Transformational Leaders* and *The Change Leader's Roadmap: How to Navigate Your Organization's Transformation*. They co-author *The Change Management* column for *Workforce Performance Solutions* magazine, as well as the e-newsletter, *Results from Change*, which is distributed to change leaders and consultants worldwide.

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About Being First, Inc.

BEING FIRST, INC. is a highly specialized change leadership development and transformational change consulting firm, serving Fortune 1000 companies, government agencies, non-profit organizations, and change consultants worldwide.

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