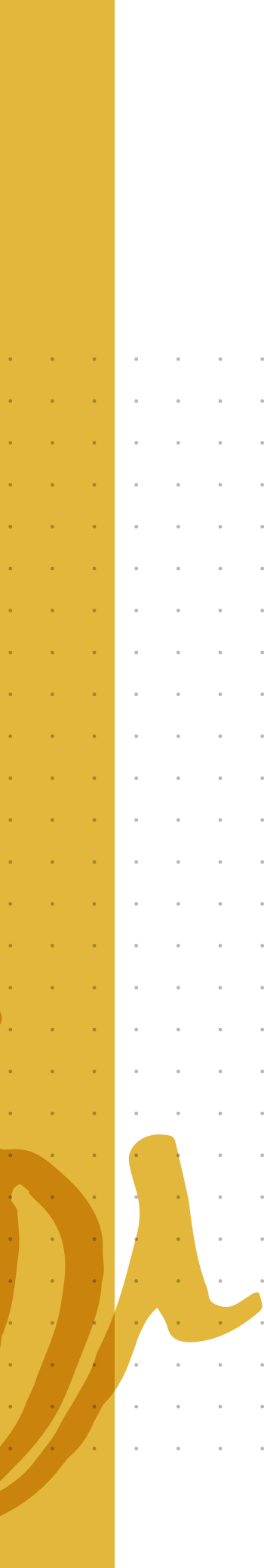# IMPLEMENT ON CHANGE COMMUNICATION

Full impact on your transformations

Traditional top-down communication is not about communication. It is one-way information. And it does not work.

Change communication is not an art form or entertainment. It is a medium of information and communication and of course change management. The mix and match of two proud individual disciplines that combined in perfection create something that can unlock even the most difficult and complex transformations. The missing link between strategy and people. The missing link between management and employees. This little book sums up some of our thoughts and perspectives on change communication. From an academic and practical perspective, embarking on more than 400 projects globally for private and public companies. This is our world. *Welcome.*

THE MISSING LINK IN CHANGE PROGRAMMES
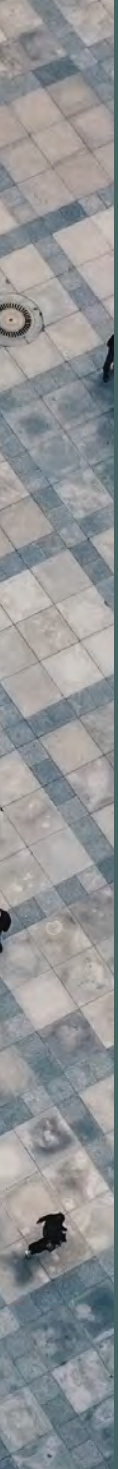
Getting the organisation on board when implementing a new strategy, a new system or new processes continues to be one of management's greatest headaches.

Despite the acknowledgement that communication is key when implementing change, change efforts often fall short due to poorly designed communication. In this article, we offer some common misconceptions about change communication and share seven simple steps for how to have more effective change communication.

Most change initiatives start with the best intentions to improve or optimise one or more aspects of the organisation's everyday operations. The problem is that most initiatives tend to stay like that – an initiative. More than 70% of all change initiatives are considered to fall short in meeting their original intent. Why does change often die with the project that was supposed to foster it?

One overarching constraint is the rare ability to provide clarity and engagement throughout the project. A study conducted by Project Management Institute offers the conclusion that poorly managed communication is to blame in more than 50% of the failed efforts. In contrast, projects with effective communication reach their objectives 80% of the time. Taking into account how vital it is for the success of

businesses to implement changes successfully, it is paradoxical how permissive many people are when managing communication. Effective change communication simply does not happen by accident, and relying only on conveying facts and figures to rationalise the reason for change only creates the illusion that communication has taken place. In truth, this can at best be regarded as information.

While executives often acknowledge the fact that communication is crucial to the success of implementing organisational change, an inconvenient truth continues to haunt change projects. Research depicts that many seem to have been seduced into thinking that they are doing it better than they actually are. As an example, while 62% of executives perceive themselves as succeeding in communicating strategic alignment, only 43% of project managers agree with this self-evaluation.
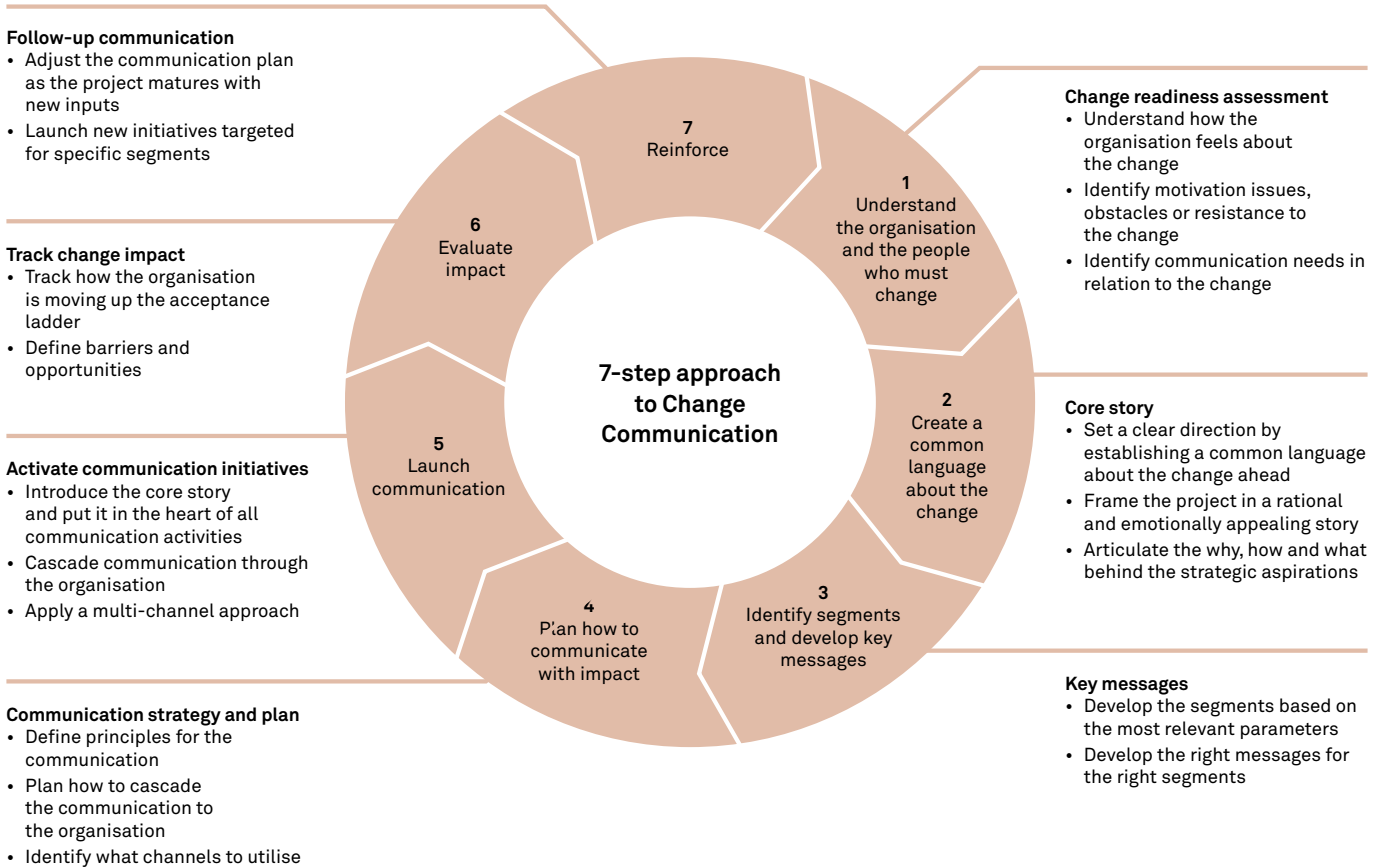
These conclusions point in the same direction. A well-thought-out communication strategy, designed to prepare and engage the organisation in the change from the start increases the odds of success.

Without it, chances are that the desired change which the project was set up to entail is doomed before it ever stood a chance to succeed.

Successfully implementing change initiatives should start with the acknowledgement that, no matter the ambition or the content of the change, it is essentially about people who must do things differently tomorrow than they are doing today. The recipients of the change are always the most influential change driver, as they are, in most instances, those who must change behaviour.

Even though this perception is often shared by management, most projects curiously fall short when it comes to executing change communication. In this article, we touch upon some common misconceptions about change communication, which we have encountered when working with communication in a broad spectrum of change projects. In continuation of this, we offer a simple 7-step approach to how to have better change communication.

Figure: The 7-step approach to change communication

Follow-up communication
- Adjust the communication plan as the project matures with new inputs
- Launch new initiatives targeted for specific segments

Track change impact
- Track how the organisation is moving up the acceptance ladder
- Define barriers and opportunities

Activate communication initiatives
- Introduce the core story and put it in the heart of all communication activities
- Cascade communication through the organisation
- Apply a multi-channel approach

Communication strategy and plan
- Define principles for the communication
- Plan how to cascade the communication to the organisation
- Identify what channels to utilise

7-step approach to Change Communication

7 Reinforce

6 Evaluate impact

5 Launch communication

4 Plan how to communicate with impact

3 Identify segments and develop key messages

2 Create a common language about the change

1 Understand the organisation and the people who must change

Change readiness assessment
- Understand how the organisation feels about the change
- Identify motivation issues, obstacles or resistance to the change
- Identify communication needs in relation to the change

Core story
- Set a clear direction by establishing a common language about the change ahead
- Frame the project in a rational and emotionally appealing story
- Articulate the why, how and what behind the strategic aspirations

Key messages
- Develop the segments based on the most relevant parameters
- Develop the right messages for the right segments

Our employees will support the change because they have to

There is a big difference between accepting a change and supporting it. While silence and obedience are often perceived as support, in most cases it is merely acceptance of the change. This is far from being supportive and motivated to embark on new behaviours. For a change to be successful, it requires vocal and engaged ambassadors who take ownership of the success of the change.

> "FOR A CHANGE TO BE SUCCESSFUL, IT REQUIRES VOCAL AND ENGAGED AMBASSADORS WHO TAKE OWNERSHIP OF THE SUCCESS OF THE CHANGE."

Our employees do not need the big picture

Telling employees half the story and expecting them to buy into it not only jeopardise the credibility of the management. It is almost guaranteed to spark conversations about the things that have not been addressed. In other words, if management does not provide neither the perspective nor the purpose of the change, the employees will make their best attempt to do so themselves.

This automatically leads to guesswork, speculations and numerous uncontrolled stories far from the original intent. When making change happen, it is not in anybody's interest to surround the organisation with mystery and confusion. On the contrary, the purpose and process should be evident and made transparent to limit the fears and manage the expectations of the organisation.

Our employees see the world the same way we do

It is a human trait to project one's own world views onto others, thinking that the counterpart is in perfect agreement with you. Unfortunately, communication in change projects is often no different. If the communication with those who must change does not reflect the reality or perception of the receiver, it will not resonate. Instead, it is likely to be perceived as irrelevant or even alienating. Similar to marketing communication, change communication must also be built on the insights of the target group – in this case the organisation. For unapparent reasons, retrieving insights from the organisation in an attempt to understand their hopes and fears is often neglected. Instead, what leads communication is based on what management considers important rather than the needs of the organisation. If you have ever experienced why change initiatives only remain a priority for management and not as an organisation-wide journey, this is most likely the scenario. Our claim is that all managers will gain valuable input to implementing change with greater impact if they grab the opportunity to scratch the surface of the organisation and understand the emotions that hide beneath it.

If we do not have the answer, we should avoid the conversation

Do you know the type of person who always has the answer to everything? It is rarely a characteristic that builds trust or relationships. On the contrary, it often makes the person seem self-sufficient and supercilious. More importantly, it sends a signal to others that their input or assessment is not important or valued. Imagine how this looks in an organisational setting. When announcing changes, not having all the answers should not be perceived as a weakness. Instead, It is an opportunity to gain trust as it sends a signal of honesty and provides the foundation for dialogue and involving the organisation in providing the answer.

We gave them the facts and figures, so we should be on track

Facts, figures and plans are important in change communication as they lay the foundation for rationally understanding the change. Most people emphasise this in the purpose of the change but neglect the importance of making the facts, figures and plans easy to digest and understand. Rational messages should never stand alone, if the ambition is to mobilise and engage the organisation, as it speaks only to the mind. This is probably the most common mistake we have experienced when doing change projects – underestimating emotions. For management to appeal to the employees' hearts and take into account how all people are motivated by fulfilling a larger purpose is the key ingredient of change communication.

If you recognise one or more of the above, you are not alone. Despite an increasing awareness of the pitfalls of change initiatives and the importance of conducting some degree of change management, too often insight-driven change communication is neglected. Communication often ends up as an ad hoc discipline executed in short bursts when launching the change. Of course, doing something is better than doing nothing. But the occasional ad hoc messages will not get the job done. Often, we encounter the perception that change can be communicated in a one-off launch when introducing a new structure, process or strategy in the organisation. The reason for doing so is not unjustified as this is the moment where the tangible change should occur. However, the foundation for change to happen is laid months before when the organisation is made aware of changes in the horizon. Communicating a shared core story about the change before the change actually occurs is simply paramount to winning people over and setting a common direction. There is no reason to preach about the story. You are not trying to cross a desert.

What is important is that it is provided at the beginning of the project to establish a common language about the change ahead, fuel new conversations and provide the organisation with a clear purpose.

So, if you are on the verge of launching a new change initiative, ask yourself – do you have the organisation on board? If not, feel free to find inspiration in this simple approach to change communi-cation.

As simple as this approach might seem, it stands in stark contrast to how most change programmes are planned. Firstly, because it articulates the phases leading up to communication being rolled out. Secondly, because it considers communication to be a continuous process rather than a tool. This implies that the organisational impact of the messages should always be measured as the project matures and constantly reinforces impact with adjusted communication. Just by understanding communication as a well-planned stream of action, moving the organisa-tion from awareness to engagement and ownership will get you a long way.

"RATIONAL MESSAGES SHOULD NEVER STAND ALONE IF THE AMBITION IS TO MOBILISE AND ENGAGE THE ORGANISATION AS IT SPEAKS ONLY TO THE MIND."
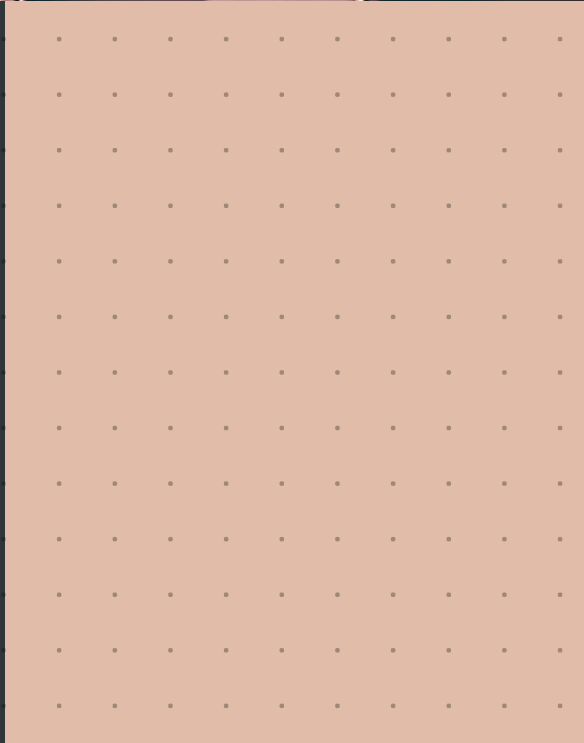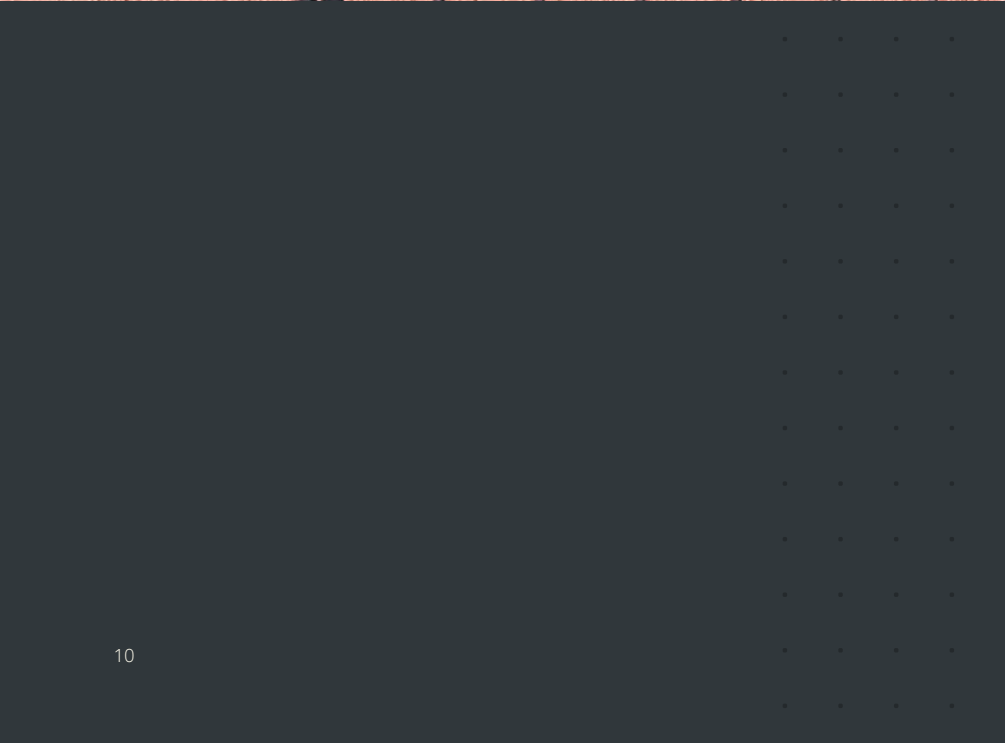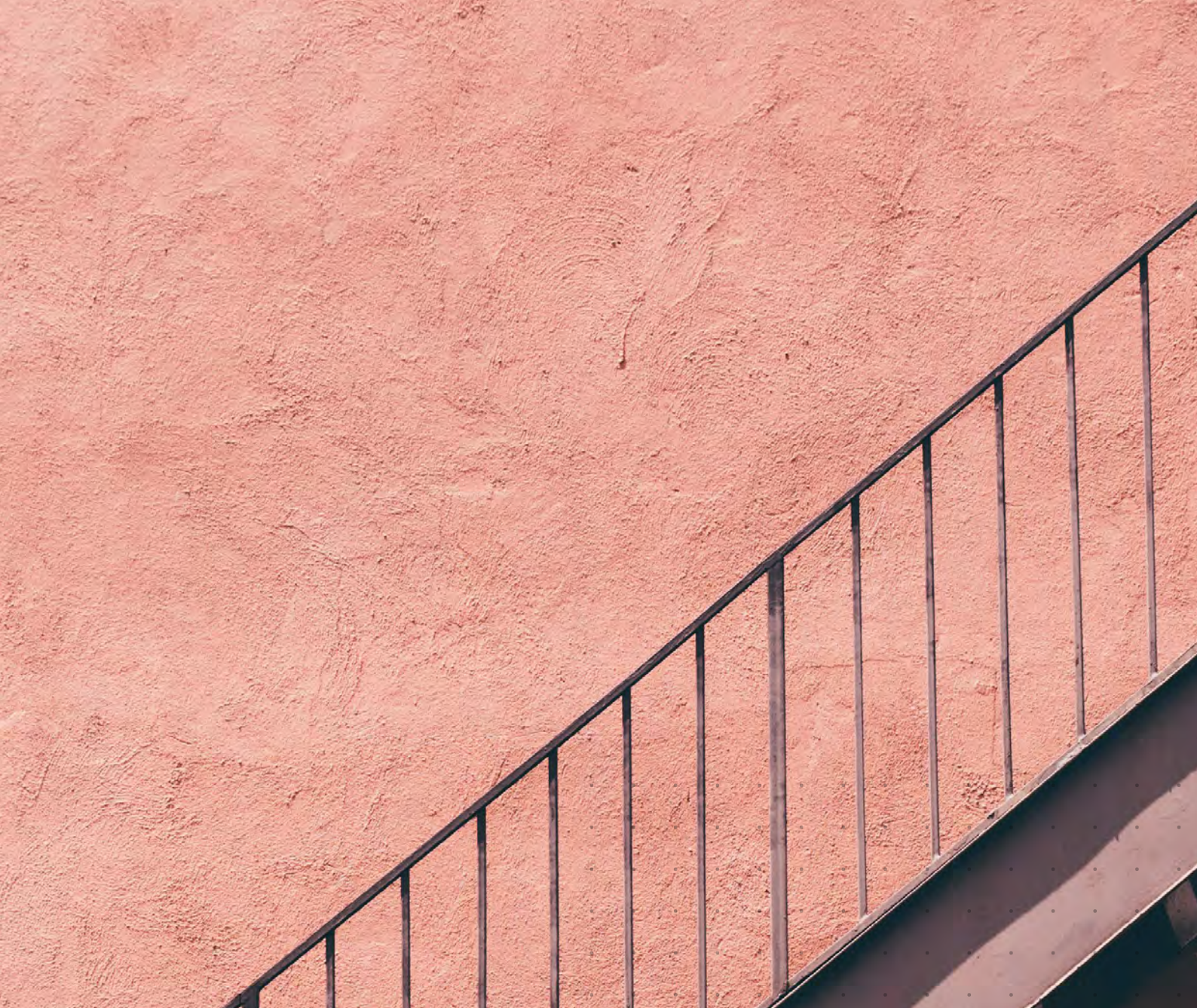
AN INVITATION TO THINK DIFFERENTLY

To succeed with change, you need to build a clear link between the strategic rationale behind the change and the personal motivators of those who need to adapt to the change. This means communicating a clear and explicit message – and this is where change communication enters the scene.

Generally, when organisations talk about implementation, they are referring to the very last phase of a project. This is the phase where the implementation is to install a change: a new strategy, a new and much better IT system or even a new KPI structure. Here, the focus is on the handover from top management to line managers who are expected to accept the subsequent responsibility for the implementation. There is only one problem. It will probably not work.

From studies, we know that poorly managed communication is behind more than 50% of all failing change efforts. In our experience, there is a fundamental reason for this depressing number. We often fail to bridge the mental gap between the management who pushes the change and the employees who are asked to adapt to the change.

The things that seem obvious and exciting to management will often be perceived with scepticism and resistance by the employees who we ask to step out of their comfort zone and change their old work routines.

We need to close the gap between management and employees by communicating what is missing. We need to communicate a clear link between the strategic rationale behind the change and the personal motivators of the employees.

If you try to please everyone, you will end up pleasing no one

The way we communicate in organisations reflects the corporate culture. Sadly, for many corporates, collective behaviour and communication are often driven by conservative thinking.

Most organisations have numerous constituencies that they need to please or keep on their side: employees, managers, departments and many more. When the organisation broadcasts anything, the amendment and approval process is, in effect, a test: will this communication offend one of our many stakeholders? When one is that cautious, one's message is honed to be as safe and sterile as possible – and while this results in a message that is unlikely to offend, it is equally unlikely to mobilise or engage.

To succeed with a message, you need courage and a firm understanding of the difference between communication that inspires and information that is just stating the obvious in the most conservative thinking. When everybody goes zig, it might be the best idea that you go zag.

Five simple tips and tricks to successful change communication

We are bombarded with thousands of messages everyday – and often without us even noticing. If you start thinking differently and use change communication, you will be able to cut through the clutter, make your messages hit their target and thus change people's behaviour.

Here are our five tips and tricks:

1. Start from the top

As with any change, you need a buy-in from the top management to succeed with change communication. Remember, courageous communication is a matter of corporate culture. And you can only establish the right promoting culture with the top management on board.

2. Take a stand

While taking a stand is often tied to political communication, you can also use it for internal change communication. When you want your key messages to do their job, it is crucial that you give your audience a clear viewpoint. Many articles on the intranet have the taste of a Reuters news flash. They are neutral reports doing their chronicler duty. Try to give your messages the flavour of an opinion or debate article instead.

3. Choose and pick

We often tend to put everything we know into a piece of communication, especially if it is an important one. We want to say everything there is to say about a certain topic. As much as this is understandable, it tends to overload recipients with information and thus obscures their view on what is really important. In that sense, when we do change communication it is pretty much like when we do strategy – it is all about making choices. In strategy, organisations need to make a choice of where they want to go and who they want to be (e.g. either cost OR price leader). When we do courageous change communication, this is no different. You must choose your core message and go with it.

FIVE PRINCIPLES TO ENSURE PROFITABLE CHANGE COMMUNICATION

Change communication is key when implementing change with impact in organisations. Nevertheless, communication too often is added as a last-minute varnish when implementing a new strategy, a new process or a new system. After having worked with change communication for years, these are our reflections on and free-to-use principles of how to design communication with impact in organisations.

How do you explain a capsized strategy or a failed transformation of your business? Was the strategy process handled in the wrong way? Was it due to insufficient data or maybe a poorly conducted analysis? Was it lack of commitment in the execution phase? No matter what, please ask yourself this: what was done to win support and create engagement in the organisation? It's a simple question, and it might also sound a bit "soft" when planning a new corporate strategy or a major organisational change. But here's a fact: only 33% of change-related strategy projects are considered to have been implemented with success. Why is that?

According to the Project Management Institute, poor communication is the primary reason why 56% of projects fail. Other research shows that the gap between the management's strategy and visions and the reality of the organisation that is about to change is the weak spot. For example, 55% of the executives asked say that their organisation does not focus on strategy execution, and 42% say that their organisation does not understand or even resist the strategy. These conclusions give us a hint as to why strategic changes often fail or fall short when it comes to delivering impact and thereby profitable change in organisations.

"ONLY 33% OF CHANGE-RELATED STRATEGY PROJECTS ARE CONSIDERED TO HAVE BEEN IMPLEMENTED WITH SUCCESS. WHY IS THAT?"

We wish to pass on some fundamental principles that we have learnt from working with communication in change projects for many years. We do not claim that these principles alone will do the job: but in our experience they are valuable cornerstones of working with change communication.

Before we introduce the principles, an important and fundamental distinction has to be made.

Information vs. communication

Information and communication are not the same, but effective change communication needs to balance the two. Information is a one-way street, which is typically formal in its tone and appeals to people's rationality by comprising facts, KPIs, plans and roadmaps. Communication, on the other hand, takes the form of storytelling that puts things into perspective, creates sense-making and starts meaningful conversations. Communication has a more emotional appeal, and working in this field, we strongly believe that when it comes to organisational change, this form of appeal is more effective than logic and executive ethos.

Most projects contain plenty of information due to the fact that most of them are full of numbers, checklists and plans. Strategy is pushed out by managers at meetings and in presentations and emails. This is not the way to win people over because there is a total absence of willingness to involve and engage people and start conversations. Often, projects completely lack communication.

With this distinction in place, here are our reflections on and free-to-use principles of how to conduct communication with impact in organisations:

Build a common ground

If you have the intention of leading a group and making them walk the same path, you must create a common starting point, language and sense of urgency to move in the same direction. Do not be biblical about this image. You do not need to cross a desert. You need to be specific, acknowledging, receptive and involving.

Make it simple and be honest

Strategy and organisational change can be complex, but communication cannot. Simple and concise messaging eliminates all nonsense and amplifies your credibility. Equip your audience with a language and arguments that are easy to use in conversations.

Be authentic to win people's hearts

Management and employees are made of the same flesh and blood. So don't rush into your comfort zone equipped with charts, facts and management jargon. Be human to human beings and think about what wins you over. We have come to the realisation that winning people over involves a fine balance between rationality and emotions. Especially in terms of internal communication, we believe that emotions are the most prevalent form of appeal.

"Kill your darlings" – and sharpen your messages

Use your insight and test your messages. But let us be honest. Sometimes you do not hit the bull's-eye. Do not waste your time on trying to explain why the message went wrong. Change it, sharpen it and repeat it. Kill your darlings and go with what actually works. You will experience that it is not numbers but conversations and observations that will get you to the root of the problem.

Keep the communication alive

If a strategy is to "fly", even after a large presentation, you need to bolster it and provide wind under its wings.

This already starts before the presentation through involvement, but do not rest on your laurels. Keep the communication alive and do engagement projects, even after the presentation. This is where real change happens. This is the tip of the iceberg approach to our principles of change communications. No two companies are the same, but we see similarities in group synergies among employees.

Notes and references

1. The Project Management Institute (PMI), Pulse of the Profession 2013

2. PwC, 2014

3. PwC, 2014

CHANGING HABITS

Change communication is about involving the organisation, creating engagement and offering insights.

The challenge is often the same

A new strategy has been completed based on an extensive analysis, and a thorough plan for implementing the strategy has been developed. There is a clear communication strategy, a bold core story and a long list of supporting communication elements for the various stakeholder segments. A wide range of workshops, train-the-trainer sessions, "town hall" meetings, intranet posts and video interviews with the management and change agents are in place. Everything is seemingly done by the book.

Over the next four to six months, the strategy is implemented, and at first it looks like a successful implementation. Everybody is aware of the new strategy, and most of the organisation can list the strategic priorities in their sleep. But as the months go by, actual change is almost invisible, and it becomes clear that the implementation is not as successful as first anticipated. So what has gone wrong despite the relentless planning and preparation? Why does the implementation of the new strategy not lead to the expected changes? Why does it not manifest in the behaviour of the organisation?

Often, the absence of change will be explained by change resistance in the organisation, and that might very well be the explanation in many cases. But there is also another plausible explanation that seems to be overlooked when trying to make out a capsized strategy implementation.

It is unarguable that strategic change most often requires engagement from everyone in the organisation, but somehow this conviction has led to a focus on change resistance that overshadows the possibility of other aspects that are perhaps even more important to focus on to achieve a successful strategy implementation.

The study concludes that optimising the organisation's strengths is more effective than pointing to resistance when building engagement and driving organisational change. More concretely, it argues that the management, in order to optimise the implementation of a new strategy, should prioritise to focus on the habits that need to change in order for the new strategy to be implemented and changes to happen.

According to a study on the neuroscience-based learning process (Ellington and McFadden, 2013), a process for working with changing habits consists of the following phases:

> **"A STUDY SHOWS THAT THE CHANCE OF CREATING ENGAGEMENT INCREASES BY UP TO 73% IF MANAGEMENT FOCUSES ON EMPLOYEE STRENGTHS, AND THAT THEY CAN POTENTIALLY STRENGTHEN AN ENTIRE ORGANISATION'S OVERALL ENGAGEMENT AND PRODUCTIVITY."**

Rath and Conchie, 2008
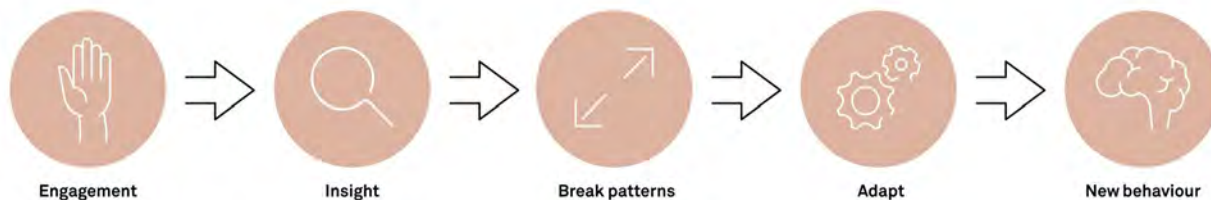
A process for working with changing habits consists of these five phases

Create engagement

The foundation for helping others to change unwanted habits is a state of engagement, also known as a "toward" state. The "toward" state sets the stage for reflection on what is getting in the way, making new connections and accessing novel solutions to problems. This is about making the people in the organisation actually want the change and making them reflect on what they need to change to support this.

Offer insights

Helping people hear those quiet signals referred to as "aha" moments is at the heart of personal learning and innovation. This is very different from telling someone what to do or giving them advice, which can induce a threat state and create unnecessary noise in the brain.

In order to make people desire the change, they need to feel it. Something has to shift in their heart and/or mind to fuel the effort it takes to change for good. Providing insights that ignite new perspectives can do just this.

Break unwanted patterns

Insights are not very useful unless action is taken. A leader helps others to hold their attention on new ways of thinking and being by taking new and timely action. However, breaking unwanted patterns of behaviour does not require big action. Small steps can just as easily form new habits. Therefore, the unwanted patterns should be broken down into manageable steps that are easier to effectuate. This should be accompanied by a focus on small successful experiences to drive motivation.

Evaluate and adapt strengths

Ongoing follow-up to identify and acknowledge the learning that comes from taking action is essential for tracking progress and ensuring self-accountability. New action that follows insight provides opportunity for learning, which leads to more reflection and additional insights.

Establish new behaviour

New habits of behaviour need reinforcement for sustainable change to occur. The persistence of continuous and repeated attention to the desired change strengthens the hard-wiring of newly created habits. The process is worth following when implementing a new strategy because the alternative is sadly unpromising.

In general, only 33% of change-related strategy projects are considered to have been implemented successfully. And according to the Project Management Institute, poor communication is the primary reason why 56% of projects fail. Other research shows that the gap between the management's strategy and visions and the reality of the organisation that is about to change are the weak spots. For example, a survey showed that 55% of executives say that their organisation does not focus on strategy implementation, and 42% say that their organisation does not understand or even resist the strategy.

So to return to our opening message: think about how strategy implementation in general is stuck on repeat. For many years, we have not changed much. Sometimes, the implementation of a change has been planned and effected more ambitiously than at other times – but not much has really changed at all. Do not rely on big PowerPoint presentations to communicate the strategy without any involvement in and reflection on the expected change in behaviour. Consider whether the "new" change is truly clear to everyone. Do people understand it? Do they trust you? Do they feel it? And do they want to change habits to secure REAL change?

FACING
A TRUTH THAT
MAY HURT

All too often, we think that great communication will change attitudes. Just think about strategy implementations in a private or public organisation. While management often acknowledges that communication is crucial to the success of implementing organisational change, an inconvenient truth continues to haunt change projects.

Great communication will not change attitudes – but behaviour will

Your odds of a successful implementation of change will surely increase if you have a well thought out communication plan designed to prepare and engage your organisation in the change from the point of departure. Without the plan, chances are that the desired change the project was set up to entail is doomed before it ever stood a chance to succeed.

However, the inconvenient truth is that no matter how effectively you have designed your communication plan, it will never change how employees behave. It is a fallacious objective.

Therefore, beware of believing that you can change behaviour by first changing attitudes. Because the fact is that **attitudes tend to be the result of behaviour – not the cause of it.**

Communication plays a vital role – but after a change initiative is released

Back in 1957, psychologist Leon Festinger showed how people justify their actions by changing their beliefs (A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*). In the context of strategy implementation, change communication plays a vital role by reinforcing a new pattern of attitudes **after** a new strategy is re-leased.

We know that good communication creates a buzz. It starts conversations, and it filters into our workplace and life. And as humans, we are curious. We start to wonder and discuss with colleagues and even more colleagues about the things communicated: How did they perceive the communication? Did they understand the changes in the new strategy as you yourself did?

And here is an important point: conversations influence how we think and thus influence our behaviour. Suddenly, we start to have conversations we otherwise normally would not have. We are discussing back and forth on the new strategy and the implications of what will
be required of everyone in the organisation
to realise the new strategy. This conversational behaviour itself will lead to a pattern of new attitudes – be it pro or against the new strategy. In other words: the implementation has started.

Changing habits to achieve a successful strategy implementation

Unarguably, change most often requires engagement from everyone in the organisation, but somehow this conviction has led to an overshadowing focus on change resistance when implementing strategies,
removing focus from other possible aspects that might be even more important when seeking to achieve a successful strategy implementation.

"A STUDY SHOWS THAT THE CHANCE OF CREATING ENGAGEMENT RISES BY UP TO 73% IF MANAGEMENT FOCUSES ON EMPLOYEE STRENGTHS, AND THAT THEY CAN POTENTIALLY STRENGTHEN AN ENTIRE ORGANISATION'S OVERALL ENGAGEMENT AND PRODUCTIVITY.

Rath & Conchie, 2008

The study concludes that when building engagement and driving organisational change, it is more effective to optimise the organisation's strengths than to point to resistance. More concretely, the study argues that in order to optimise the implementation of a new strategy, **the management should prioritise to focus on the habits that need to change** in order for the new strategy to be implemented and changes to happen.

According to a study on the neuroscience-based learning process (Ellington & McFadden, 2013*), you can work with changing habits through a process that consists of the following five phases:

A process for working with changing habits consists of these five phases

Engagement → Insight → Break patterns → Adapt → New behaviour
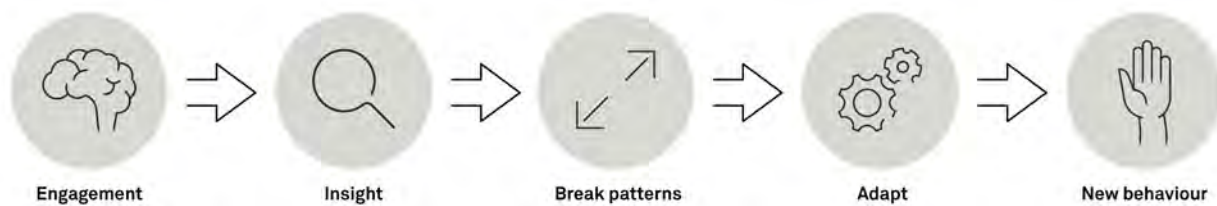
Create engagement

Creating a state of engagement is the foundation for helping others to change unwanted habits. This state of engagement is also known as a "toward" state. The "toward" state sets the stage for reflection on what is getting in the way, making new connections and accessing novel solutions to problems.

This phase is about making the people in the organisation actually want the change and making them reflect on what they need to change to support this.

Offer insights

Offering insights is about helping people hear those quiet signals referred to as "aha" moments. This is at the heart of personal learning and innovation. It is very different from telling someone what to do or giving them advice, which can induce a threat state and create unnecessary noise in the brain.

People need to feel the change in order to start desiring it. Something has to shift in their heart and/or mind to fuel the effort it takes to change for good. Providing insights that ignite new perspectives can do just this.

Break unwanted patterns

Without actions taken, insights are not very useful. A leader helps others to hold their attention on new ways of thinking and being by taking new and timely action. However, breaking unwanted patterns of behaviour does not require big action. Small steps can just as easily form new habits.

Therefore, you should break down the unwanted patterns into manageable steps that are easier to effectuate – accompanied by a focus on small successful experiences to drive motivation.

Evaluate and adapt strengths

To track progress and ensure self-accountability, it is essential that you do ongoing follow-up to identify and acknowledge the learning that comes from taking action. New action that follows insight provides opportunity for learning, which leads to more reflection and additional insights.

Establish new behaviour

For sustainable change to occur, you need to reinforce the new habits of behaviour. You must be persistent, giving continuous and repeated attention to the desired change as this strengthens the hard-wiring of the newly created habits. Therefore, when you implement a new strategy, it is worth following the process because, sadly, not doing so is unpromising.

Sources

*Festinger, L. (1957): A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance, Stanford University Press, CA: Stanford.

* Ellington, L. & McFadden, P. (2013). "The Neuroscience of Leading Change by Creating New Habits". Retrieved 2 August 2016 from: http://www.neuro-leader.us/2013/07/02/how-to-lead-change-by-creating-newhabits

This article is an alteration/refined version of an article from 2017. During the intervening time, the thoughts of the original article have been further developed. You can find the original article here:

https://implementconsultinggroup.com/change-communication-is-also-about-changing-habits/

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD AND IMPLEMENT HAVE SOMETHING IN COMMON

Every project and every development start with communication. A purpose, a process and competences. Not to mention the actual implementation. Communication is in everything. Communication inspires and creates direction, and experience shows that the more complicated the project, the greater the need for change communication.

Just think of IT projects. Often developed by very few people with a specific technical insight and with great or small impact for an entire organisation/company. The implications are significant, and the effect often fails to materialise. Why?

In 2016, Implement and the University of Oxford initiated a collaboration with the aim of analysing large IT projects. An academic collaboration to describe and find the common denominators for success and failure that occur again and again in every project. In all of Europe.

The background of the Oxford study:

- Data from more than 150 IT projects

- More than 1,800 academic articles about change collected and analysed

- More than 200 interviews conducted

- Analysis based on more than 9,000 data points

- Workshops with more than 250 IT project managers

The work was based on the known myths and theories about change and, therefore, dealt with the seven well-known elements to creating change with impact. There must be a *structured approach* to change, a need for *clear purpose* for the change, management must take *ownership of the project*, significantly *build trust*, early involvement of *users*, effective and relevant *communication* must be established, and *training* must be agile and effective.

Three years and 150 IT projects later, the results of the research are clear. The seven previously listed elements in managing a successful change were examined in the study, partly for importance and relevance and partly measured relatively in terms of effect in relation to each other. And the result was surprising.
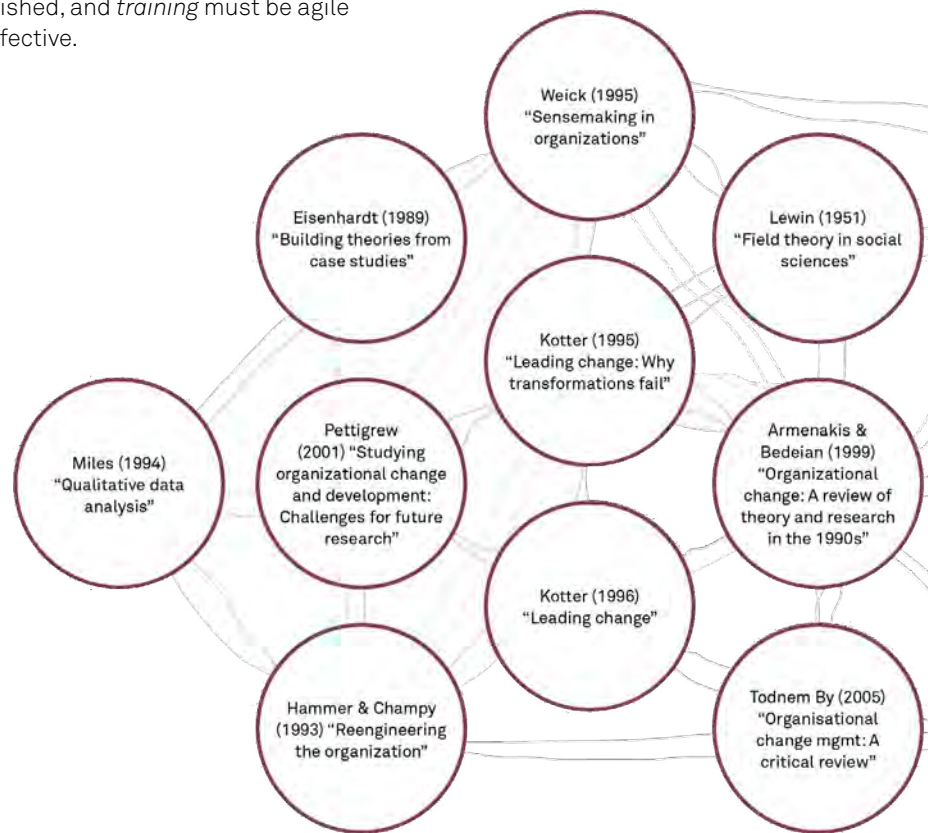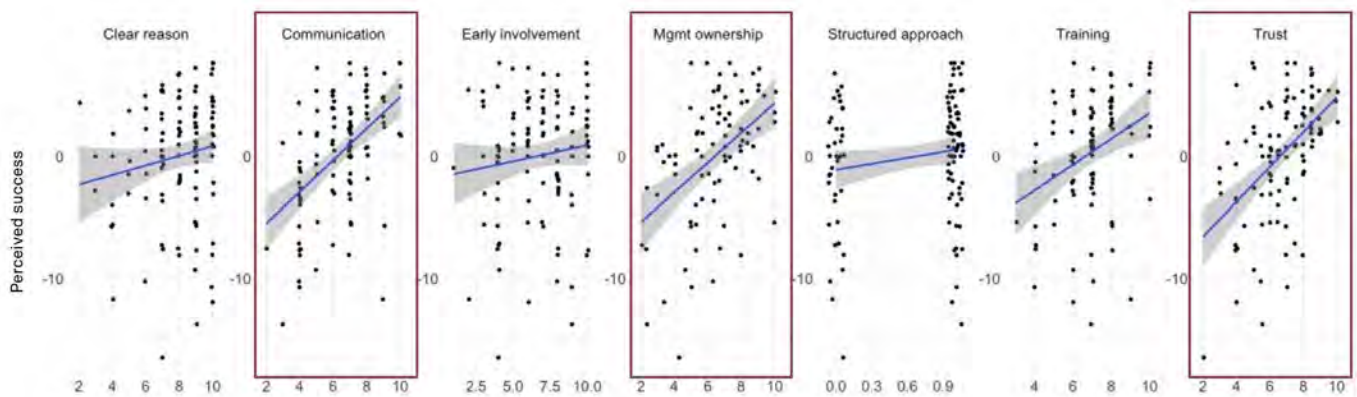

Figure: **Meet the famous figures in change management**

Clear reason · Communication · Early involvement · Mgmt ownership · Structured approach · Training · Trust

All seven theories are related to the effect and success of change, but three stand out statistically from the others.

The starting point of this article is change communication, and we will, therefore, refrain from commenting further on the study's two other focus areas: *management's ownership* and the ability to *build trust* to ensure success.

The study answers three crucial questions about communication:

1. What is effective communication?

2. How do we start a dialogue with end-users?

3. Who should be the primary sender of communication?

Overall, we can establish that effective communication follows the IT project's plan, is dialogue-oriented and targeted towards end -users. This sounds simple, but in reality it is quite complicated. For example, the study shows that user forums and feedback sessions are the most effective forms of communication, while regular user surveys and meetings are the least effective.

Furthermore, the study provides answers as to which sender group the end-users immediately trust the most, and here, the answer is clear-cut: it is not top management.

The two sender groups that are in a class for themselves as the most confidence-inspiring and effective are direct leadership – in other words, the manager that is closest to the individual end-user/employee – and the communications people who work with the project's communication. And one of the study's largest dilemmas is here, as far from all of the 150 IT projects that were part of the study actually had set aside resources for project communication.

The conclusions from the Oxford study are completely new and will undoubtedly have a major impact on the focus of prioritisation in future IT projects and theories and myths behind change management.

We already work with this at Implement, and the question is whether the results of the study can be carried forward to other projects that do not have IT as a focal point.

At Implement, we are convinced that the known change management theories will continue to apply, not only within IT projects, but within all project categories. The fact that the Oxford study highlights change communication as one of the three crucial elements only serves as a pleasant piece of information for all communicators that do not only work with internal communication but are focussed on project communication. Clever change communication can change (almost) everything. Even impact in IT projects.

Armenakis et al. (1993) "Creating readiness for organizational change"

Piderit (2000) "Rethinking resistance and recognizing ambivalence"

Herscovitch & Meyer (2002) "Commitment to organizational change"

Podsakoff (2003) "Common method biases in behavioral research"

Beer & Nohria (2000) "Cracking the code of change"

WHERE IS THE FUN?

Why humour is an underrated tool in change communication

From a risk/reward perspective, there is a huge upside to using humour in change communication. However, it needs to be used carefully and in moderate quantities. Here, we will dive into a few guidelines which will increase your odds of striking the right balance between eliciting a chuckle and going down in flames.

"A PRIEST, A RABBI AND A NUN WALK INTO A BAR, AND THE BARTENDER SAYS: 'WHAT IS THIS, A JOKE?"

You might consider it a bit misplaced with such an intro to an article about change communication in a corporate environment. After all, we are professionals here, right? This is not the place to fool around. Actually, you'd be more right than you think. Because when it comes to corporate communication, humour is criminally underutilised. Many organisations and leaders shy away from using humour in their internal communication. They avoid it for fear of insulting someone or appearing unprofessional. Some leaders also harbour a concern that the use of humour could be perceived as neglecting the impact a certain change will have on their teams.

It goes without saying that humour, like pepper, is an ingredient to be used carefully and in moderate quantities.

Not all projects are born to elicit laughter. But then again, not all projects are born to be communicated as if they were tax audits or re-enactments of a script that we have seen a thousand times before.

For reasons detailed below, humour has a huge upside from a risk/reward perspective.

Humour creates a safe space

First of all, research shows that humour can create a safe space. When we use humour to introduce an IT implementation, a new strategy or new ways of working, we defuse the tensions that might be associated with it. Whether a demanding change project or a personal conflict, using humour can help you reframe the process in a positive way and open the door for employees to participate constructively.

"PEOPLE WHO LAUGH IN RESPONSE TO A CONFLICT TEND TO SHIFT FROM CONVERGENT THINKING WHERE THEY CAN SEE ONLY ONE SOLUTION TO DIVERGENT THINKING WHERE MULTIPLE IDEAS ARE CONSIDERED."

- Michael Kerr, Humor at Work[1]

An additional benefit of incorporating humour in your communication is that it contributes to making it legitimate to ask questions which employees might otherwise avoid for fear of appearing ignorant. If the leader or "the project" is the first to admit to not having all the answers or to struggling with consultant-driven buzzwords, then it is also ok for employees to wonder. On a deeper level, this builds credibility around the project and trust in the leaders who front it.

Laughing helps you remember

Secondly, a common misconception in corporate communication is the notion that facts and figures tell the story when we know that in fact it is *the story* that tells the story. As human beings, we make sense of information by organising it in narratives. In the struggle for our brains' attention, factual statements are like smoke rings – we might notice them momentarily, but they quickly fade.

Rather, one thing that helps us remember a story is humour. When we are amused by something, dopamine hormones are released in our brains, which gives us an emotional sense of connectedness and positivity.[2] The emotional reaction stands out in our memory and helps us remember messages a lot better than those rational arguments about increased productivity, competitive advantages and agile decision-making.

Humour is team building

Finally, using humour in how you frame and communicate around your project can pave the way for a sense of community and collaborative spirit.

Having a great sense of humour is one of the traits we value most in humans. Studies show that the same is true when employees are asked what they find to be the most desirable trait in leaders.[3] And the author of this article will argue that the same holds true for projects in the sense that humour creates an environment that you like to be associated with and contribute to.

Humour creates a bond. It is a shared experience. A feeling that we have something together which is unique and honest. Like winking at each other across the hall. Leveraged in the right way, this is a powerful driver in motivating people to adopt new behaviour.

Of course, all of the above hinges upon your ability to communicate in a way that makes people laugh rather than cringe. Applying humour to your messaging does not in itself guarantee that it has the desired effect. We all know the guy at the dinner party who tries a bit too hard and ends up leaving an awkward impression.

Five ways to use humour effectively

Like love, there is no exact recipe for humour. Not even in the corporate world. Any comedian will tell you that a good joke is as much about timing as it is about content. But there are a few guidelines which will increase your odds of striking the right balance between eliciting a chuckle and going down in flames.

1. Keep the balance
There is something liberating and disarming in being able to laugh about something that can appear intimidating. But as a communication tool, humour can never stand alone.

There is a fine line between taking the lid off anxiety and skating over the necessary conversations. Therefore, always make sure you supply your organisation with solid information about the changes taking place as a counterweight to the light-hearted elements.

2. Call out the elephant in the room
With every change, there is anxiety in some shape or form. Maybe new skills are required, new team dynamics appear, or change fatigue has set in. These are all insights that can serve as powerful sources of humour and irony. You are better off addressing these barriers than ignoring them. And doing it with a tongue-in-cheek approach should help defuse some of the tension. In their book The Humor Code, Peter McGraw and Joel Warner refer to this concept of balancing something that is "wrong or unsettling" with something that at the same time feels "safe and acceptable" as "benign violation".[4]

3. Poke fun at the clichés
The corporate world is riddled with clichés, arcane rituals and theatrical gestures. Consider the notion that management always holds all the answers. Even if we like to think so, this is rarely the case. In their book Humor, Seriously, Stanford professors Jennifer Aaker and Naomi Bagdonas use the example of former Twitter CEO Dick Costolo who always had a team member accompany him on stage when presenting the latest strategy. The role of the team member was basically to comment and poke fun at the CEO in front of the crowd to remove any air of pomp and self-importance.

4. Laugh with your audience, not at them
Granted, it is the oldest piece of advice in the book, but it bears repeating. Because calling out elephants and clichés is more like precision surgery than chopping meat – the fine nuances make all the difference. Take care to position any humour in a way that does not make fun of people's feelings but rather channels the jabs towards the corporate idiosyncrasies we all recognise. One way to do this is by introducing a character that personifies the change – the insolent consultant or the artsy film-maker.

5. Never punch down
And building on the point above, make sure to never "punch down" when you parody a situation or a group of people. To facilitate the psychological safety and sense of togetherness, you must work to humanise those in power. Consider having members of leadership explain certain terminology or strategic objectives associated with the change they want to implement and then create a highlight reel of the many awkward silences and inevitable slips of the tongue. If you use this at the beginning of a project, it can be an incredibly efficient way to position the change as something that is difficult for everyone involved and position leadership as self-reflective and empathetic.

And remember, it takes courage to apply humour in an environment that is traditionally buttoned up. However, you can find comfort in the fact that even somewhat clumsy attempts at humour – also known as "dad jokes" – are proven to have a positive effect on your audience.[5]

So start considering humour a serious member of your change communication toolbox. No shame in your project being the laughing stock of the organisation.

By the way, what happened to all the cyber security consultants? They ransomware.

Sources

[1] 10 Reasons Why Humor is a Key To Success at Work, Jacquelyn Smith, Forbes, 2013

[2] Humor, Seriously: Why Humor Is a Secret Weapon in Business and Life, Jennifer Aaker and Naomi Bagdonas, 2021

[3] 10 Reasons Why Humor is a Key To Success at Work, Jacquelyn Smith, Forbes, 2013

[4] The Humor Code: A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny, Peter McGraw and Joel Warner

[5] Humor, Seriously: Why Humor Is a Secret Weapon in Business and Life, Jennifer Aaker and Naomi Bagdonas, 2021

CLARITY
IN CRISIS

How to get your message across while also making sure employees feel reassured

COVID-19 has brought a lot of confusion and uncertainty, and when everything is in flux, we often forget even the most basic communication skills. We have gathered some insights and practical guidance on crisis communication to help you and your organisation navigate uncertainty.

From reactive to proactive measures

Crisis communication reinforces the rules of normal communication – being in tune with your audience. Crises are governed by emotions, so crisis communication is all about empathy and putting yourself in your audience's shoes. This means moving away from reactive thinking and transitioning to proactive thinking. The more proactive you are, the more capacity you have to think ahead and envision your audience's concerns. This requires firm rules and structures around how you communicate.

1. Use simple messaging

In a time of crisis, our mental capacity decreases – the mind is preoccupied, and we are in a state of fear. We are not able to digest or focus on a lot of information at once, and we have a tendency to read our fears and worries between the lines. We can mitigate this by keeping messaging short and simple. Aim for one key message per communication. Present this key message first and then elaborate on it and provide more details.

2. Establish a fixed rhythm of communication

Signalling credibility and structure is key to reassuring people in times of confusion. Set up a structure so people in your organisation know when they can expect information and updates. Ensure a clear understanding of who communicates what and when and remember to create space for informal touchpoints and two-way channels of communication. Creating a weekly communication plan can help ensure fixed and structured communication.

Figure: **Example of a weekly communication plan**

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Weekly video conference update from CEO	Daily team check-ins	Daily team check-ins	Daily team check-ins	Daily team check-ins
Follow-up email with key points and actions	One-to-one meetings	Alignment call with managers	One-to-one meetings	One-to-one meetings
Alignment call with managers		Informal team lunch meeting		Informal team lunch meeting
Informal team lunch meeting	Other meetings		Other meetings	Other meetings
Daily team check-ins		Other meetings		
Other meetings				Email from CEO

3. Use a consistent structure

A consistent communication structure will help your audience focus on what is important. Use a template or a recognisable format. Colour coding by message or theme could also be helpful for the audience, for example using different colour codes for health, commercial or financial updates or different colour codes for information updates and updates that require action.

4. Repeat the key message

We need to be exposed to a key message several times before remembering it – especially in a time of crisis when there is a lot of noise. Do not fall into the trap of believing people have understood your message just because you told them once. Make sure to revisit your message and conclusions by using different channels of communication. Encouraging questions also means you have an opportunity to repeat and add nuances to your key message.

5. Balanced communication

People's anxiety often manifests itself as a desire to want more information, but this is often counterproductive. When the crisis erupts, we need to keep people informed about developments and what the business is doing to keep on top of things. But as time goes on, crisis-related content should be scaled down, and business-related content should be scaled back up. This balanced communication gives your audience reassurance that we are transitioning back to a state of normality.

Navigate the crisis with clarity

When communicating during the COVID-19 crisis, it is important to think proactively, keep your messaging short and communicate consistently at fixed intervals. If you can use the crisis as an opportunity to strengthen your corporate culture and exemplify your organisation as truly people-oriented, your employees and the organisation as a whole will emerge from the crisis with even more resilience.

Figure: Always follow up on critical communication

if you ...		then ...
Introduce a key message at the beginning	⟶	Make sure that you conclude with the same
Conduct a live stream, a video call or a meeting	⟶	Follow up with an email with key actions and info
Send an email with critical communication	⟶	Follow up on the topic in a team call
Encourage questions	⟶	You have the opportunity to repeat the message

ENGAGING YOUR VIRTUAL ORGANISATION

COVID-19 is changing the way we work. Instead of having face-to-face meetings and a physical workplace, we are now working in isolation, experiencing fluid boundaries between our work and private lives and adjusting to a virtual workplace. This calls for new ways to engage your team, and it all starts with how you communicate.

Work systematically to build engagement

Unsurprisingly, the COVID-19 lockdown has dramatically changed the focus of the working population, and as you can see from the figure below, we are all searching for ways to stay motivated and productive from our new home offices.

It is becoming increasingly clear that there are intrinsic benefits to sharing a physical workplace alongside colleagues. Energy, commitment, team spirit, focus and dedication come easier when people around us are similarly engaged.

In a virtual setting, these virtues are a lot harder to come by. Maintaining productivity, delivering high quality and staying connected to colleagues and customers requires firm discipline as disengagement easily creeps up on us.

Communication is the key to maintaining engagement – and it starts with strong leadership. Leaders need to understand where their teams are emotionally, mentally and in terms of their sense of belonging. From here, you can work systematically to build strong engagement through clear communication.

Staying engaged while working from home is our top concern right now

According to Google Trends, concerns around working remotely and staying engaged have been the highest-ranking search topics for Danes during the last three months.

Working from home	29,955,399
Working remotely	25,161,972
Home office	24,749,609
Crisis management	24,525,822
Recession	21,961,659
Crisis	18,811,424
Global economy	14,906,103
Productivity	9,750,391
Supplier	9,201,878
Mental health	8,936,620
Remote management	3,399,844
Solitude	2,361,502

3. Build commitment

It is important that every employee feels important and understands exactly how they are contributing to the organisation's mission. However, creating engagement only through top-down communication is difficult. Peer-to-peer communication and organising work in small groups help build commitment across the entire organisation while also enabling team bonding over mutual obligations.

4. Listen with empathy

Building engagement is about understanding your audience and their thought processes. Active listening and empathy are key to understanding people's concerns. This means acknowledging fears and concerns irrespective of whether you agree with them or not. As a leader, it is your job to create a safe environment where people feel comfortable opening up and sharing their doubts. You can do this by sharing personal reflections and encouraging any and all questions and comments, regardless of whether they are of a critical or constructive nature.
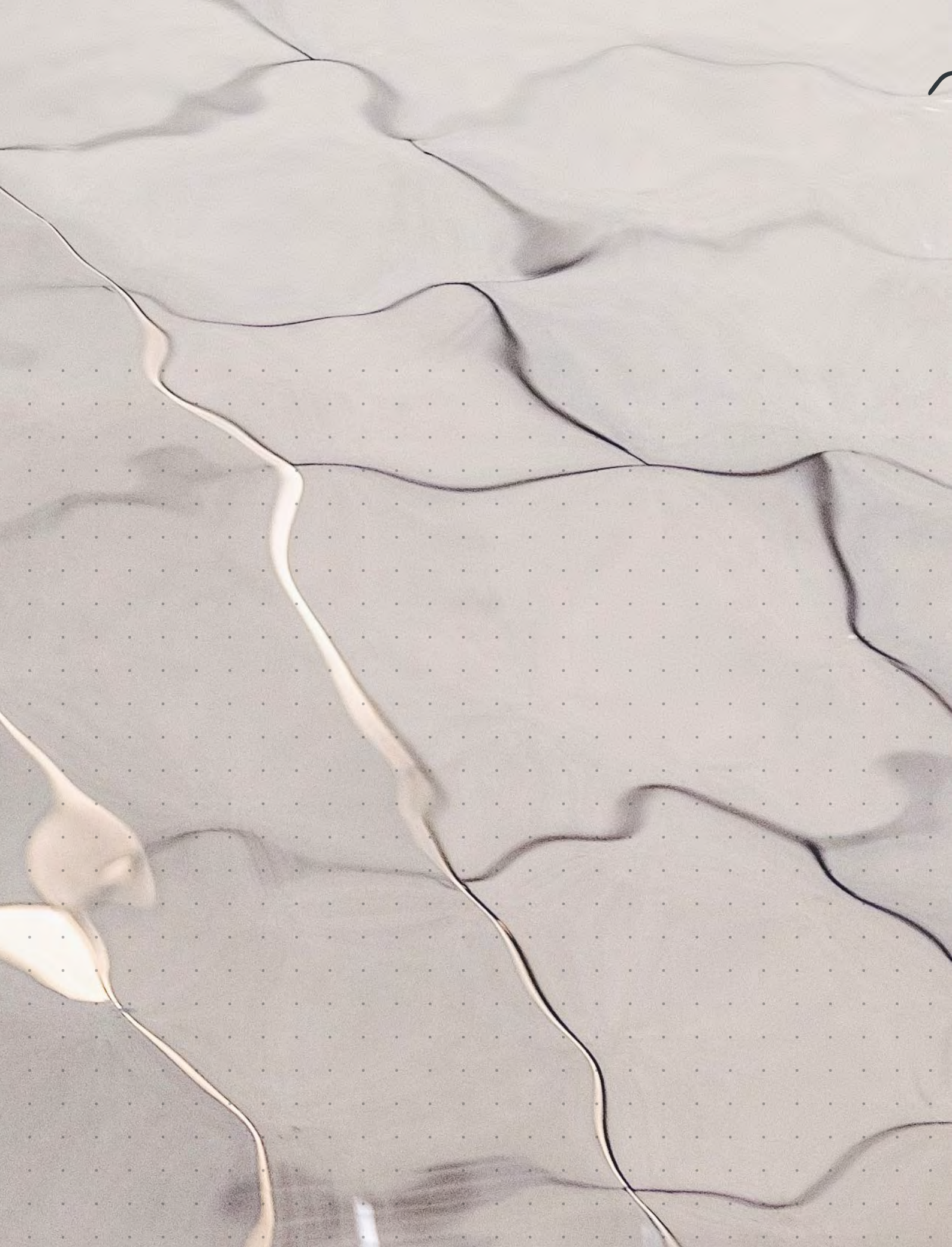
5. Share successes

Demonstrate that you are progressing towards your mission by sharing success stories. Studies show that optimism is contagious – especially when coming from a leader. Be optimistic without being naive. Make sure to take every opportunity to counter any negative sentiment that arises while remote working by highlighting positive perspectives on progress and success.

1. Be visible

Whether you are a CEO or a team leader, employees need visible leadership in times of uncertainty. Seeing a leader take charge and tackle problems head on creates motivation and reassurance. If you are a project leader, visibility is also about keeping the project top of mind with both team members and stakeholders. Check in frequently, be present and build a weekly communication plan that allows you to take centre stage.

2. Create a shared focus

Define a mission and objectives for the short term with full transparency that gives employees something to rally around. Where does the organisation need to focus, and what are the priorities during the lockdown? Create a narrative that engages the organisation and creates a sense of hope.

PERCEPTION VS REALITY

Perception: Management controls the strategy roll-out communication.
Reality: Employees control the strategy roll-out communication.

Great change communication has never been produced by management. It might be that management conducts the roll-out, sets up the channels for the internal communication, points out key stakeholders, designs interview and workshop formats to gather insights for key messages and the ever so important core story and controls the rhythm for important timing in the communication plan. This is what management will typically do. But will this change anything? Will it control and change employees' attitudes towards the strategy roll-out communication? It is an utterly fallacious objective.

Planning and structure play a vital role – indeed. Your odds of a successful implementation will significantly increase when designing an impactful change communication plan for the desired change project. Without the plan, chances are not great. Studies show that the chance of creating engagement and impact rises by up to 73%[*] when management focuses on employee strengths and employees participating actively in the roll-out communication, giving them tools (communication channels) to provide perspectives and anchor true initiatives to change the traditional top-down approach. And here is an important point: the traditional top-down approach is becoming less and less impactful.

The way management communicates reflects the culture

Traditional internal communication has been a one-way street with management controlling everything and with very limited two-way opportunities for the employee. As a consultant, you have always known that the coffee machine talk was essential to pick up any signals from the organisation besides the insights that were given to you from management. **There was almost no formalised room for two-way communication** in most organisations, and internal channels were even being edited by group communication controlled by management. But things have changed. Like the world outside the organisations. Communication has changed. Everyone can comment on everything. SoMe tools have been adapted by companies and, as a result, so have the habits from the outside. Communication channels are more unpredictable than ever, and many companies are today producing content for more than 8-10 platforms. And so are the employees.

From cases and studies we know that poorly managed communication is behind 50% of all failing change efforts. In our experience, there is a fundamental reason for this depressing number. And the answer is provocative and simple: we often fail to bridge the gap between management that pushes the change and the communication and the employees who are asked to adapt to the change. The gap between perception and reality is surprisingly obvious, and the scepticism and resistance we often see from employees pushing back on the change and the strategic priorities are even more obvious.

The way management communicates reflects the culture. If there is an honest and authentic culture, the communication will obviously reflect that. Sadly, for many companies, collective behaviour and communication controlled by management are often driven by conservative thinking. And if you try to control everything and please everyone, you will end up pleasing no one. Be authentic to win people's hearts. Build common ground. Accept that the organisation in reality controls the understanding and communication of the change. Changing the conversations through simple and honest communication is truly fundamental to successful impact.

For management, this is the reality, and the best thing they can do besides accepting the "new" world of reality is to embark on this journey, keep the communication alive and let go. The organisation will always find the way forward.

[*] The Project Management Institute (PMI), Pulse of the Profession 2013

Contact

For more information, please contact:

Lars Hancke
Implement Consulting Group
Danmark/Hellerup
+45 4138 0048
laha@implement.dk

Elmar Jung
Implement Consulting Group
Germany/Munich
+49 151 40205312
elju@implement.eu