CCOM X-RAY 2022

A health check on organisational change communication

It is ~~not~~ always about you!

WHAT IS CHANGE COMMUNICATION?

Change communication is the strategic communication activities carried out inside organisations to engage employees and leaders with the purpose of motivating them to adopt new behaviour associated with a given change.
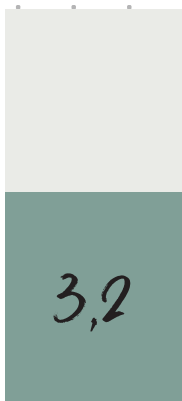
ABOUT THE CCOM X-RAY 2022

The data basis
The CCOM X-ray is based on data from 904 responses to a digital survey performed in August 2022. The respondents represent more than 10 different industries and 39 different countries (the majority of which, 72%, were from Denmark). The respondents were almost equally distributed between employees, middle management and top management.

Which changes are we talking about?
In the survey, respondents answered questions about their experience with the most recent change in their organisation. Typical changes were re-organisation, new business strategy, and new ways of working. 86% of the respondents stated that the change affected their work to some, high, or very high extent.

The diagnosis: A scrappy state of health

What was once an underappreciated insight is now becoming a well-established truth: To make change happen, you need to engage the people who are impacted by it. And communication is a crucial step in realising this objective.

So, how are we doing on that? What is the state of health of **change communication** across European organisations?

Our biannual survey, Change Communication X-ray, is a health check. Instead of questions about lifestyle and blood circulation, we asked leaders and employees about the state of change communication in their organisation.

The diagnosis is clear: Change communication is in a scrappy state of health.

When we asked respondents to rate their experience with the most recent change in their organisation, they scored communication at an **average of 3.2 out of 5.** This score is quite frankly disturbing when you believe in communication as a key enabler of change.

As we will see in this report, the ailing health of change communication exhibits many symptoms. Looking across them all, we have identified one root cause:

We seem to have forgotten that communication is spelled with a "you".

Taking employees for granted

When asking people which word or phrase they wish to hear more in change communication, many point to one simple word: "you". Below are some of the statements that support this observation.

"I would like to hear the phrase: 'We have thought about your needs and situation. We would like to engage you and hear your opinion.'"

"It would be good to hear more 'you' in the communication: More direct communication about what we – the

3,2

"Overall, I was satisfied with the communication"

N = 904. **Question:** To which extent do you agree with the following statement regarding the change communication connected to the most recent change in your organisation? "Overall, I was satisfied with the communication"

Respondents answered with a score between 1 to 5, 5 being "To a very high extent" and 1 being "to a very low extent"

employees – win from a change and why we should prioritise to engage."

"The phrase: 'what do you think?' is something I would like to hear more often."

This resonates with our observations from hundreds of change projects. Again and again, we see how internal communicators focus on the hard factors: The ERP system, the new process in Customer Service, the 5 must-win battles of the strategy. Communication becomes system-centric, rather than people-centric. The problem: This terminology misses the fact that it is behaviour that drives change – not the other way around.

If we want people to act, we must inspire them. Just think of external communication to consumers. Companies here build their messaging around insights-driven content, and they care deeply about the emotional lives of their target groups. In other words: they put the people they want to inspire to act at the centre of communication.

When communicating internally, on the other hand, many organisations tend to forget that people should be at the centre of attention. They do not listen to the employees' emotions regarding the change or give the individual a clear role in the story of change.

Instead, we see how organisations – sometimes without even noticing it – take their employees' support and engagement for granted. Well, here's the bad news about that: Just because people receive a pay cheque every month doesn't mean they automatically applaud every change they are exposed to.

This approach leaves employees unhappy with the process as well as the result. So, make sure to address the element of "What does this mean to you" in your communication.

Bringing YOU back: 3 paradoxes to navigate

Changing the mind, heart and behaviour of people isn't a rational step-by-step process like installing a computer app or fixing a bike. Working with people

means accounting for irrationality and emotions, such as our innate fear of risk and our strong need for fairness.

It means being receptive to changing states of mind and heart. States that may fluctuate back and forth several times during your decision-making process.

It also entails the ability to meet seemingly contradictory needs. Human beings are complex and sometimes paradoxical in their mental patterns.

In fact, three seemingly contradictory statements stand out when we want to engage the hearts and minds of our audience:

#1 Lead the way, but listen to me

#2 Come down to Earth, but take me higher

#3 Repeat, but relate

In this report, we will explore these three paradoxes, in turn diving into the challenges of meeting them and outlining tips for how to address both sides of the coin.
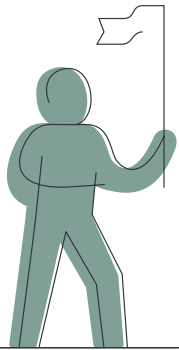
#1 Lead the way, but listen to me

Leaders must take the lead by sharing the ideas behind a change in a compelling way. At the same time, employees have a profound need to be involved from an early stage and see their own ideas put into action. How can those needs be balanced?

TOP 10 WORN-OUT "CHANGE BUZZWORDS"

We have asked respondents which change buzzwords they are most tired of hearing. The top of the list looks like this:

1. Agile
2. Must-win battles
3. Journey
4. Low-hanging fruit
5. Burning platform
6. Transformation
7. Empower
8. Growth
9. Align
10. Lean in

Interestingly, employees and management agree on this list. Apparently, everyone is seeking a more authentic way to speak about the changes we are trying to turn into reality.

Lead the way ...

Management and change agents play a key role in successful change communication.

We see that need clearly when we examine how people have answered the questions: "What would you like change communication to be more inspired from?" Many replied by naming a specific person, like a celebrity, author or intellectual. Typically, someone known for their skills in making complicated matters simple and interesting. As one survey respondent reflected more generally: "Use people that are good at communicating the reason and benefits."

The fact that respondents answered with names illustrates a key insight: People relate to *people*, not strategy presentations or organisational models. Stories need to be told by **someone**. Change communication starts with change *communicators*.

Unfortunately, our data show that leaders are in dire need to level up their change communication skills. Among employees,

6 | 10

are not satisfied with the ability of top and middle managers to communicate changes.

Similarly,

5 | 10

are not satisfied with the communication abilities of team managers.

One sure way of communicating unclearly is using buzzwords, which no one really understands. Around **one third of employees agree that management "always" or "often" uses buzzwords they can't relate to**, while another third agrees it happens "sometimes".

... but listen to me

Leading the way and speaking clearly are only part of the equation. The ability to engage in dialogue and listen for the more uncomfortable truths are core disciplines of human-centric communication. Strikingly, our survey reveals "one-way communication" to be the most typical flaw that people point to.

One of our respondents made the point that leaders and internal communicators need to be better at posing questions such as: "How do *you* feel about this? How do *you* think this will impact you?"

We see this clearly in the survey results: Lack of involvement and meaningful conversations are strongly associated with low satisfaction with the change process and the communication.

What's more, low involvement is a wide-spread issue:

- Less than half the respondents felt involved in the most recent change they experienced. **Among employees, the number is as low as 35%.**

- **Four out of ten respondents** directly pointed to the problem that communication only went one way and offered no opportunity for dialogue. This makes it the most typical problem people experience with change communication.

- Asked about their general experience with change processes, **49% of employees** felt they are often or always **involved too late** in the process.
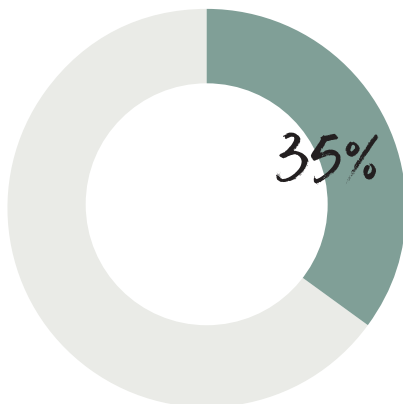
Less than half the respondents felt "involved" in the most recent change they experienced. **Among employees, the number is as low as 35%.**

N = 877; **Question:** "Thinking back on the process up to and during the change, to which extent did you feel involved".

Respondents answered with a score between 1 to 5, 5 being "To a very high extent" and 1 being "to a very low extent"

Case A

How LanguageWire put involvement at the core of their change process

Interview with Kelley Reynolds, Change Communication and Brand Specialist at LanguageWire

When LanguageWire wanted to develop and implement a new purpose and value set across the organisation, they turned to employee involvement as a key change strategy:

"For us, it was important to build a communications plan that would encourage change in behaviour and ensure that employees resonate with our new values. You can't speak externally unless that connection is rooted internally. Utilising a bottom-up approach and **including many employees in the process has been crucial for adopting and successfully implementing the values and purpose** of LanguageWire."

LanguageWire managed to balance the need for leading with a clear story with the need to let people make things their own: "[The communication] clarifies the impact at every level of the organisation. And by introducing tools that help people connect, we've enabled people to feel what the values mean to them and how that shapes the way they work. 'As you develop, we develop' has been the motto. So, we are **providing autonomy but also clarifying impact** for the organisation."

Reynolds concludes on the power of involvement: "I think the **best way you can achieve adaption** and get people to promote the change is by integrating their input."

language**wire**

How to lead the way while listening

On one side, we need communicators to take the lead with a story about the change we are initiating. On the other, we need to involve employees early and sincerely, so as to invite people into the process of reacting to the story and helping us bring it to life.

How do we navigate between these two poles? There are at least three important ways to manage that:

1. **Start with insights:** Try to understand your target group as deeply as you would in any external communication.

2. **Identify pockets for involvement:** Design touchpoints throughout the project roadmap that will allow your audience to be heard so they can voice frustrations, share ideas and give specific feedback.

3. **Design for conversations:** Work strategically to ask questions and shape the conversations you have with your audience to ensure a shared purpose and sense of inclusion.
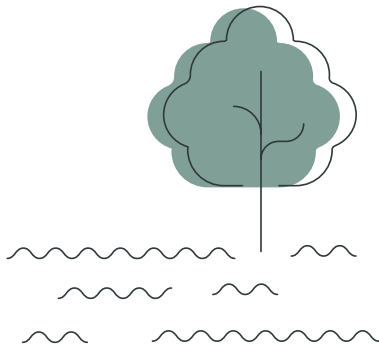
#2 Come down to Earth, but take me higher
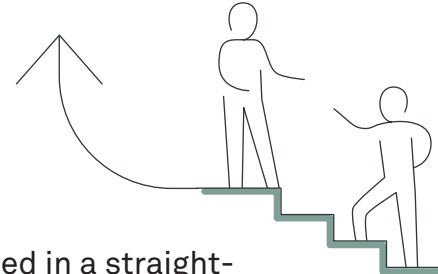
People need changes to be explained in a straightforward and concrete way. They also need to get emotionally engaged to be inspired to action. How can we make those ends meet?

Come down to Earth …

Survey respondents are praying for communication to be tangible and "down to earth":

"[Change communication] should be more 'down to earth'. Do not try to cover up or sugar coat … Be informal from time to time. Do not use too many corporate buzzwords. Speak to people at their level."

Unfortunately, there seems to be enough hot air to go around:

- **1 out of 3 respondents** reported that the communication in the most recent change they experienced was too **high-level.**

- About **half the employees** found that management is always or often **"overselling" the change.**

- A third of employees found that management often or always **uses buzzwords that are difficult to relate to.** Another third said that it happens sometimes.

Bringing things "down to Earth" is about saying things as they are, using simple and straightforward terms and not hiding behind empty corporate clichés. It is very much about daring to be informal and communicating at eye level. You build trust with your audience by addressing the elephant in the room. Be open about the challenges. Tab into the conversations taking place at the coffee machine, rather than yelling at people from an ivory tower.

One way to strike an informal tone in your communication and create a safe space for discussing the challenges is to use humour. This is a far cry from the situation today, where most change communication seems to be delivered in sombre tones. To illustrate, a **mere 9%** of our survey respondents experienced a humoristic element in the communication they were exposed to.

So, kill the buzzwords, stop overselling and start acknowledging the challenges. Try to anchor the high-level explanations with clear examples rooted in the day-to-day work life that people experience. Let the communication emulate how you would talk to a normal person. And, as a respondent put it: Do "something that makes it fun, instead of posting things on the intranet."

… but take me higher

Coming down to Earth shouldn't mean that we leave people feeling bored and down. On the contrary, to make change happen, we need to engage and excite.

Why? Because information and explanation alone does not change behaviour. As

Jerry Sternin, a former country director of Save the Children, said: "Knowledge doesn't change behaviour. We've all met crazy psychologists, obese doctors and divorced marriage counsellors."

No, change takes more. And a key ingredient is emotional engagement.

Yet, our data shows that emotional engagement in change processes could be much higher. For instance, **only**

4 / 10

employees felt excited about the change they experienced most recently (with top management being more eager – here 6 in 10 were excited). And **only**

5 / 10

felt trust towards those in charge of the change.

Of course, some changes may not be exciting no matter what. But still, there is room for improvement in terms of how we engage people in the vision behind a change.

How to come down to Earth while taking people higher

Organisations are generally much more comfortable with rational argumentation than working with emotions. That's why we so often see communication falling into the buzzword-glitter trap: It's a hollow attempt at getting to a more emotional place. But it fails.

What works, on the other hand, is building a core story around your change that hits the right emotional spot while using language that resonates with your target group. To achieve that, base your story on target group insights – and make employees, not the system, the hero of your story.

Case B

How Santa Fe Relocation makes transparency the key to change

Interview with Runar Nilsen, Deputy Chief Executive Officer at Santa Fe Relocation.

When Santa Fe Relocation, a global mobility and relocation company, went through a re-organisation and transformation of the management structure, being "brutally honest" was a core ingredient in the change approach:

"Our slogan is to be brutally honest when communicating to our employees. So, immediately, when we started the transition at Santa Fe Relocation, we instigated monthly town halls globally to have our messages distributed directly and to make being open into a virtue. Transparency to us means that we say what we mean, we mean what we say, and we do what we say. That's what we have achieved."

Alongside transparency, Santa Fe Relocation also insists on getting away from the ivory tower (i.e. headquarters) and connect with the organisation where it operates:

"The most important management tool we know about is communication. And communication means remembering that you have one mouth and two ears. Instead of thinking that we have all the answers and just telling people 'what to do', we're interacting and developing business together in what I call 'the real world' – which is outside of the headquarters."

Here are some more ways to balance the need for staying grounded with the need for lifting people's spirits:

1. **Apply a critical filter:** Work actively to unpack management lingo and buzzwords – ask yourself: "What is it we really want to say?"

2. **Create a compelling vision:** A vision can create excitement and trust if it is crafted in plain language and speaks to the sense of a shared and relevant ambition.

3. **Dare to use engaging formats:** Generally speaking, video has a much stronger ability to evoke emotion than text. We know that from our private lives, but all too often we forget using the power of video or other engaging formats in change communication.
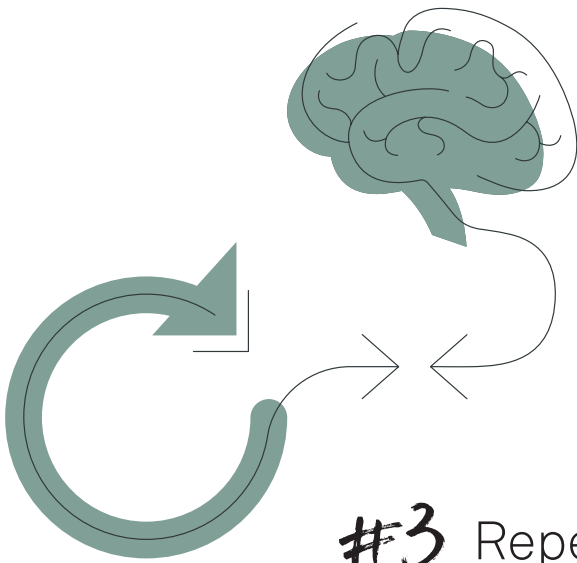
#3 Repeat, but relate

A certain quantity of communication and repetition is needed before messages start resonating with people. At the same time, communication must be relatable and relevant to the individual. How can we communicate massively, without resorting to mass communication?

Repeat…

Organisations are noisy environments filled with busy people. Therefore, communication should be designed on the assumption that no one listens or even cares about your message.

That's why change communication needs to make use of many channels. And to repeat the messages, over and over – 7 times according to the classical advertising paradigm, The Rule of 7.

We see this need for quantity in our data: People simply want more communication.

35% of respondents highlight "too little communication" as a problem. Among those who were unsatisfied with the communication, the number **increases to 60%**. Conversely, only 7% found the communication to be "too detailed".

So why this shortage of communication?

One possible explanation is a misplaced fear of spamming the organisation. **42% of managers** in our survey reported being **afraid of overloading their employees** with information. By contrast, **only 14% of employees have ever felt overloaded.**

35%

65%

42%

14%

Managers worried about overloading.

Employees feeling overloaded "Always" or often.
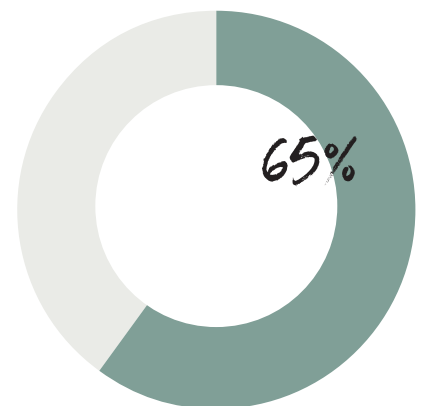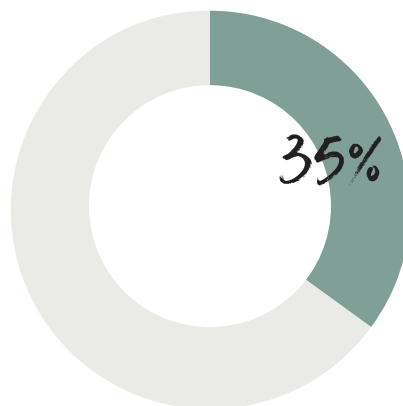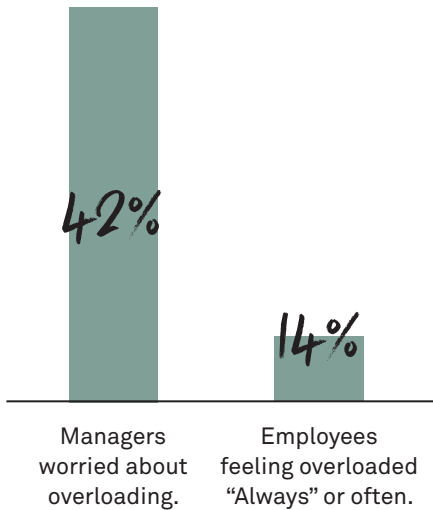
N = 874; **Question:** "In connection to changes in your organisation, how often have you been..." [Managers]: "...concerned with overloading your employees with change communication" [Employees] "... Overloaded with too much communication concerning a change".

Respondents has answered on a scale from 1 to 5, 5 being "Always" and 1 being "Never". Percentages shows sum of respondents answering 4 or 5.

In other words, we are far from the point where leaders need to hold back when communicating change. Instead, they should scale up their communication efforts significantly.

... but relate

Communicating more should not result in generic mass communication. Failing to relate to the individual when communicating an important message defeats the purpose of the communication in the first place.

We see that clearly in the differences between our respondents. Among all respondents that were unsatisfied with the communication, only

3 / 10

experienced the communication as relevant to their role.

For those who were satisfied, the number is

9 / 10.

The correlation between relevance and overall satisfaction shows the pivotal role of getting close to the people you communicate with. Broadcasting generic messages doesn't do the trick on its own.

Respondents deem **1:1 meetings and small meetings/workshops** to be the most effective communication formats. And we see that those who were satisfied with the change communication were also exposed more frequently to these formats than others.

But getting close to the individual is not just about explaining the specific changes for each and every person in your target group. It is also about an emotional connection.

Communication that speaks to individuals or smaller teams has more power to establish trust and make people feel helped. However, we see much room for improvement in our survey when it comes to both elements:

On average, on a scale from 1 to 5 (5 being the highest), respondents scored 3.0 in "feeling valued" in the change process. And they scored 3.3 for feel-

ings of trust towards those in charge of the change. Interestingly, among those who were satisfied with the change communication, 80% scored their trust with a 4 or 5. Among those unsatisfied, it was 9%.

How to repeat, but relate

It's not an easy task to boost both quantity and quality at the same time. But that is, roughly speaking, what we need. Here are three ways to do that:

1. **Think campaign:** Design for your messages to appear across multiple touchpoints in different formats.

2. **Be a parrot:** Parrots aren't afraid of repeating themselves over and over. Neither should you. Repeat without shame – but be receptive to people's needs to dive deeper into the messages.

3. **Enable team leaders to spread the word:** Team leaders are powerful allies in bringing out key messages and helping to translate them into a context that is close to the individual.

"There is no follow-up to the process. Too often, we are left with one-off information. And no communication after the change has taken place, where it is often needed most." – Survey respondent

#4 The cure: Spelling Communication with a "you"

The opening lines of this report tell the story of change communication's scrappy state of health.

To explore that diagnosis further and to prescribe a cure, we have taken a deep dive into the insights from our survey data.

Clearly, there isn't a straightforward formula to getting change communication right. We need to embrace the complexity of interacting with people and learn to navigate seemingly contrasting needs.

The call to put the "you" back in communication stands at the centre of all that. Our data shows that, far too often, change communication is system-centric rather than people-centric. It lacks involvement, personal leadership and emotional engagement. It is out of touch with reality, fails to relate to people – and finally, there is simply not enough of it.

Reversing all that means tackling three paradoxes: **Lead the way, but listen to me. Come down to Earth, but take me higher. Repeat, but relate.** This approach is not a quick fix, but as with all change it starts with the realisation that we can do things in a better way:
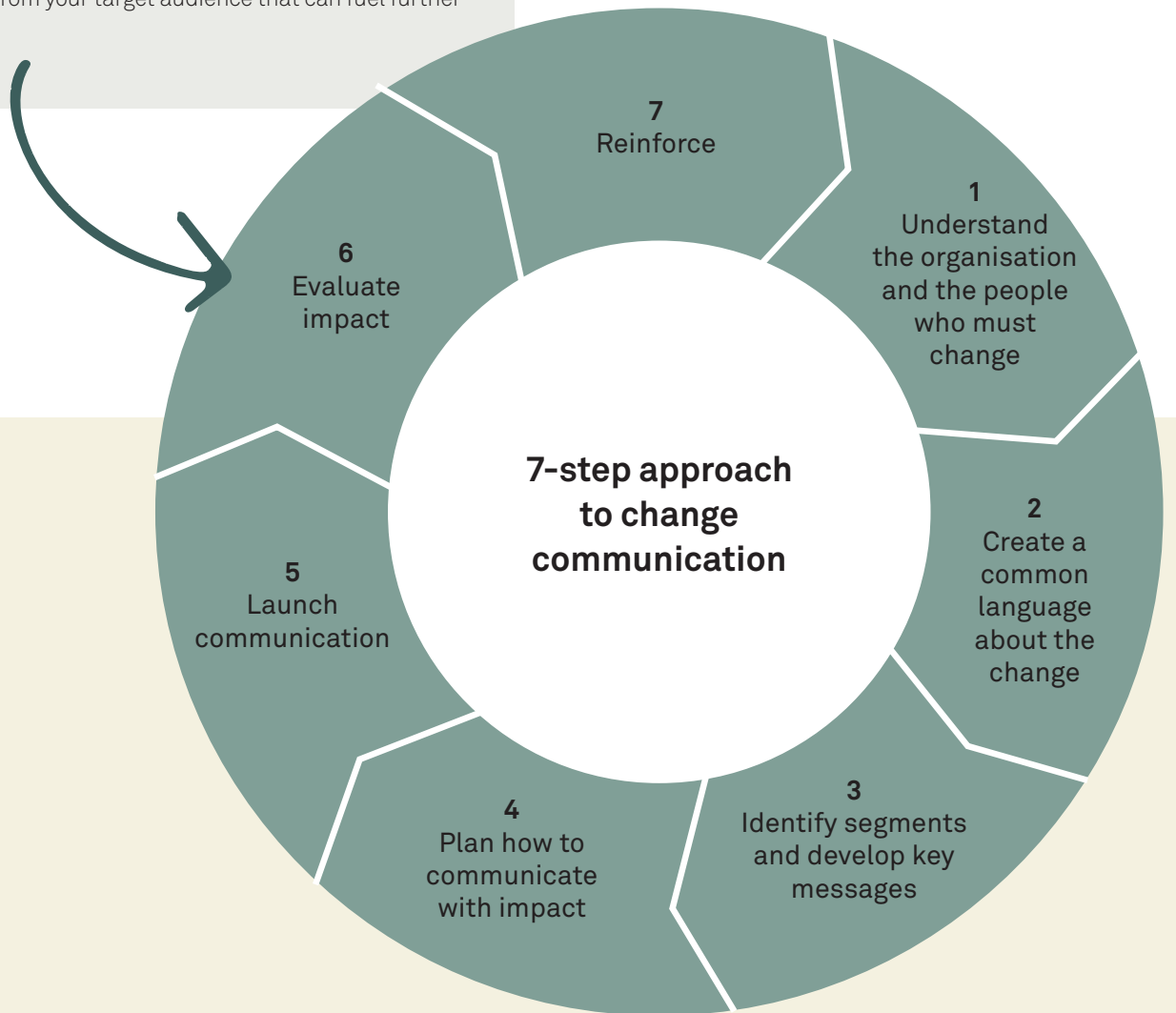
THREE PARADOXES WHEN WE WANT TO COMMUNICATE WITH A "YOU"

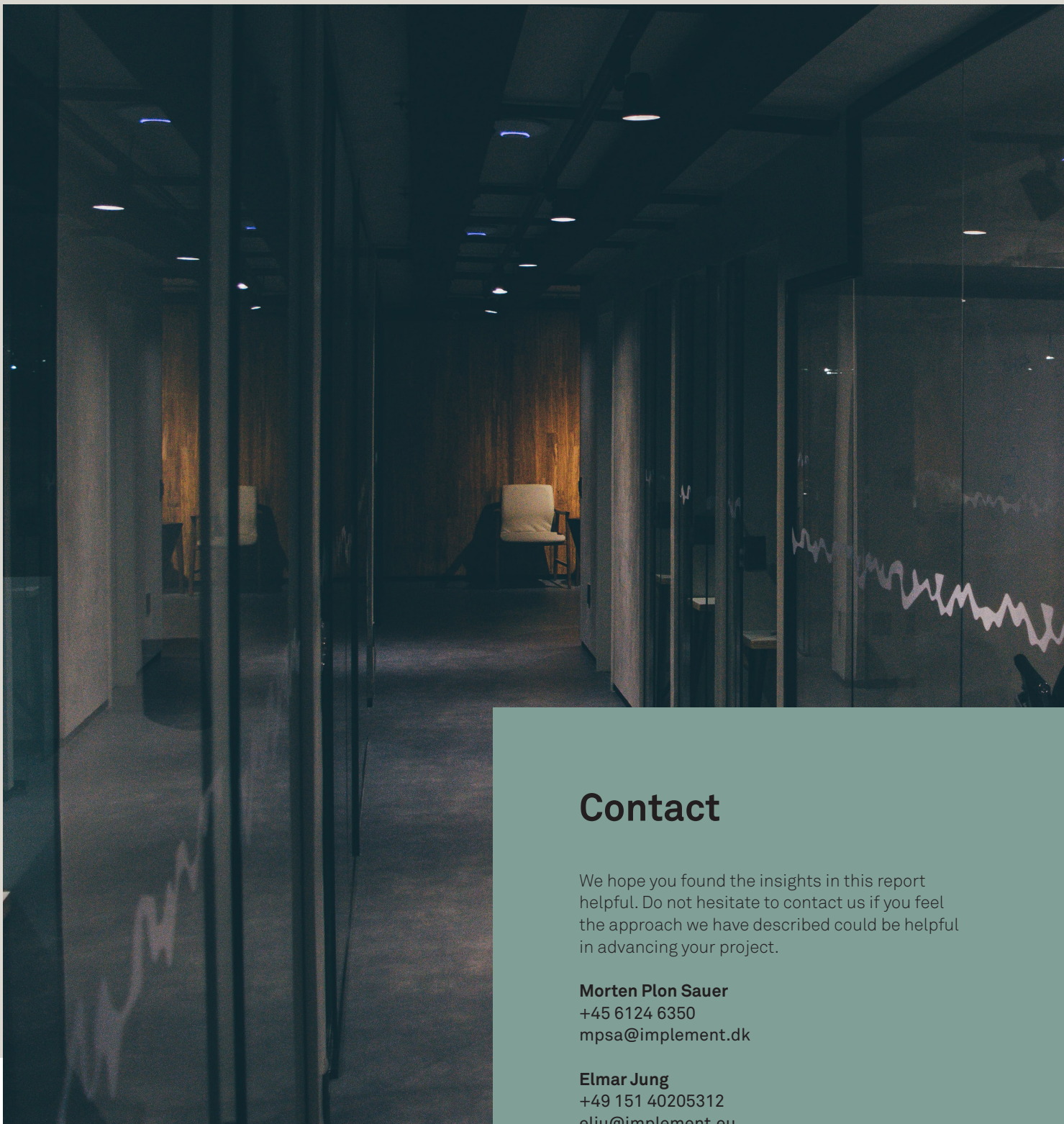| Lead the way, but listen to me	Come down to Earth, but take me higher	Repeat, but relate
Take the lead by speaking to the deeper needs of your audience, while involving stakeholders from an early stage	Communicate change in a straightforward and concrete way, while getting people excited about the vision behind it	Communicate massively without resorting to mass communication
How to: 1. Start with insights 2. Identify pockets for involvement 3. Design for conversations	**How to:** 1. Apply a critical filter 2. Create a compelling vision 3. Dare to use engaging formats	**How to:** 1. Think campaign 2. Be a parrot 3. Enable leaders to spread the word

IMPLEMENT'S 7-STEP MODEL FOR PEOPLE-CENTRIC COMMUNICATION

can help you infuse a bit of "you" into the communication. You start by building insights and vision and you close the loop by reinforcing your messages, and harvesting new input from your target audience that can fuel further activities.

7-step approach to change communication

7 Reinforce

1 Understand the organisation and the people who must change

2 Create a common language about the change

3 Identify segments and develop key messages

4 Plan how to communicate with impact

5 Launch communication

6 Evaluate impact

Contact

We hope you found the insights in this report helpful. Do not hesitate to contact us if you feel the approach we have described could be helpful in advancing your project.

Morten Plon Sauer
+45 6124 6350
mpsa@implement.dk

Elmar Jung
+49 151 40205312
elju@implement.eu