REPORT

It's conversation time

News about the growing gap between management and
employees – and recommendations on how to close it

Introduction

Bridging the gap between managers and employees has always been the objective of change communication. Indeed, it has been the most consistent theme when looking at the thousands of projects we at Implement have been involved in over the past ten years of engagement in change communication services.

When looking through the results of this third edition of the Change Communication X-ray – our recurring survey inspecting the state of change communication across global organisations – it was therefore not surprising to find indications that the gap persists. The unsettling thing was to learn that the gap, in fact, seems to be expanding.

Share of **top managers** who are overall satisfied with change processes in their organisation
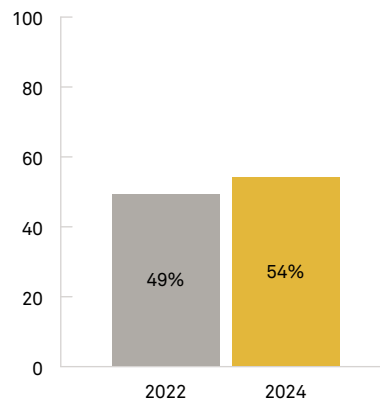
Share of **employees** who are overall satisfied with change processes in their organisation

	2022	2024
top managers	49%	54%
employees	37%	31%
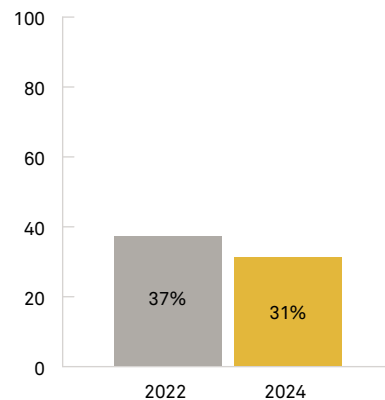
While top managers' overall satisfaction with change processes in their organisation has increased over the past two years (+5 percentage points since 2022), employees' satisfaction has simultaneously decreased (-6 percentage points since 2022). Employees' and managers' interests and perceptions are slowly drifting further apart, and with that, the risk of failure grows for anyone trying to drive successful change across organisations. **This leaves us with the questions: Why is this well-known gap increasing? And what can be done to close it?**

While these questions are by no means new, and even though the answers will likely sound familiar, the logic behind them might be more important than ever. Because as we have entered a year with war, accelerating climate change and politics threatening the stability of global supply chains on a backdrop of exponential technological development, change can be expected whether we initiate it ourselves or not. And circumstances like these mean that the need for clear communication is only growing stronger.

This edition of our Change Communication X-ray contains new perspectives for companies' sustainability narratives, proof that company visions cannot be expected to trickle down by themselves and a dissection of the misperceptions that often block alternative roads to effective communication. Some of the learnings we present will feel rather basic. The recommendation to lead change by facilitating the right conversations is an example of something you might have heard before. But discarding these conclusions on the simple notion that they seem basic would be a mistake. Because while the basic principles may seem insignificant, they are anything but. Managing successful change projects requires getting the basics right. And if there is one thing that can get us safely through the times ahead, it is successful change.

We hope that you enjoy the read and look forward to having a conversation with you about the results.

What is change communication?

Change communication is the strategic communication activities carried out in organisations to engage employees and leaders with the aim of motivating them to adopt new behaviours associated with a given change."

About Implement's Change Communication X-ray 2024

Data was collected between 6 December 2023 and 3 January 2024 through a digital survey distributed to more than 20,000 professionals registered in Implement's CRM system. A total of 1,082 respondents from 49 countries completed the survey, the majority of which (62%) were from Denmark. Respondents are almost equally distributed between organisational levels (top management, middle management and employees), primarily representing the private sector (84%), while the remaining respondents are split between the public and third sectors (16%).

A new era for the sustainability narrative

Over the past few years, "sustainability" has moved from page four of the CSR plans to being a key term in most companies' business strategies. In a survey conducted for the Confederation of Danish Industry in 2019, young Danish adults even declared having higher expectations of companies' ability to solve climate and environmental challenges than they did of their own politicians (danskindustri.dk/di-business/arkiv/nyheder/2019/9/unge-virksomheder-kan-lose-verdens-klima-problemer/).

The results from the Change Communication X-ray support the impression that most of us acknowledge that companies play a role in shaping a more sustainable world. 61% of all respondents even declared that they found their own company's sustainability narrative trustworthy to a large or very large extent.

The sustainability competition has increased

Yet, as companies have integrated sustainability in their branding and communication work, and as sustainability has become necessary to address rather than nice to address, the threshold for what makes a sustainability narrative visionary and motivating has been raised. What was once perceived as ambitious is now considered the bare minimum, making employees and leaders hesitant to declare their organisations' sustainability narratives as ambitious and engaging. Less than half of all respondents found their organisation's sustainability narrative visionary (47%), and only 45% of respondents reported that they found their organisation's sustainability narrative motivating.

In other words, we trust the sustainability narrative. But as competition has increased for companies wishing to position themselves on the agenda, the standard for bold ambitions has changed. And while it may have been motivating to see your company go public with a net-zero ambition five years ago, building employee engagement around a sustainability vision has become more demanding.

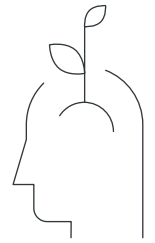## Only leadership feels involved in sustainability

While these results transcend all organisational levels, there is great variance in the feeling of involvement across organisations. While 2 out of 3 top and middle managers feel that they are personally able to contribute to their organisation's sustainability ambitions and targets, only 1 out of 3 employees feel the same way.

58%

22%

The same tendency is evident when looking at the involvement in discussions and conversations about sustainability. **When asked to what extent respondents feel involved in the conversation about sustainability in their organisation, 58% of top and middle managers said that they feel involved to a large or very large extent. For employees, the number is only 22%.**

It is about making the sustainability narrative sustainable

The results challenge the assumption that a strong company-wide sustainability commitment is enough to create a feeling of engagement and purpose throughout the organisation. In effect, this means that the feeling of contributing to the green transition becomes a luxury for the few instead of a driver for the many. And not only that. As only a minority of people feel invited to the conversation about sustainability improvements, companies miss the valuable input from the majority of employees working in parts of the organisation where the most tangible solutions are most likely found.
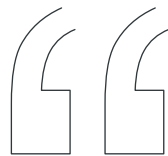
> I notice that my organisation sometimes hides a lack of leadership and structure behind terms such as entrepreneurship and agility, which makes these terms a hollow concept and causes insufficient employee engagement to achieve sustainable change."
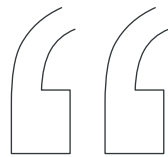
Survey respondent

If we hope to overcome the many trials and challenges that we currently face – and can expect to meet in the coming years – these findings serve as a warning. Because if we really want to find tangible solutions that move the needle, we have to design for involvement and engagement at all levels in our efforts to become sustainable businesses – from the shop floor to the manager's office. Those who succeed will be frontrunners in the new era of the sustainability narrative. An era with a more sustainable anchorage of green company ambitions.

Purpose and engagement: a management perk?

Unfortunately, the challenge of bringing the sustainability narrative to all parts of the organisation is not unique. In fact, it seems to be a symptom of a broader problem when it comes to translating vision and purpose internally in companies.

Across all levels, only half of the respondents in this year's Change Communication X-ray feel that their organisation's purpose is reflected in the internal communication in their company. Employees feel this slightly less than managers (46% of employees feel that the purpose is reflected, while 54% of top and middle managers feel the same).

> The overall narrative is missing, and it is hard to see how all the changes fit into a bigger picture."
>
> **Survey respondent**

Even though this is not an entirely surprising finding, it still highlights an enormous potential for companies when it comes to messaging alignment and governance. After all, most large companies have already invested heavily in developing the brand core. Leveraging the good work in internal communication by localising and translating the purpose to local contexts holds massive potential for giving employees a more seamless connection between their daily work and the future ambitions of the company.

Purpose in internal communication is tied to personal engagement

If the individual's experience of seeing purpose reflected in internal communication had been an isolated indicator, the above findings would have been easy to recognise. But when cross-referencing our data, we found a strong correlation between the level of engagement and the perception of whether the organisation's purpose is reflected in the internal communication.

Acknowledging that we are dealing with a chicken or egg situation, the correlation nevertheless highlights the tie between communication to collectives and individuals' perception of their own role in the organisation. A tie that only grows in importance when we add the perspective of the familiar gap between management and employees. Results from our survey show that while 86% of top and middle managers feel engaged or highly engaged in their work, the corresponding number for employees is only 67%.

So there we have it again. The gap. But where does it come from? Why does it continuously appear when we investigate the implementation of sustainability narratives and vision statements alike?

Case

Danish Standards designed for conversations to strengthen its values

In autumn 2023, Danish Standards, an organisation developing, selling and advising on standards, initiated a project to define and strengthen its values and unique offerings. After several 1:1 conversations and workshops, Mette Eskesen, Head of Marketing and Communications, presented the findings to the organisation in January. It was the culmination of a co-creation process that had only just begun.

"The fundamental insight we started with was that if we just sent out slides from our department, we would risk misunderstanding the context of the people who had to unfold the values in the organisation. We had to build ownership, and the only way to do that was by involving people", says Mette Eskesen.

Through a series of workshops with people from across the organisation, her team facilitated conversations about the company's DNA, its unique offerings and what it would take to make the values relevant in day-to-day business.

"I remember one person coming up to me after a session and asking if we could share more material. I had to tell her that this was the process for developing the material and that we did not have any more to share at that time, but she was just so curious. That has been the general reaction: curiosity and just an overall positivity about being involved."

The co-creating process also meant that stakeholders were invited into the project at an earlier stage than was standard before the project. But once the mental hurdle was overcome, the benefits were significant:

"The upside to early involvement is a stronger commitment to maintaining the pace, resulting in a sharper focus. The product that came out was basically ready to plug and play."

That is one of many reasons why Mette Eskesen and her team have already started to design activities to prolong the conversations that have been initiated:

"This process has been a big success. Both management and employees eagerly support copying the approach to other projects."

When asked whether this project has also contributed to a stronger bond between management and employees, Mette Eskesen is in no doubt:

"The conversations sparked by this project are bringing us all closer together. This was not a project solely about the communication department's agenda but rather a process relevant to everyone across the organisation. Now, values are no longer something we just put on the website. It is much bigger than that."

Mette Eskesen
Head of Marketing and Communications


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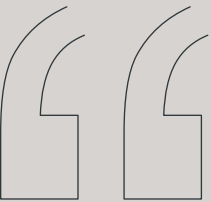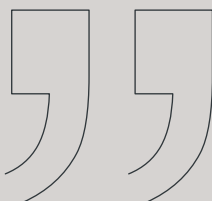
Genesis of the expanding gap

The short answer is that managers and employees operate in different contexts. Therefore, it is not a given that one party understands the other – it takes an active effort. And while most leaders already know this and work to bridge the gap every day, our results indicate that the energy is not focused on the right levers – in part due to a blind spot among leaders when it comes to understanding the communication needs of their employees.

79%

52%
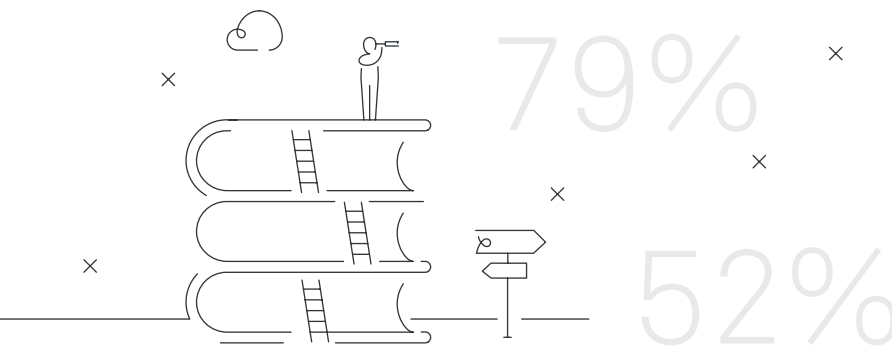
In our Change Communication X-ray 2024, we asked leaders: "To what extent do you think that your employees know your ambitions for your team/department?". **79% of top and middle managers responded that they believed that their employees knew their ambitions to a large or very large extent. Conversely, when the employees were asked to what extent they felt that they knew their leader's ambitions, only 52% replied that they felt that they knew them to a large or very large extent.**

Leaders communicate too little

Previous findings from our Change Communication X-rays support the claim that leaders tend to overestimate their own communication efforts. For example, in this year's survey, 35% of employees found communication efforts in their organisation insufficient. But quantity is not the only explanation for the disconnect illustrated above. Consistent with findings from previous years, the problem also relates to qualitative parameters. 36% of all employees in this year's X-ray experience communication as only happening one-way, and 32% characterise the communication as being too high-level.

Communication starts too late

Another communicative error was indicated when we took a closer look at IT changes and the importance of the timing of change communication. When asked how they would rate the timing of communication about IT changes in their organisation, 63% of employees expressed that they were communicated either a bit or way too late.

This delay in communication about changes is problematic as the interpretation of rushed communication often is that the change it addresses is rushed and flawed as well. Successful change happens through gradual improvements in the attitudes of the affected stakeholders. Building awareness is the first step, but when communication is initiated too late, it will often lead to greater initial resistance, making it unnecessarily difficult to create the intended desire and engagement in the organisation. In our experience at Implement, the delay in communication is often not because project leaders and management forget its importance. Rather, it is due to a desire to finalise a complete narrative with little room for doubt and question marks. The urge is understandable, but unfortunately, it often results in one-way communication, low involvement and occasional delays in communication initiation.
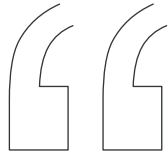
> " Typically, we are not empathetic enough when communicating change. We don't seem to understand that emotions are what makes people tick."
>
> **Survey respondent**

Emotions are left out of the story

Finally, there seems to be an emotional disconnect between managers and employees. Across all organisational levels, the respondents replied that the communication in their organisation would generally be described as more rational than emotional. 55% of all respondents replied that the communication in their organisation was primarily rational, and only 11% replied that it was primarily emotional.

However, when asked whether they were missing emotions in their organisations' communication, a majority of employees replied "yes" while a majority of top and middle managers replied "no".

Managers' lack of understanding of this gap between them and their employees means that they are often unable to communicate the changes successfully, especially as science supports the claim that emotional appeal plays a key role in making communication impactful.

Addressing the blind spots of leaders and managers and fostering a more empathetic approach to communication will be crucial to bridging the gap between leaders and employees and achieving successful organisational change. And while that sounds like an abstract ambition, we have tried to concretise some recommendations to make it happen. In other words, we have gathered three different answers to the question from our introduction statement: What can be done to close the growing gap?
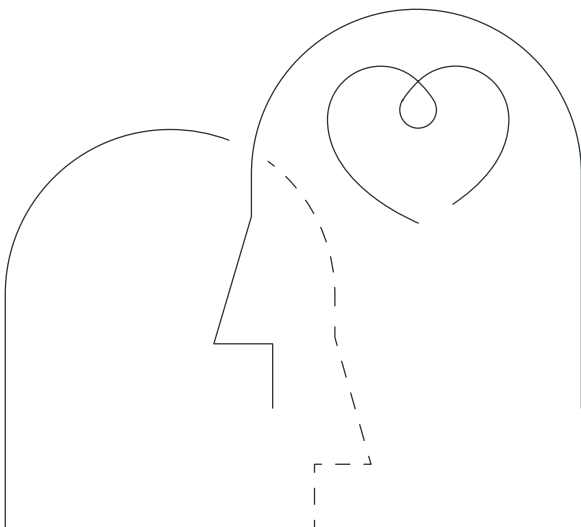
Recommendation #1
Dare to be honest and co-create the missing links

We tend to think that we need to have all the answers before sharing new ideas and initiatives with our surroundings, especially in a work setting. We do not want to seem unprepared or dim-witted, so we wait until we feel confident in our conclusions. However, in an ever-changing world where demands and circumstances constantly evolve, it is nearly impossible to have all the answers from the get-go.

Additionally, decisions are often limited by bounded rationality and imperfect information. Therefore, great perspectives can be derived from inviting other people into the decision-making process, also from the very early stages.

Several respondents highlighted a lack of involvement in the design and decisions related to changes. When asked how they generally felt about changes in their organisations, one respondent wrote: "I love change. It is often for the better. However, it tends to happen without involvement, which means that it often misses the perspective of the employees."

Another respondent replied: "It is always top-down and with very little involvement outside the top leadership".

In order to create sustainable change in an organisation, anchorage at all organisational levels is a necessity. That is achieved by designing for involvement. The side effect of including all affected employees is that you gain a better understanding of the organisational context in which your change will take place. And most likely, new ideas for strengthening the change project will follow.

According to our respondents, honesty is a missing ingredient in the internal communication mix. Being honest and vulnerable about doubts and shortcomings can help build trust and forge relations, creating an environment where insights and considerations are shared, and sense-making becomes a process of co-creation.

So, challenge yourself: Be honest about the missing links and invite your colleagues to help fill them in.

Recommendation #2

Use the company vision in your change story

Any change project holds a story – a transition from one state to another. Understanding the story is the first step towards owning the change it addresses, making storytelling the backbone of any change project.

Yet, as highlighted in the first sections of this report, telling change stories locally without incorporating the bigger visions and purpose whenever possible equals missed potential. In other words, forging a compelling change story is good; tying it together with your company's vision and purpose is even better. As indicated in our first recommendation, this is not to say that your story cannot have question marks and missing answers. Instead, be honest about those elements – and use them as an invitation for co-creation.

Recognising that encouraging storytelling is hardly surprising advice from change communication experts, we decided to build in a simple experiment to deliver new proof for the ancient storytelling tool. In our survey, we presented half of the respondents with one description of a new IT project and the other half with another description. The practicalities of the project were exactly the same. Only the descriptions differed. The first one was rational, similar to the current communication style of most organisations, and the second one was more creative, using a captivating title, metaphors and a more engaging format.

Our findings were clear. While 59% of the respondents who were presented with description B thought that the IT project sounded exciting, only 35% found description A to be the same. Additionally, we saw the perception of the complexity and overall value of the transformation differ depending on the narrative used. While 38% of test group A thought that the IT project sounded demanding, only 32% of test group B thought the same. Accordingly, 53% of test group A thought that the IT project sounded useful for the company, whereas 62% of test group B believed the IT project to be useful. This shows that even a dash of storytelling can improve the starting point for a change project significantly.

Test group A

Imagine that a new IT project is introduced in an organisation. The project is called "Stakeholder Manager 2.0", and when all modules are implemented, the system will cover all processes and roles related to order handling between departments. The project will primarily affect one group of employees who will, therefore, receive more training in the new system than the rest of the organisation.

Test group B

Imagine that a new IT project is introduced in an organisation. The project is called "Perfect Dancer", because the ambition of the project is to turn the confusing steps of today's order handling system into a tightly choreographed dance that everyone can perform across departments. Training is offered to everyone affected. And the people most affected can even expect an invitation to dance lessons – with a twist.

It's conversation time

Recommendation #3

**Lead with conversations – and do not fear emotions**

When asked what emotion our respondents in this year's Change Communication X-ray missed the most, empathy was the most frequently mentioned word.

Acknowledging that change is difficult and brings up worries about future tasks, responsibilities, ways of working and, in some instances, job security also means accepting that knowing about and handling those worries is essential to successful change. Yet, the ability to put yourself in your colleagues' shoes to try to understand their pain points and desires can be difficult. Thankfully, there is a simple tool to make that process easier

– conversations. It could be asking an employee questions and genuinely listening to the answers in a 1:1 coffee break. It could be setting 15 minutes aside for airing concerns in a team meeting. It could be testing thoughts with some of the people affected by the change. The methods are numerous, but the goal is the same: to shine light on your blind spots and improve your communication by giving room to the people who need to act on it.

The ten emotions that are missed the most in companies' communication:

1. Empathy
2. Excitement
3. Passion
4. Joy
5. Enthusiasm
6. Happiness
7. Engagement
8. Honesty
9. Compassion
10. Pride
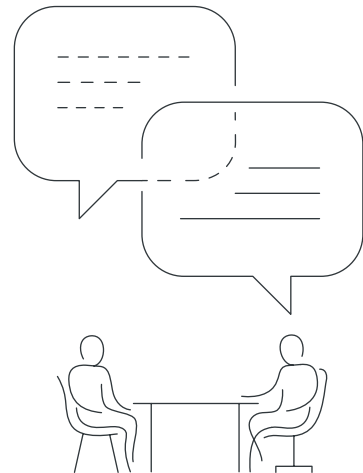
Excitement, joy and passion were also among the most frequent answers when asked which emotions people missed the most in their company's communication. It is not about being phoney or false. It is about bringing the energy that lies in your own passion for the project and using it to spark excitement. At the very core, change is about people (at least for a while longer). So do not be afraid to make the communication about people as well. After all, if you do not lead with energy and curiosity, why would your colleagues think to follow you?

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