Fish Where the Fish Are:

How Smart Companies Use Managers to Communicate Change

By Jack Goodman, Thomson Reuters

A major logistics software project for the U.S government crashes and burns. The ERP implementation for a global consumer company dies on the vine. While the failure of any complex IT initiative is the result of many factors, a critical common denominator is that these organizations were not sufficiently prepared for change. Good communication is key to any organization's ability to change – and managers are the linchpin of good communication. Here's a framework for understanding why, and how, your managers can help employees navigate through change.

Peek under the hood of any organization that's having difficulty adapting to change and – regardless of whether it involves a new technology, organizational restructuring, merger or acquisition, leadership transition or some other unsettling transformation – chances are you'll see some common elements:

- The executive team is not communicating its strategy for success; in other words, why is this change happening, how will we deal with it and what will we look like on the other side?
- Managers at all levels have few, if any, guidelines for what – or how – they're expected to communicate.
- Employees are receiving messages from multiple sources that are uncoordinated and inconsistent – a recipe for confusion.

In an environment like this, there's no shared vision for the organization and, as a result, people can't connect the dots to see how their jobs link up with the larger changes taking place, the role they're expected to play and what happens next. And that's an impediment to peak performance.

So what are shell-shocked employees supposed to do?

"The art of communication is the language of leadership."

This quote by James Humes, a former presidential speechwriter, speaks to how "managing" and "communicating" are not two separate skills; rather, communication is an intrinsic part of the manager's role. In fact, you could argue that communication is the single most important thing that managers do.

In their classic *Harvard Business Review* article, "Reaching and Changing Frontline Employees," TJ and Sandar Larkin focus on the critical role of managers in the change communication process and the importance of good old fashioned face-to-face communication in driving change. In the past few years, social media have become an important tool for professional communicators. But when it comes to helping employees understand and work through the complexities of change, there's no substitute for face-to-face engagement.

Every two years, HR consulting firm Towers Watson does a survey of global companies on communication ROI. What they've consistently found is that good communication is a leading indicator of superior financial performance across organizations in a wide range of industries and countries. Not only that, a key part of these organizations' success is that they train their managers to communicate effectively and help drive change.

Fish where the fish are.

Let's step back for a second. There are a number of ways that communication can flow through an organization: At one end of the continuum is a traditional top down, highly centralized communications environment, where messages from senior leadership are tightly controlled and disseminated broadly. While there's still an important role for this approach to communicating change, in that it's necessary for leadership to set the stage and provide employees with the "official" story, it's not sufficient.

On the other end, there's the decentralized, horizontal world of internal social media, where employees connect directly inside a company much the same way they do outside – they blog, they share pictures and video, they collaborate. These channels are great for creating conversations, but the problem with relying too much on social media to drive change (at least initially) is that there's often a level of complexity around a major change that requires a regular stream of up-to-date, relevant information, which senior executives are more likely to have. The challenge is that this information doesn't always penetrate deeply enough into the organization.

Enter another approach – "middle down" – which puts managers in the driver's seat and enables them to play a more significant role in helping their teams understand and support change. There's a considerable body of research showing that managers are consistently the most trusted source of information for employees when it comes to change. Since managers have this credibility with their employees, it makes sense to "fish where the fish are" and provide them with the tools and resources to advocate on behalf of whatever change is being implemented.

Timing is critical when communicating change.

The single most important thing that managers can do during change is to communicate what they know – and what they don't – clearly and repeatedly. Managers often assume that they've communicated once they've delivered a message, but employees need to hear that message over and over again, especially during a period of change, when their natural inclination is to hold on to the familiar and resist whatever is new and different.

Often there's a disconnect between the time managers, especially senior managers, first learn about a change that will impact their teams and when their employees are most receptive to hearing about it as well. While managers may want their employees to quickly focus on the change, in the early stages employees may be less interested, because they don't yet know how the change affects them. But over time, as the direct impact becomes clearer to individual employees, their interest increases. By this point, however, managers' interest frequently drops off, as they move on to new projects and priorities.

Here's the conundrum: Managers often don't spend sufficient time and energy communicating about change when their teams are most willing and able to accept and process the information. Managers need to reinforce the change over and over again – not only when they first become aware of it – because they have the critical role of helping employees translate the broad communication into the "What's In It For Me?" Managers provide context and clarity for employees as they make sense of the change and how it impacts them personally.

Here are three guidelines for how managers can communicate change successfully:

- **Candor.** Even if they can't answer "What's In it For Me," managers should be as open and honest as possible, meaning if they don't have all the information say so – and be clear about their intent to provide more detail and clarity as soon as possible.
- **Repetition.** Managers should provide frequent updates and, when leadership sends a message, look for the relevance and linkage to their team – and speak with team members about it. And if they need more information from their own managers, ask.
- **Visibility.** When working through change it's especially critical that managers get out of their offices and into the hallways (or on the phone, for those with teams in remote locations). Being visible and accessible is key to making sure that messages are being heard, understood and supported.

Elements of success: putting it into practice.

Given the pivotal role that managers play, there are a number of systematic actions organizations can take to equip their managers to drive communication and change:

Accountability. The first step is to articulate what and how managers are expected to communicate, so they understand that it's intrinsic to what they do. Draft a "communication charter" that lays out a minimum set of activities managers should be doing with their teams – holding regular meetings, following up with actions, building in opportunities to listen, etc. This may seem basic, but it's important for managers to have a communication operating rhythm already in place that they can tap into during a period of change.

Training. Like any new muscles, communication skills need to be exercised and used. Work with your communications function (or an outside consultancy) to develop a training module that takes managers through the basics of message development and communication planning. Focus on helping them: 1) identify their audiences, both primary and secondary; 2) determine their goals for communication, i.e., what they want each audience to know, do and feel; 3) create relevant messages that can achieve these objectives; 4) deliver the messages using the most credible messengers and effective channels; and 5) measure whether they have met their communication goals. Build in practical exercises related to the changes taking place, so that managers leave these workshops with actionable plans they can use immediately.

Reinforcement. As we all remember from Psych 101, if you want a behavior to continue it needs to be reinforced. Develop channels designed just for managers, which remind them how they're expected to use their newly developed communication skills. For example, prepare a weekly email (or more frequently, depending on the pace and scale of change taking place) that gives managers a core set of consistent messages to use when communicating with their teams. Create an intranet site with links to other resources that can support managers with their communication responsibilities. The goal is to keep wiring communication into the DNA of managers, as part and parcel of their role.

At my old company, Thomson Financial (before our parent company, The Thomson Corporation, acquired Reuters), we put this program in place during a period of major change in the company and saw striking results: in three years, the percentage of employees who could "connect the dots" between their own roles and our leadership's strategy and vision went from 61 percent to 84 percent. Similarly, the percentage of employees who believed management was communicating a clear plan for success grew from 47 percent to 68 percent.

It's not rocket science why this worked. For one thing, we started with solid research that set a baseline for how our employees viewed the company. We had strong – and vocal – support from senior management. In fact, our CEO publicly championed the communications charter for managers that we drafted. And the steps we took didn't break the bank; they were effective, not expensive.

Why focus on managers?

If there's one constant element in today's business environment, it's change. So we're not "done" – and never will be. Since managers arguably have the broadest reach and deepest influence across organizations, with the potential to make or break any change efforts, it makes sense to fish where the fish are by providing the resources and support they need to help our organizations succeed.

About the Author

Jack Goodman has worked for Thomson Reuters since 2003 in a number of senior communications roles, with responsibility for executive communications, training and communications support for managers, online and social media channels, and M&A and other change communications. Before Thomson Reuters, he co-directed IBM's corporate intranet, headed employee communications at McGraw-Hill, co-led the intranet practice at Xceed, a Web consultancy, and worked in public relations for Golin-Harris and Makovsky & Company. He can be reached at ***jack.goodman@thomsonreuters.com***.