

Disingenuous Communication Changes Everything -- Including Change

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of organizational communications in the failure of change transformation. Despite using solid communications strategies to gain buy-in during change transformations, many organizations fail in their efforts to achieve successful change transformations. This discussion proposes that buy-in to organizational change should be solicited before the change is underway. Efforts at communicating change often fail because the foundation of the communication is inauthentic organizational communication. Disingenuous internal communications promote disinterest in change transformations because when change messaging is met with skepticism, cynical receivers of the messaging will ignore it or even weaken the change effort in some way. Organizational messaging that incites skepticism and cynicism invites distrust, which adversely affects employee engagement and successful change. One way to help improve the change failure rate is to undertake a closer examination into how communications affect outcomes. Besides that, organizations can commit to further study into the effectiveness of communications before, during, and even after the change initiative.

Keywords: trust, buy-in, communications, inauthentic, engagement, disingenuous

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I would like to dedicate this work to my friend Vanessa who has always championed my potential and my father Bill who saw that I was educated. Most especially I would like to thank my friend, Vanessa whose boundless support and encouragement enabled me to accomplish this goal. She is my cheerleader who has inspired me to understand there are no limits on what I can do. Vanessa strongly encouraged me to pursue a graduate degree when I was having second thoughts about it. Three years later, here I am. Vanessa has listened to my ideas, been my inspiration, and taught me so much about life.

Disingenuous Communication Changes Everything -- Including Change

Introduction

This paper analyzes the role of internal communications — in particular, disingenuous organizational communications — as one critical reason for the widespread failure of change transformation initiatives. Internal communications (interchangeably employee communications or organizational communications), according to Berger (2008), can be defined as “communications and interactions among employees or members of an organization” (p. 1). The role of internal communications is to influence behavior change within an organization. Communications can move organizational change forward, disrupt it, divert it, obstruct it, sabotage it — or help make it sticky. Poorly conceived and executed communications strategies, dependent on inauthentic organizational communications, assures the challenging implementation of successful change initiatives.

Statement of the Problem

When it comes to organizational change, it is probably more known for its failures than admired for its successes. In comparison to its failures that are routinely discussed, little is said of its successes. It can be expected that in conversations around organizational change, the word “fail,” “fails,” or “failure” will find its way into the dialogue. The failure of change has been a decades-long affair. Change has been failing since the 1970s: “... despite the huge investment companies have made in tools, books, and training ... most studies still show a 60-70% failure rate for organizational change projects — a statistic that has stayed constant from the 1970’s to the present” (*Change Management Needs to Change*, 2013).

That indicator begs the question, is organizational change truly understood? If it is, we should be celebrating more of its successes. This paradox around change failure has invited

much scholarly research, and business and thought leaders have opined heavily about the failure of change. Scholars like Dr. John Kotter, who has spent a career researching and studying the topic extensively, cites the 70% failure rate (*Interview: Dr. John Kotter on Creating Organizational Change*, 2011). McKinsey's Harry Robinson reiterates the 70% change failure rate (McKinsey & Company, 2019). Change experts like Darryl Conner also cite the 70% change transformation rate (Conner, 2012). And research by Washington & Hacker (2005) confirms the 70% change failure number as well. Indeed, it has been well studied that organizational change transformations fail most of the time.

There is no shortage of theories that inform the reasons for change failure. These theories have been repeated over time by many. Of all the reasons advanced for organizational change failure, little is devoted to the discussion of how organizational communication influences its failure. Even less is said about those communications that result from perverse actions, like nefarious and disingenuous intentions or lack of critical thinking. Without a doubt, employee messaging plays a role in weakening change transformations.

Disingenuous Communication Leads to and Exacerbates Change Failure

I hypothesize that change communication fails because often its foundation is inauthentic communication of one form or another. Deliberate or unintended misrepresentation of the truth or failure to tell the whole truth leads to distrust. Internal stakeholders and their role in shaping communication strategies are rarely considered, but the subfield of change communications often regards employees as important stakeholders (Järventie-Thesleff et al., 2015; Lewis, 2011, as cited by Christensen & Christensen, 2018). It is up to practitioners and leaders to do the same.

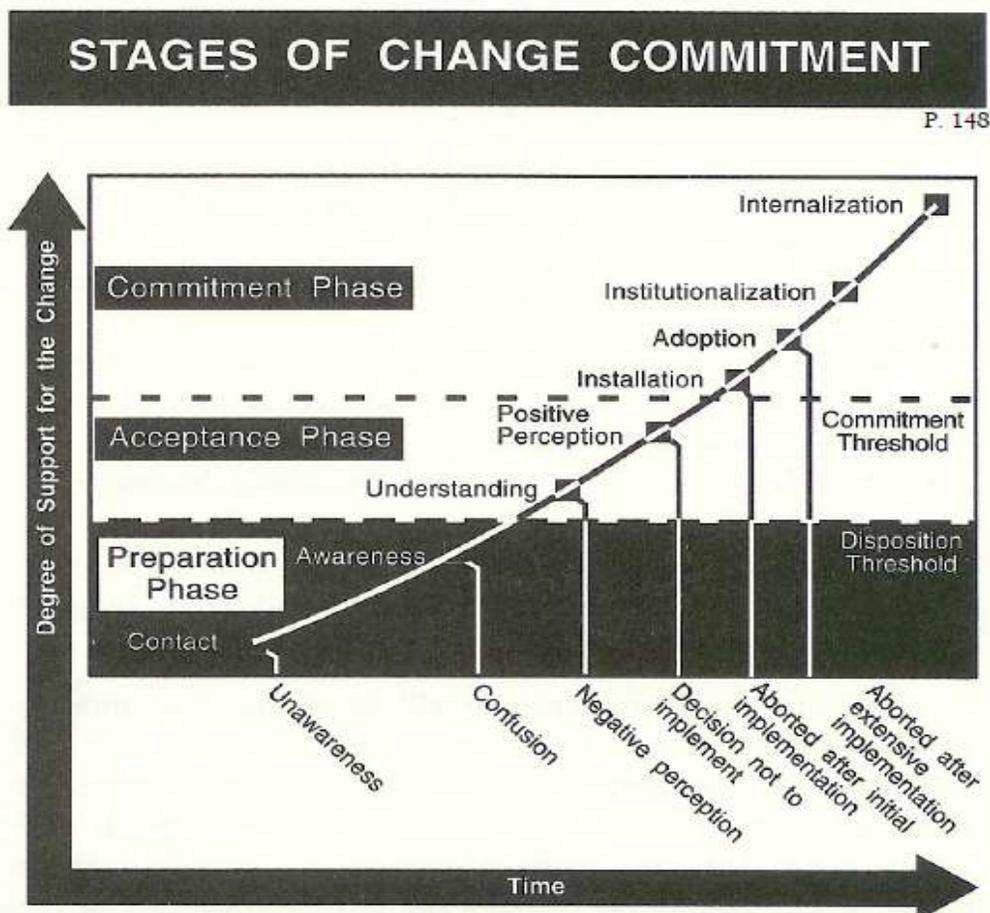
I further hypothesize that organizations seek buy-in for change at the wrong time — *during* the change initiative itself, when organizations should be looking to attain buy-in every

day with everything they say. To communicate and engage successfully with employees, leadership should think about actions before they think about the words (Zetterquist, n.d.). Internal communications is about people, so it is critical to manage this relationship successfully, *before* change occurs. And of course, *during*. *After* as well. Ignoring that employees are watching behaviors long before they are receiving messaging during transformation time is a misstep that could threaten successful change.

Darryl Conner's Commitment Curve (Conner, 1993, p. 149), shown in Table 1 below, depicts the 8 stages of change that require commitment from stakeholders at each stage in order to achieve a successful transformation. On close examination of Conner's Curve, it is apparent that the activities of internal communication occur throughout the stages of the curve; this further supports the undeniable significance of the communications function. All eight segments of Conner's Commitment Curve consist of variables that affect the trajectory of the change.

However, there is one constant —communications— which will help determine awareness of the change, confusion around the change, understanding of the change, perception of the change, and, importantly, reception of the change. The adoption, institutionalization, and internalization points on the curve are also influenced by internal communications. The location where people land on the curve as well as how long they stay there depends on the quality and authenticity of the messaging they receive, which will determine the employees' commitment to the change.

Table 1

Darryl Conner's Commitment Curve

Note: Adopted from *Managing at the Speed of Change* (Walker, 2014, p. 8).

The Unexplored: Less Commonly Cited Reasons for Change Failure

In the world of internal communications, practitioners are attending to many considerations around messaging. Throughout all this noise, surprisingly, the basics of communications often go missing; in particular, the dictates that power internal communications approaches that are more likely to create supporters and messengers who experience change transformation as something to be received, advanced, and promoted. This paper discusses two fundamental communications matters practitioners should give more attention than they

generally do; the first is *diverse and marginalized audiences*. Those who belong to certain social identities are apt to develop a keen awareness of inauthentic organizational communications — both internal and external. The second topic for discussion on unexplored communications failure that is dooming change transformation is the overall *messaging for all populations*. This messaging affects all employees — not just marginalized communities in the workplace; so, its impact is considerable and in the way it affects employee reception of change initiatives is profound and can potentially drive cumulative emotional assaults on employees.

Purpose of the Research

Highlight the Importance of Communications in Organizational Change

The primary purpose of this research is to highlight something that, despite its power, is overlooked and not given the credit it deserves. Organizational communications define an organization on so many levels. Its importance in securing sticky change cannot be understated, which is why the buy-in for the change initiative should start before the change initiative is even conceived. If it does not, why would anyone expect change communications strategies to be successful? Secondly, the research serves as a toolkit for communications change agents to inform their decisions around the everyday communications messaged by the organization. Beyond all the things leaders consider important in communications strategies, they should also consider that every word said today — or webcast they play — or townhall they host — or Zoom call they run — or presentation they share — impacts the success of change tomorrow. If the organizational structure is such that organizational communications is segmented in some way — e.g., change communications, internal communications, external communications, executive communications, crisis communications, etc., these groups should be collaborating all the time — before, during, and after transformation if the organization expects successful change.

Advocate for Truthful Communications

The overarching goal of this work is to advocate for authenticity in communications. I argue that authentic organizational communications foster improved employee engagement, which enables investment in the organization and its activities and goals. Apathy is minimized and employees are more committed to organizational success, if, for no other reason, to *honor* the leadership that honors them. When employees are messaged in the wrong way, they will not honor their leaders' will, goals, or agenda — or designs for organizational change. As a communications professional and change agent, I help influence employee loyalty to the organization, but any change agent is powerless to do this if the communications function is not prioritized in the organizational culture and narrative.

A Distinction Between Common Reasons and Unexplored Reason for Change Failure

Why do we see the common reasons and not the unexplored reasons for change failure? Organizational change leadership as an area of management is relatively new; most gurus, theorists, scholars, consultants and thought leaders in the field — those who have built, formed, interpreted, researched, studied and practiced within this realm in an expansive way, are likely mostly white males. Therefore, what they posit has become the foundation for this field of management. It has been through their distinct lens and observation that the norms, tenets, and understanding of the field of change leadership or change management has been interpreted. These individuals, as creators of the narrative, are naturally versed in the dialog around change transformation and its failures, but they are failing to capture and capitalize on the unexplored reasons why poorly executed communications strategies promote change failure, for they are distanced from this understanding in one way or another.

With all the scholars, practitioners, thought leaders, theorists, and business leaders positing about this area of management, and who bring such vast knowledge about the field, one might wonder why the 70% failure rate persists? Importantly, it would seem many change communications leaders are not inadequately versed in communications theory. Some of change's biggest names are academics in numerous disciplines, business leaders, MBAs — not everyone is a Communications practitioner or a member of a marginalized population. Also, until organizations develop a comprehensive approach to organizational messaging, understand what employees demand in their communications, and view communications through the varied lenses within an organization, change transformation will continue to fail. Continuing to sustain a minimal understanding of what change transformation means to everyone assures unfavorable outcomes. As long as there is no exploration into the importance of these understandings, change will not find the success it deserves. Bringing a feeble knowledge of the depth of how messaging is received and interpreted will just continue to expand the mechanism that breeds leaders who misread the role of internal communications on change transformation.

Significance and Implications of the Research

The research accomplishes three goals: (i) it is a guidepost for that debriefing conversation that analyzes why a change transformation effort has failed; (ii) it takes leaders down the path most do not visit, but is rife with insights which, if applied, can change outcomes and make change not only desirable but sustainable and sticky; and (iii) the findings are important because they establish that a comprehensive look at communications is a prudent step toward successful change transformation.

The research supports the view that transformations fail before they start; this would explain why even those that do succeed are not sustainable, or as sticky as hoped, so are declared

change failures. This research explains that it is the communications *before* the change — completely unrelated to the change underway — that dooms the change before it is even conceived. By the time the change effort has been strategized, decided on, picked apart, settled on, communicated, and put into place, the wheels that will guide its success or failure are already in motion. Organizational communications help turn these wheels and inspire trust among employees. “Once distrust exists, significant trust building efforts must take place just to return to the zero point of neither trust nor distrust. Even further efforts are required to then move into positive trust domain” (Currall & Epstein, 2003, p. 196). Buy-in does not come from the actions of communications executives or C-suite leaders’ communications directives; nor does it come from their chiefs who carry out their wishes. Buy-in is not bought; it is earned. Trust in the organization, its ethics, and its morals are important to gain employee loyalty and support.

For desired outcomes, organizations should embrace the broader realms of the impact of communications like they would address the truths of other matters related to the business. The communications function has different needs than it did a decade ago and should embody ethically sound, honest messaging suitable for its modern-day audience. Research has shown that in organizations, building a culture of trust makes a meaningful difference (Zak, 2016). The importance of employee trust to successful change management is discussed by Grates (2008), who states that effective communication builds trust, which is a key ingredient in strong, viable organizations (as cited by Berger, 2008). In their 2016 Global CEO survey, PwC reported that 55% of CEOs felt that a lack of trust was a threat to their organization’s growth (Zak, 2016). To build trust, an organization must take great care in how it communicates to its workforce.

Literature Review

Organizational Communication: Its importance to Organizational Change Leadership

The importance of communications in organizational change cannot be understated. It is “the key variable in almost all change efforts” (p. 95). Some argue that internal communication is indeed the most important driver business performance (Gay, Mahoney & Graves, 2005, as cited by Berger). Given its importance, communications can act as a disruptor when change is underway. Change transformation will be disrupted if any of these events are occurring during the change implementation: insufficient attention to change communications, resisting and blocking change, insufficient internal communications, and poor communications quality.

Hayes cites insufficient attention to the discipline of change communications, arguing that sometimes those leading change drive it from a technical perspective, ignoring people issues like communications, trust, motivation, and commitment (2014, p. 35). Those leaders who fail to attend to the people issues before the change as well as during the change, are adversely impacting how the change will be received by the employees. Hayes confirms that people can resist and block change by purposefully undermining a change already underway (2014). Though Hayes is talking about those *leading* change, other *stakeholders* will undermine change as well. People’s motivations are developed in large part by what they consume via organizational communications, and these motivations are manifest and executed in various ways. An individual, driven by their own ethical or unethical inclinations, can use various communications channels, including word of mouth, to resist change. Hayes discusses asserts there may be advantages to improved internal communications, such as “superior performance by improving internal alignment” (2014, pg. 83). Improving internal communications, however, means crafting the culture, strategizing and decision-making on the communications function before the change

is conceived. Finally, Hayes discusses communications quality, the relevance of which cannot be ignored. The quality of communications can significantly impact the success or failure of a change and can also influence whether it will garner support. Quality of communications will determine if it is consumed in the first place and to what extent, and to what extent it is acted upon or remembered.

Hayes' insights into change weakened by communications failures begs further inquiry into the nuances of organizational communication. His observations bring to light some of the considerations for communications and change leaders and reinforces the view that a deep appreciation of this science and its methods could yield more favorable change outcomes. Change management has many moving pieces; too often the communications piece is glossed over. Organizations that pay closer attention to this will likely enjoy improved employee engagement.

Organizational Communication: Evolution of Organizational Communications

History

As a recognized discipline, change management has been in existence for more than 50 years (*Change Management Needs to Change*, 2013). Its tradition started during the industrial revolution where corporate communications was top-down, cascading through layers of management until it made it to the rank and file. During this time, the other communications channel was the bulletin board, where workers would read posted notices.

During the industrial age, the purpose of organizational communication was to serve the industry and the focus was on “worker productivity, organizational structure, and overall organizational effectiveness” (Venditti & Library, n.d.). As a specialization, organizational communication can be traced to Alexander R. Heron's 1942 book, *Sharing Information with*

Employees, which examined manager-employee communication (Redding & Tompkins; Meyers & Sadaghiani, as cited by Venditti & Library, n.d.). W. Charles Redding is considered a founding father of organizational communications, which is why some consider that the tradition of this discipline really began in the 1950s with Redding's academic work, which later included the 1972 textbook titled, *Communication Within an Organization: The Interpretive Review of Theory and Research*. Redding was considered instrumental in developing organizational communication as a discipline. From the 1930s to the 1970s organizational communication contained an element of humanism within it, with those studying the field observing that it was actually broader than the historically narrowed focus on productivity (Cheney, 2007).

Current State

The current state of internal communications can be considered from three lenses: the power of the individual receiving the message; discursive language in the corporate narrative; and the effect of apathy, ethics, hubris, and half-truths in the language. Llewellyn & Harrison study how employees analyze examples of corporate communication, and their work provides understandings into the psychology and human behavior aspect of internal communications. The receiver of the message is empowered, and they have needs, and it is best for organizations to acquiesce to those needs. Previously secure relationships between identity, meaning and employment can no longer be taken for granted; instead, these relationships have to be built (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, as cited by Llewellyn & Harrison, 2006, p. 568). I would argue they must also be nurtured. The notion of the employees' authority is reiterated in other research. These days, it is apparent that receivers of organizational messages are co-constructors of meaning (Eco, 1979; Duranti, 1986, as cited by Christensen & Christensen, 2018). This is profound for it recognizes that messaging is more than top-down; it is multidirectional because

the intended recipient or target represents only a partial audience. When the messaging is shared with dozens or millions it is a reminder of the power of a single individual, part of the target audience of messaging. Those dozens or millions can and do include other employees and organizational leadership, not to mention other organizational stakeholders like vendors. Plus, there are potential clients, who might desire alignment with the organization. What might have started as a top-down message can mutate into a form of upward communication.

The current state of corporate communications employs discursive linguistic mechanisms to program people into an illusory sense of familial amiability. According to research, “employee relations are managed primarily through discursive, rather than coercive or remunerative forms of control (Kunda, 1992); where moral involvement, high commitment and social order are produced through the manipulation of abstract signs and symbols” (as cited by Llewellyn & Harrison, 2006, p. 569). Discursive labels like “team” and “family” and “we” and “all of us” and “our people” in organizational communications ‘promote certain desired sensibilities among employees’, in particular it serves to mute the hierarchical structure and influence employee involvement in the corporate structure (Casey 1995: 118, p. 112, as cited by Llewellyn & Harrison, 2006, p. 569). These usages are part of a calculated effort to create a unitary image of organization. Scholars argue that using “we” instead of “The Company,” “It,” or “They” as “efforts to reframe employment in terms of community” and though contrived, may provoke individual feelings of belonging and membership (Llewellyn & Harrison, 2006, p. 569). This demonstrates how powerful words can be when it can be shown that the power of contrived language to rouse emotions. Many may have noticed the word *employee* has fallen out of favor over the last decade or so. Llewellyn & Harrison write that customary images of hierarchy and formalization are being displaced by representations that emphasize egalitarianism and trust

(2006). The corporate narrative is built on language, which is why it is so important to pay attention to communications and words.

Questionable ethics, hubris, and half-truths as part of corporate communications can weaken efforts to gain buy-in for change initiatives because internal communications drizzled with this kind of messaging ensures that employees lose trust. Most employees are routinely overloaded with organizational messaging coming at them from every channel: emails, chats, conferencing, texts, phone and more. For larger organizations, there are a lot of channels, a lot of messages and a lot of messengers. Kotter & Cohen, found that in 80% of organizations the communications that flow to employees daily was being pushed out to them and that they neither asked for these communications nor did they need them, writing like it or not, the messaging was pushed to them (Kotter & Cohen, 2002). Leaders who send communications merely because they can, are green in the psychology of communications, which speaks to their apathy and hubris. Importantly, this apathy affects how and if the message is received by the target.

Today's corporation communications contain a good deal of deception and morally questionable methods to impart communications. Communication is meaningful because of the power of language to move people to do things, say things, feel things — even kill other people. When leaders fail to walk to the talk, people assume a tarnished view of the organization. Change agents and communications leaders should bring sound ethical stances to communications and recognize the importance of not just saying that you are ethical, but ensuring the rhetoric matches the organization's actions. And these managers must govern their activities to mitigate the quandary they might find themselves in when they are charged with advancing the organization's brand while managing any inconsistency between what the manager believes and what the organization champions.

Today, the war on the reader is indisputable. The hubris behind the written messaging to employees often disregards the reader. This hubris has been more pronounced over the last few decades with the emergence of digital communications. Readers routinely endure violations of visual design best practices, which makes the digestibility of content challenging. There are many examples of flagrant indifference to the user experience where messaging is presented in unsound ways. The examples below show what authors force readers to do:

- Grapple with small fonts.
- Read text across a widescreen page in landscape instead of portrait.
- Discern words when, for example, a white font is placed on a yellow background
- Scroll excessively.
- Read 25-line long paragraphs (unacceptable in business writing).
- Read bullet point entries, scrunched together with no padding between the entries.

Many, if not most, communicators present content in the way they like to see it, with disinterest in how the reader wants and needs to consume it. These unacceptable violations of content development degrade the reader experience. This action will assure that potentially important content is either not consumed or, if it must be, is consumed with contempt. If reading and digesting content becomes a loathsome experience, hubris has won.

Lying is pervasive in organizational communications and manifests in various ways. Fleming & Zyglidopoulos (2007) discuss four: (i) lies of commission, (ii) lies of omission, (iii) harmful lies that ensure the receiver might respond differently to change directives if they knew the hidden details that would have influenced their behavior, and (iv) those lies leaders engage in to simply avoid anxiety in stressful situations and who perceive this kind of deception as a defensive maneuver rather than a cunning act (Grover, 1993, as cited by Fleming &

Zyglidopoulos, 2007). It is relatively easy to perpetuate a lie almost to the point it goes unnoticed, by becoming an organization-wide phenomenon (Fleming & Zyglidopoulos, 2007).

Llewellyn & Harrison discuss some of the linguistic maneuverings that can be applied to disguise the real messaging; e.g., the flexing of pronoun usage as a potential way of framing top-down directives in an inclusive fashion. Their work also illustrates how crafted usages enable a nuance in the tenor of the discourse, so that a given message, for instance, is not as apparent as a top-down command (Llewellyn & Harrison, 2006). Messengers can manipulate language with careful use of pronouns. Examples of such skewed usages are discussed below:

- To soften rebukes — “Too many of *us* take extended lunch breaks.”
- To impose a separation between management and employees — “To be clear, *we* can offer no guarantees ...”
- To appear light-handed when describing imperatives — “Who’s responsibility is it to keep *our* skills current?”

Language can be manipulated to hide the truth. Examples are as follows:

- Concealing the identity of an individual directing an action — “The idea of 5% pay cuts *was* introduced.”
- Concealing the question of whose needs must be met — “*The* need for working in the office ...”

Llewellyn & Harrison (2006) discuss the relevancy of linguistic choices. Words can be manipulated to create the illusion that developments *just happened* and were not the outcomes of the actions of specific groups. This, they write, enables the author to have their cake and it, too. In instances when language is deployed in this manner, the goal is for the receiver of the message to come away with the impression that, for instance, an initiative was *employee-led*, rather than

motivated by management's desire to gain the appearance of being magnanimous (Llewellyn & Harrison, 2006). Issues of linguistics are germane to understanding the effects of internal communications, as they prompt us to take a closer look at truth-telling. If we consider the nominalization that occurs when, for example, a predicate is "realized syntactically as a noun" (Fowler, 1991: 79), which can then be used as the subject of a clause deletes many features of the predicate it replaces" (as cited by Llewellyn & Harrison, 2006, p. 578), it gives us pause about how language can be manipulated. This may sound like linguistic mumbo-jumbo, but an inability to more fully discern messaging is the reason why people are blind faith loyalists, for example.

The insights of scholars into the current state of internal communications implores further into the nuances of organizational communication. Their observations bring to light some of the present-day considerations for communications and change leaders and reinforces the view that a deep appreciation of this science and its methods could yield more favorable change outcomes. Today's global, astute, tech-enabled, knowledge-seeking workforce demands more from their employee communications. A rethink of the role of communications in change is long overdue.

Change Management: A Long History of Change Failure

The Same Theories

"Corporate transformations still have a miserable success rate" (Anand & Barsoux, 2017). "Studies consistently report that about three-quarters of change efforts flop—either they fail to deliver the anticipated benefits or they are abandoned entirely" (Anand & Barsoux, 2017). "An astonishing 75% of organizational change initiatives either fail outright or don't achieve desired objectives, according to research" Spencer & Watkins (2019). Anyone involved in the discipline of change management has encountered these mutterings before. Andreatta argues people just innately resist change and estimates 50-75% of change fails (Andreatta, 2017). Many

have theorized about the reasons for change failure, and many of these theories have remained the same over time. Scholars cite some of the following reasons for the failure of change:

In *Wired to Resist*, Britt Andreatta cites *change fatigue* (Andreatta, 2017).

McKinsey & Company (2015) and Schulz-Knappe et al. (2019) cite *employee resistance*.

Spencer & Watkins (2019) cite 10 reasons for change failure:

1. No clear and compelling case for change
2. Lack of senior team alignment
3. Abdication of leadership's responsibility to drive the process
4. Insufficient focus on co-creation in design
5. Communicating without really engaging
6. Inadequate focus on culture change
7. Lack of accurate, timely feedback on progress
8. Failure to create (and sustain) momentum
9. No focused effort to accelerate the transition phase.
10. Insufficient investment in developing people to succeed

Anand & Barsoux (2017) cite five reasons for change failure:

1. Flawed implementation
2. Organizations pursue the wrong changes
3. Out-of-control focus on growth
4. Leaders who lack the business acumen to sustain change
5. Failures in Quest phase with change leaders losing focus and overextending themselves

Kotter cites lack of employee buy-in (*Kotter's 8-step Change Model: Implementing Change Powerfully and Successfully*, n.d.).

Kotter cites eight major errors that lead to change failure (Kotter, 1995):

1. Not creating urgency
2. Not Creating a Powerful Enough Guiding Coalition
3. Lacking a Vision
4. Undercommunicating the Vision by a Factor of Ten
5. Not Removing Obstacles to the New Vision
6. Not Systematically Planning for and Creating Short-Term Wins
7. Declaring Victory Too Soon
8. Not Anchoring Changes in the Corporation's Culture

They all miss the mark when it comes to the communications function. It should be noted there are voices that dispute the widely held 70% change failure rate. Even if the failure rate was established at 20% and the success rate at 80%, communications is still at play in the 20% failure gap, and an audit into current internal communications practices is warranted to close the gap.

Other Theories Not So Widely Discussed

Hayes asserts that those leading change sometimes, when developing and implementing change strategies, give insufficient attention to people issues, like communication (Hayes, 2014); yet even this mention of communications fails to address the communications that occur ahead of any change transformation. What Kotter missed here and what he misses in his latest book, *The Heart of Change*, is the unspoken aspect of communications — how employees are spoken to, how they receive messaging, and how they share it. Today, communicators and change leaders engage with sophisticated audiences able to readily assess both the intent and the quality of

organizational communications. Which is why individuals keep the subtext of communications top of mind. These elements of subtext discussed in the following pages are the makings of continued assaults on the intellect of the receivers; and these reasons for change failure are not so widely discussed because they are quiet and cumulative. People's intellectual capabilities are not what they were in the 1950s. Today, people have access to vast amounts of information that fills in the blanks and arouses more curiosity and more knowledge and more hunger for knowledge. Today, people are truth seekers. And if one endeavors to optimize their chances for successful organizational change transformations, they will consider their messaging to diverse populations and their messaging to organizational members as a whole. And they will see to it that these truth seekers find what they are looking for.

Messaging to Diverse Populations. In messaging, we can celebrate a modicum of progress if we consider that a Black, homosexual woman over 50 is not going to interpret messaging the same way as her colleague, a 27-year-old, straight white male. Until leaders choose to understand the lenses of the people in their organization, organizational transformation will continue to fail, since workforce diversity is increasing. Until diverse perspectives are not so much sought — but rather, *appreciated* — organizational change transformations will continue to fail. As long as organizational authorities do not view change through varied lenses, fail to understand the totality of the communications function, and avoid queries into the sentiments and opinions of those with one or more marginalized social identities, change will, most assuredly, continue to fail.

In the United States, white males, as maestros of industry, have achieved amazing feats in business — this, without diverse perspectives. Maybe in today's global business landscape a \$50 billion company would be a \$70 billion company if it had diverse perspectives. Hayes writes

that if individuals are ignored, they may be motivated to resist the change (Hayes, 2014, p. 31). Consequently, communicators should consider diversity and inclusion (D&I) and social identities in messaging strategies. Social identities impact change transformation efforts as they color the lens by which organizational messaging is received and they act to diminish leadership's credibility with the workforce when the lived experiences of those social identities are ignored or dismissed in organizational messaging.

D&I and how it is handled and perceived should probably be top of mind — especially now, with social media. Saying one thing, showing another is hard to hide these days. Once the organization has proven to communicate disingenuously, what the organization says after that comes into question. Or is ignored. This includes internal messaging around change initiatives. When the staff discards organizational messaging, it will be challenging to get these populations to buy into the organizational narrative. To them, the organization is probably not completely trustworthy. Here, the change agent's work will be difficult. Kotter & Cohen wrote, "Trying to empower people who don't feel much urgency doesn't work" (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, p. 58). Organizations have to be mindful of their messaging and scrutinize the details. If a person is not engaged on a daily basis, why would they be moved all of a sudden during a change transformation?

What Employee Sees Versus What Organization Says. The seemingly endless chatter around D&I these days consistently serves to undermine the organization's credibility. For instance, oftentimes when organizations talk about their D&I shortcomings together with paltry promises for a better future, this posturing lands amid a backdrop of a stark reality that puts what the organization says at cross-purposes with what it delivers. The organization is at a disadvantage when there is a fissure between what is said and what is witnessed.

Promotions and advancements are a good example of what could be characterized as a contradiction. What individuals witness every day is not so much that people of color do not advance in the organization; they do, but they often do not advance at the speed or with the frequency of their white colleagues. And racial minorities and other marginalized populations often feel that to advance they must be — not just capable, but *highly* capable — in the viewpoint of white men and women. What does this have to do with transformational change? Everything. This is an assault — one which illuminates the gap between what leadership espouses and what their lieutenants deliver. The McKinsey article *Race in the Workplace: The Black Experience in the US private sector* asserts that a trust deficit exists between Black employees and their companies, and this trust deficit reflects Black employee perceptions of their workplace as less fair, accepting, and authentic (McKinsey, 2021). In the face of incessant dialog around D&I, glaring contradictions persist.

Things go unnoticed — like the videos produced for various webcasts or organization wide messaging that feature voiceover actors who are almost always white. Sometimes internal communication messaging documents consist of white-only images. If people keep seeing this kind of imagery, they will dismiss the communications associated with the imagery, especially if it is in contrast to the narrative that is delivered daily by leadership. There are the brochures, the hundreds of presentations and documents, the podcasts, the decks and presentations that visually embody perhaps only a pittance of the diversity the organization touts. It is probably considered absurd to suggest that this matter be considered important enough to result in a directive from the top-down that not a single visual message contain an all-white population unless this kind of presentation is appropriate or sensible for some reason. The apathy behind the decision to acquire and place in circulation stock images that fail to adequately capture the United States

population is unacceptable. It would seem the people who procure stock images give little credence to such matters, historically anyway. Something as seemingly innocuous as a stock photo can be perceived as considerably “louder” than it is thought to be. And this potentially high-decibel assault, especially when repeated, can be deafening ... and drown out other messaging, including change messaging.

Marginalized populations hear equality but have an experience where questions surround the inconsistency of what they see; for example, one might wonder if leadership pay is aligned with their delivery of a diverse workforce or if leaders are incentivized to diversify their teams. An attack occurs when it can be observed that there are no adverse consequences to maintaining a non-diverse team. The attack is intensified when people perceive that a leader’s advancement and even employment with the organization is secure, even if they keep their departments non-diverse. Marginalized populations see them advance through the organization to the upper echelons of leadership, while they oversee non-diverse teams of dozens or hundreds — this alongside the promise “we will do better.”

Organizations administer surveys to collect intel on many things, but surveys that assess say, the Black, Gay, over-50 experience in the organization are not sent. Traditionally, leadership has been disinterested in these insights from someone with multiple social identities. Senior leaders, obviously, also know what survey findings could yield and what it would mean. Overlooking, dismissing or ignoring the experiences of diverse populations undermines change effectiveness. Racial, ethnic and other diverse or marginalized populations will push back on messaging perceived as emanating from a sense of authority where the messaging is presented in a manner that dares the recipient to question its honor, heritage, or intent. Continuing to ignore these groups will only weaken the organization and cause its change strategies to fail.

Communicating to Racial, Ethnic and Other Marginalized Populations. Many do not know how to communicate to diverse populations; nor do they care to. As mentioned, these populations are not asked about their experience, and there are not enough people with decision making authority who want to ask. Leaders have little interest in what people with social identities (the disabled, older employees, etc.) do not hear in messaging, and they fail to consider these populations are acutely aware of verbal, written, and visual messaging and what is said and what is not. Therefore, these populations could display more cynicism toward organizational communications.

Organizational cynicism is basically a disapproving attitude toward one's employer. It is also "a pessimistic approach shaped by an individual to his or her company" (Yasin and Khalid, 2015, p. 569). According to Mousa, one of the most important definitions for organizational cynicism was written by Delken (2005, p. 10), who wrote it was "an attitude of rejection of the employing organization, or part of it, as a viable psychological contract partner" (Mousa, 2018, p. 285). Cynical employees have little faith in their organization and believe it lacks the principles of equality, sincerity, honesty, integrity, justice, morality, and transparency. Cynical employees also bring feelings of distrust, hopelessness, insecurity, disturbance, mistrust, anger, and disappointment (Mousa, 2018).

Because this cynicism is present, organizational communications serve another purpose beyond what is considered standard; it must quell this sentiment, because as long as this cynicism is experienced by employees, it will be difficult to achieve successful transformational change. And marginalized populations are probably more cynical than others. Reichers et al., (1997) and Tukelturk et al. (2012) articulate that some of the main factors influencing organizational cynicism are poor communication, nepotism, the existence of bias, ostracism,

disagreement with organizational values, and inadequate social support. Barefoot et al. (1989) describe cynical employees as “barriers” that prevent an organization from achieving its goals” (Mousa, 2018, p. 286).

The research shows how cynicism builds and how it emotionally effects employees and their interactions with the organization. Diverse populations experience oversights as attacks. These attacks, in the form of messaging, are particularly egregious when they are experienced in contrast with the organization’s stance on diversity and inclusion. It is in the interests of the organization to learn how to communicate with these populations to minimize their cynicism and persuade them to become ambassadors and advocates of the organization.

Hiding Diversity Information That Could Be Shared. Shrouding the truth in secrecy does not bode well for the organization — or its transformation efforts. Some organizations opt for concealment instead of releasing, for instance, what might be dismal diversity numbers. Even when the numbers are disclosed — for all the things the numbers do reveal, still, *other* numbers often remain veiled in secrecy. Despite apparent transparency, reality is hidden, and questions arise. For example, the questions below might speak to the experience of, for instance, a Black employee:

- Organizations boast about *hiring* PoC, but what is done to *retain* these employees or build and sustain an environment where they want to stay?
- How many of them are retained beyond five years?
- Are they promoted as quickly and as frequently as their white counterparts with similar educational backgrounds and experience?
- Are they given chances to fail and still prosper in the ways white employees can?
- Why do they leave? Does the exit interview really reveal the truth?

- Does the diversity report share the other numbers — departments with 80, 100, 120 people with less than five Black people members?
- What are the salaries of Black employees compared to their white counterparts, of women compared to white males, of over-50s compared to 27-year-olds?
- Are they not in senior leadership because they leave, not staying around long enough to advance? The other question then is why do their white counterparts stay for 8, 10, 15, 20 years, and what are the mechanisms in place to assure their comfort? They would not remain that long if they were not made comfortable. What do they get to make them comfortable that PoCs do not get to make them comfortable enough to remain for a decade?
- Is the Black woman not a senior leader because she was not promoted? Is that why she left?
- What is the incentive for leaders besides the “desire for diverse perspectives” to create a diverse workforce?
- How many over-50s are there in the organization?
- How many over-50s of color are there in the organization?

The release of a diversity status report could be considered a brazen attack, since for all it tells, there is far more it hides. Some people probably interpret such omissions with cynicism. Accordingly, it could be said that release of incomplete D&I information is an example of corporate indoctrination intended to divert the real truth. People can see the reality around them, and if it does not match with the messaging, this could antagonize employees and diminish organizational loyalty ... and support for change initiatives. Research shows that “Transparent internal communication leads to key relational benefits such as fostering employee trust and

credibility” (Rawlins, 2009; Stirton & Lodge, 2001 as cited by Lee et al., 2021, p. 5).

Organizations should strive to achieve transparency at all times and certainly before change transformations.

Virtual Silence on Age Discrimination. People will look for evidence of equality in organizational messaging. A friend to the Blacks, yet anti-Semitic; that is not equality. A supporter of economically disadvantaged youth, yet a misogynist; that is not equality. An ally to the gays, but anti-elderly; that is not equality. Equality applies to all people. Pages and pages of content and hundreds of hours of webcasts and townhalls bemoan the trials and tribulations of *minorities* or other underserved communities; yet little is said about discrimination of over-50s. This silence suggests the desire to discriminate against this populations and devalue their humanity. This appalling quiet violates this community and their allies. Organizations that dismiss this population’s existence will not attain buy-in from this group ... or their supporters.

D&I Leaders’ Ethnicity – Does it Matter? Can a white person effectively lead D&I efforts? Can these individuals make an impact? Can they drive change and advance the cause of those who are discriminated against in corporate settings? They can do those things and much more, but they will operate suboptimally on some of these issues, for the mere fact that their perspective, broad no doubt, is still limited and their range narrowed. For all the distinction these individuals deliver, they lack the critical element of perspective. Because these leaders lack this lens, it stands to reason their effectiveness is diminished by some measure compared to their brown counterpart who brings similar academic credentials and professional experience.

No doubt, some question how a white person could be suited for a D&I role. They will ask how could this person who benefits from white privilege lead in this role. How can they ever be able to lead and so speak to the experience of a marginalized population? And people will

answer these questions without the scholarship required to inform their responses. They may determine these assignments are wrong, unjust, or even racist. Try to get them to change. For some, a white person's presence in this position is an assault. It might even be thought that a white person in this role is an affront, since it could be thought that the organization is unconcerned about how this *looks*. Worse, the appointment of a white person in the role could be seen as a deliberate message signifying that "Your perspective, diverse as it may be, is not valued enough for this role to be yours."

I think people require proof of trustworthiness, expertise, and credibility. Are whites who occupy this position seen as credible? Should they be? Should they not be? Dr. Maura Cullen asked an important thought-provoking question, "Should diversity and multicultural professional jobs be earmarked for people of color? If so, what is the role of white allies?" (Cullen, 2015). This question is critical when considering this topic. Where do white allies fit into the fabric of racial and social justice, and how will they be supported as they do their part to bring about change and justice? This topic finds its way into this work, because for those who conduct no scholarship on the topic, they might dismiss the role of white allies — those in diversity leadership roles and those who are not. It is a question worth thinking about because of the strength of perception and how it affects engagement and ultimately buy-in.

The Nonverbal Communication That Screams. This paper does not explore a very real communications methodology — nonverbal, but it is powerful. Can Blacks behave the same as their white colleagues and still advance in the organization in the same way? There was once a white colleague who was bald with a long bushy beard and had a large tattoo of a biblical scripture on his arm. He would show up on calls sometimes wearing a wearing a baseball cap. He was liked and respected. Can a Black man appear like this and still be respected like the

white male is? Most Black employees would probably say if a black male showed up in this way, his career would go nowhere and he would never ever be promoted or fully respected. Once, there was a newly hired white male. His internal and LinkedIn profile picture was that of a young, white, unshaven man wearing a hat, with dark circles under his eyes — as if hung over. If a young Black male started at the organization and had a profile photo of an unshaven man wearing a hat who has dark circles under his eyes, he absolutely would not advance in the organization. I have known white managers who cuss freely who are promoted and rewarded. If I permitted my potty mouth to take hold at work, it would brand me, among other things, as crude. I once had a white colleague who routinely showed up on calls with barking dogs. A Black person had better not.

What is permitted for some is not permitted for others — or, at least, that is the perception, which should not be discounted. These things are not understood by those whose experience could be described as privileged. People of Color (PoC) know white colleagues can say and do things PoC could never could get away with. Observing this double-standard is not going to nudge this population into backing a change initiative. It is another assault.

Though this communication is not organizational communication, it is still a form of messaging that has to be reckoned with if the organization wants to be viewed as credible. Those who set eyes upon these men receive an offensive message. Moreover, it is not a message that is sent only one time; it is sent whenever people gaze upon these men; this means the message could be received hundreds or thousands of times. The message plainly states that one of these men was given the freedom to exhibit the hubris that empowered him to post on a professional forum a picture of a scruffy, tired, hung-over, gutter punkish persona — fine for the arts, but contrary to the expectation of his environment. Few can appreciate the power of this message.

It does not stop there. Those with certain social identities might periodically take a peek at his LinkedIn profile to see if he has been promoted — to see if he is still employed — to confirm the stamp of approval given him, denied to others, is still in place. What should the organization do? I have known the organization to “nudge” a person of color whose LinkedIn summary did not meet with their approval; there was nothing offensive or inappropriate about it; it just did not meet the preferred cookie-cutter verbiage. It is up to leadership to set unacceptable standards for LinkedIn and internal profile images; it is up to them to determine when an image fails to meet professional standards and to manage violators appropriately. What is notable about this man is that this picture was not placed on his profile months after he started. It was there when he started.

Repeated observations of what is commonly perceived to be a double-standard will make employees become more disloyal over time. Repeated affronts will increase cynicism. This non-verbal messaging is largely driven by culture. But the organization builds the culture. And those builders, if they want to continue to grow and change and have their workforce buy into their transformations, have to value the experience of diverse and marginalized populations; then they can strategize on their messaging to achieve successful outcomes.

Messaging for All Populations. Beyond messaging to marginalized populations, organizations have to be mindful of their overall messaging and how it is received by their workforce. Research suggests it is becoming clear that individuals receiving messaging cannot be reduced to one specific receiver role, but embody all these roles at once (Rowley and Moldoveanu, 2003, as cited by Christensen & Christensen). People who receive messages are messengers; as a result, there is an increased number of messages and viewpoints that organizations need to monitor and, eventually, respond to (Christensen & Christensen, 2018).

Today's message recipients have motivations and methods to dissect organizational communication and share their findings. People are not naïve, and if they are spoken to like children, they will themselves act out as children and expose the organization in public forums, easy to do in these Internet times.

Undue Praise. Leaders who fixate on repeating to staff how great they are diminish their own credibility and messaging — including change messaging. Forcing people to consume drivel in the form of obscene praise will breed resentment. The excessive praise routinely hoisted upon employees, which paints them as magnanimous when most are merely intent on earning a living, is inauthentic and its purpose, transparent. This insults the intelligence of the receiver. Christensen et al. discuss “empty or pretentious talk.” Importantly, they write that this dialog is seemingly pervasive in contexts where power is exerted (2019, p. 3) — like the organization.

A peek on the Fishbowl app, however, shows who the employees really are — people who are more than just friendly, considerate, compassionate, and noble — but people who are angry, petty, greedy, entitled, elitist, neurotic, childish, mean-spirited — people who are gossips, whiners, braggarts, and complainers. These caricatures exist in stark contrast to the people the organization wants to put in their storyline. The organization, as if some would-be fiefdom of altruism, indoctrinates its subjects daily, under the guise of admiration. The less discerning exist in a fictional microcosm of fabricated lunacy where everyone is glorious. For others, outside this utopia, doubt can arise about the story that is told versus the story that is real, skewing these doubters' view of the organization's messaging, its leaders, and the organization itself. It is difficult to buy in when, every day you are told how lovely you are by someone who is utterly unable to gauge your exquisiteness. And so, this dialog communicates deceit. Considering this kind of messaging is regularly pushed onto employees via multiple communications channels,

senders should consider that the overabundance of feigned tributes could be experienced as meaningless and insufferable. The change agent's job is hard.

A transgression can be particularly heinous when it is underway in full view; as if the perpetrator dares anyone to acknowledge it, as if the perpetrator feels invincible, as if the perpetrator cares not what others think. Many might consider this stance unacceptable, and this could lead to disengagement. When excessive, the phrasing “thank you for your dedication to the organization” becomes grotesquely synthetic, persisting beyond its usefulness, relevance, and truth, because as Christensen et al. write, this messaging is sent by an agent who knows his audience is willing to let him get away with it (2019).

If the organization continuously says to its workforce *thank you for all of your hard work, you are great*, it implies the workforce members are overly virtuous, which is a fallacy of course. These terms amount to psychobabble intended to manipulate the recipient since this *praise* language is intended to enact an emotion of gratefulness to the leader for acknowledging this; yet the result is often cynicism. This attempt to shape the narrative to drive benevolence is a farce and a construct apparently based on madness, when we consider the workforce in 2021. Christensen, et al. write that the “bullshitter ... fails to care whether the audience believes the message or not as long as the bullshit is ignored or allowed to pass” (Christensen et al., 2019, p. 9). Considering this kind of “bullshit” occurs all day every day in an organization, why would communications or change transformations be met with anything besides indifference or contempt? Further, as Christensen, et al. point out “people often pass on bullshit without any intention to misdirect” (Christensen et al., 2019, p. 10). This is observed when leaders' direct reports repeat the leaders' words, “*thank you for all of your hard work, you are great.*” Company

men should consider that groupthink — which can occur even in the most prestigious of organizations with the smartest men and women — can adversely impact the organization.

There are those times when the sender reveals themselves as messengers of lies and leaders who deem it acceptable to direct inauthentic messaging to employees. For intelligent adults, this assault will likely lead to disengagement with the leader, their lieutenants, and the organization. These disengaged workers will bring zero interest and support to a change initiative unless they are personally impacted by it and then their activities around it will be self-serving, anyway — the interests of the organization not be top of mind.

Repetition. Repetition becomes an annoyance, which, over time, adds to an already jaundiced eye toward organizational leaders. When a leader repeatedly speaks the same phrasing in written and spoken communication — for example, that they are *thrilled with* where the organization is, what the organization has overcome, what they envision for the future — is can be overdone. The result is a measure of simulated giddiness that arises, which dilutes the messenger's words, turning the messenger into a clownlike distortion who employees are likely to doubt — including when this leader becomes *thrilled with* the upcoming transformation; for this leader is seemingly *thrilled with* all things at all times. Continual excitement about all things invites scrutiny; for example, unfounded questions like, “Thrilled? Yeah, I bet. You probably bring in a few million a year.” Or, “Yeah, I bet you're thrilled. You're going to benefit from this outcome.” Plain, transparent language would likely be better received (Dixit, 2018) instead of the messenger posing as a second-grade teacher, shielding youngsters from the harsh realities of the world. Willful attempts to placate the audience by constantly repeating certain phrasing will incite contempt for the leader, who comes across as disingenuous. There may have been in a case

for this kind of pretentiousness 50 years ago, but today too much is out in the open, in front of what was once a tight veil of secrecy. Measured and authentic language is best.

Word Choices. It would be silly to micromanage every word a person writes or says or scrutinize speech unnecessarily; but some phrasing should give the leader pause. In consideration of the separation of church and state — or church and work, certain religious language is inappropriate. One of the truths about religion is the hubris of some practitioners who presume their truth is someone else's. Saying how the organization is “blessed” could be offensive to atheists and agnostics and brings into question the leader's judgment, even to the smallest degree. Saying this also causes other people to make their own judgments about the leader — right, wrong, good or bad — that the leader's commentary is insolent and offensive (even if well intentioned). Some people could take this the wrong way and color everything the leader says with this stroke of contempt. It is just as easy to say the organization is on sound financial footing or weathered an economic downturn or some such verbiage. This was one example of thousands. Leaders should be mindful about pushing their own truth onto others — particularly with respect to religion or church.

Spin, Word Play, Corporate Speak, Propaganda, Euphemisms. Anderson writes about the importance of words and their context and argues that the interpretive processes we use to make sense of words often go unexplored (2020). An organization can invite distrust among the ranks depending on how they spin things. An example of this could be the dissemination of the organization's D&I statistics. If those numbers are embarrassing, the organization could manipulate the narrative to achieve its desire; e.g., “... but the numbers don't tell the whole story...” Conversely, if the numbers were welcome, the rhetoric could be spun like so: “the

numbers tell it all — we have magnificent diverse representation.” Rittenburg et al. posit that spin “creates misinformation and outright deception” (2015, p. 316). Spin is disingenuous.

It would seem corporate speak is necessary and that euphemisms are the order of the day, since they commonly beat out the other option — providing explicit guidance, direction, instruction, or information. “The purpose of euphemisms is to sugar-coat terms that people may find offensive or objectionable, that is, to reduce the transparency of the communication” (Rittenburg et al., 2015, p. 319). Yet, people demand honesty. Research shows that transparency in communication positively affects subordinates’ ratings of their manager’s trustworthiness and effectiveness (Rittenburg et al., 2015). Euphemisms reduce the impact and thus the transparency of negative terms. Among other things, euphemisms are used to “mislead or obfuscate the real meaning of what is being said” (Rittenburg et al., 2015, p. 315). Some examples of euphemisms include “development” instead of the “need for improvement.” Adults experience a two-fold strike when receiving this messaging: first, they are perceived to be performing poorly and second, they are being spoken to like a child. Rittenburg et al. write that some studies suggest that employing euphemisms to deceive or mask negative consequences may backfire and that aboveboard, transparent communication may serve a company better in the long run (2015).

One definition of propaganda is the “deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2018 as cited by Malhan & Dewani, 2020, p. 5). But it takes on a different definition in corporate settings: In corporate settings, propaganda is defined as communications for the sole purpose of persuading a target audience to adopt attitudes and beliefs chosen by the sponsors of the communications (Carey, 1997 as cited by Malhan & Dewani, 2020).

Corporate leaders utilize propaganda to manipulate followers. As Aaltio-Marjosola and Tuomo (2000) stated, “Propaganda means the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior...” (p. 162 as cited by Fioravante, 2013, p. 119). Propaganda apparently does not create new beliefs. A propagandist builds on the audience’s existing beliefs and uses them as anchors to alter or form new beliefs. “The stronger the belief of a receiver, the more likely it is to influence the formation of a new belief” (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2018 as cited by Malhan & Dewani, 2020, p. 3). Many would probably believe and accept a level of corporate propaganda as status quo. Propaganda, however, is still inauthentic; and how ever it shows itself, it is still that. It could be construed by those who tire of it or object to its messaging, as more — as in another assault — inauthentic communications. “Honesty always trumps propaganda” (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, pp. 138–139). This seems to make sense and will probably help with organizational change.

Two People: One Professional. When people are asked to buy into the change, they are asked to believe in it. And when people believe in something and discover it is not what they thought it was, they become disillusioned. Credibility is germane to organizational communications. One time, a leader for an important community-affairs initiative of the organization, implied in her email messaging that she was warm and welcoming. When she wrote, “you can contact me anytime,” it seemed like she meant it. But after she was contacted a few times, it became apparent she did not care to advance privately the cause she so feverishly promoted publicly. Masquerading as one thing and revealing herself as another was one way to make sure people ignore organizational communications. In this instance, had the previous communications been more even in frequency and tone, she might have received a pass for being nonresponsive when engaged. But since the goal of her messaging was apparently to convince

employees that her cause was great (and by extension, her too) and that people should get involved, her real-life persona was a letdown — and she was an example of a leader not living the organization’s mission statement or value statement. This individual is no longer trustworthy. Her messaging might not be, either, when she seeks our attention again.

Lying About Reason for Change. Towing the company line; one time a woman informed the team that activities and elements of their existing job function were going overseas because the organization observed that people in other countries who were performing administrative activities for teams in the United States held advanced degrees and we wanted to make sure they were able to use their degrees to do more fulfilling work. This was impossible to believe — that this multibillion dollar organization was in any way concerned about the career advancement of workers in developing countries. Anyone who follows trends, business activities, and happenings within their profession probably would not succumb to this tale, but would likely resent that it was told. Not only were people fed an appalling lie, there was the added sting of when the person lying to you knows you know they are, yet they possess the gumption to advance the charade. It may have been easy for her since her messaging was sent behind servers, through email and she did not have to look at anyone when she said those words. She had options and numerous ways to communicate the message: some of your work functions are going to be performed by offshore teams. But to say that our organization was magnanimous in this way was an attack. This turned out to be a significant change transformation in many ways and the first messaging communicated started with a lie.

Happy Family False Narrative. Leaders endeavor to position the corporate structure as a bastion of benevolence filled with always-positive do-gooders who are practically in love with their colleagues; yet one look into Fishbowl dispels that fib. It is dispelled every day in actions

and deeds when employees ignore or behave contrary to the values established in value statements and mission statements; it is observed every day in the ethics of the everyday employee. In *Heart of Change*, Kotter & Cohen write that positives can be overplayed till they become unbelievable; then skepticism arises (Kotter & Cohen, 2002), which reduces the credibility of communications. The average employee just wants to work and advance their career, not partake in a lovefest with their colleagues. When organizations were smaller, perhaps in the early part of the 20th century people were probably more connected than they are in today's large global organizations, which do not seem to be characterized by benevolence.

Saying we care for each other, embrace organizational values, and live mission statements is hardly well-received when in practice, people are as dismissive as they are helping, as indifferent as they are caring, as demanding as they are understanding. And too, many in corporate paradigms have mastered the ability to lie without blinking an eye. Christensen et al write “much of what is said in contemporary organizations is bullshit because it is disconnected from organizational practices and ‘avoids reference to the truth’” (Spicer, 2013, as cited by Christensen et al., 2019, p. 13). Organizations boasts about who they have employed — educated, degreed individuals with the capability to think critically; however, when convenient, like during a change initiative, those same individuals are then expected to be the antithesis of what the organization says they are: cognitively challenged braindead cohorts who lack the ability or desire to think critically.

This is an example of the blithe chatter that is disconnected from more important organizational initiatives. Narratives put forward are part of an organization's strategy and are designed to advance organizational interests; even if incompatible with reality. Promoting a contrived false narrative such as this hammers another nail into the coffin of successful

transformational change because it propagates continued intolerance for any messaging seen as irrelevant to the receiver's personal interests or germane to their employability in the organization.

Organizational Communication: Devalued Communications Function Impacts Change

Communications Function Is Not Seen as Important

Communications leaders often lament the fact that this function usually gets a backseat at the table and is not top of mind for senior or executive leadership in most organizations. During a meeting, a leader beamed with pride when she said we were on a “privileged perch.” She was talking about how our communications team operated within a culture that valued us a great deal. This was the exception. Communications is ignored, misunderstood and devalued at an organization's peril. People understand, believe in and appreciate the wordsmith's ability to put words together; but few reflect on the power of those words. Oddly, the power of words is still not fully appreciated by business titans. “To put it bluntly, corporate communications is the spurned stepchild of the C-suite.” (Marx, 2015). It is the nature of words in a corporate paradigm; generally, they do their job quietly, going unnoticed, changing minds, influencing behavior. They are often unquestioned unless there is a glaring grammar error. Unfortunately, many organizations do not give the function the attention it deserves, and it is costing some companies dearly (Marx, 2015).

Communications, unfortunately, is undervalued; this according to Dorie Clark, author and adjunct professor of business administration at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business. The main reason for this is because the ROI on internal communications is difficult to measure. Communications expert Walter G. Montgomery, who writes on Knowledge@Wharton, adds that internal communications requires three elements that demand a degree of thinking that busy

executives usually prefer to forgo: (i) a high tolerance of ambiguity, (ii) contradiction, and (iii) subtlety (Marx, 2015).

Hard to Measure ROI and Internal Communications Effectiveness

Not only is it difficult to measure, sometimes it is impossible to measure. But communicators need to be able to quantify communications. There are a lot of obstacles interfering with ROI, including the fact that the very “definitions or interpretations of ROI can vary and “it is extraordinarily difficult for most IC professionals to show a quantifiable, precise and provable correlation between their communications and their company’s bottom line, the return on investment” (Vaughan, 2017).

Vaughan argues that the measurement of internal communications activities needs to be rethought and that the term ROI should be discarded; and instead, the focus should be on more easily understood and measurable concepts. Because this function and its effectiveness cannot be satisfactorily measured, there are problems in organizational communications. Too many communications leaders focus on output measures like open rates, click-throughs, page views, rather than on outcomes like changed behavior, knowledge, attitude, or opinion (Institute of Internal Communication [IoIC], 2019). Until these outcomes are addressed, they will play a part in not only the function of internal communications but change communications as well.

Words and Writing – Business Communication Is Not Sexy

In the scheme of things, business communication is arguably not as sexy as other forms of writing. People admire the output of creatives like novelists, playwrights, and poets. But the business writer probably grieves the incoherent understanding of the value they bring. If their value is not sufficiently understood prior to the change, why would this be any different during a change transformation? The power of business writing might not be so readily apparent, like the

power of the luscious scenes drawn by screenwriters. Though the business writer might be admired and valued, this individual is rarely elevated to their proper position within the organization. Instead, to advance their career, they become managers, complicit in advancing archaic organizational thinking and in danger of drifting into wooden writing and corporate jargon, taking pride in the constructing sentences littered with buzzwords.

Theoretical Framework

Elaboration Likelihood Model

Skepticism and cynicism occur when information is being processed. One communication model that addresses the processing of messages is the Elaborate Likelihood Model (ELM). The ELM asserts that persuasion occurs through either the central route or the peripheral route (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986, as cited by Panda, 2018). Individuals process messages through either route, depending on the type of message they are processing. The ELM spotlights the receiver. Some messengers, it would seem, perceive message recipients as mannequins that merely serve as the object of their messaging. Yet, research shows otherwise.

Central Route Processing

“Central route processing uses logical reasoning and requires careful and thoughtful consideration of the true merits of the message presented” (Panda, 2018, p. 39). Indibara & Varshney write that the choice of central or peripheral route by the receiver depends on the ability and motivation of the receiver to analyze the incoming information (2020). Attitude changes created through the central route are also more resistant to future messages; this is because attitude changes induced via the central route involve considerably more cognitive work than attitude changes induced through the peripheral route (Panda, 2018). The central path is

most appropriately used when the receiver is motivated to think about the message and has the ability to think about the message (Oregon State University, n.d.)

Peripheral Route Processing

In contrast, peripheral route processing makes use of some cues in the persuasion context as it relies on the attractiveness of the source; e.g., visually appealing design such as flashy computer graphics or appeal to the sense of hearing with background music in an advertisement (Panda, 2018). These message recipients focus less on the core message and more on the “noise” that surrounds it. This means that if the Indi bara message is ambiguous but attitudinally neutral to the receiver or if the receiver is unable or unmotivated to listen to the message, then the receiver will look for a peripheral cue. Peripheral cues include such communication strategies as trying to associate the advocated position with things the receiver already thinks positively toward (e.g., food, money, sex), using an expert appeal, and attempting a contrast effect where the advocated position is presented after several other positions, all distasteful to the receivers, have been presented. If the peripheral cue association is accepted then there may be a temporary attitude change and possibly future elaboration. If the peripheral cue association is not accepted, or if it is not present, then the person retains the attitude initially held (Oregon State University, n.d.).

The Outcomes

Academic research shows that if the receiver of the messaging cares about the issue and has access to the message with a minimum of distraction, that individual will elaborate on the message. Moreover, lasting persuasion is likely “if the receiver thinks or rehearses favorable thoughts about the message” (Oregon State University, n.d., p. 1). On the other hand, a move away from the advocated position is likely if the receiver rehearses or thinks unfavorable

thoughts about the message (Oregon State University, n.d.). Some of these thoughts might include recollections of the other assaults they have experienced in their consumption of organizational communications — written, digital, video, online, internal. These thoughts will not help when it is time for the change communications team to go to work. If the message is ambiguous but in line with the receiver's attitudes then persuasion is likely, but if the message is ambiguous and at cross-purposes with the receiver's attitudes then receiver will take a position opposing to the position being advocated effect is likely.

Interestingly, research shows there are differences between the ways this messaging is processed based on how the receiver is processing the information. The ELM theorizes that persuasion resulting from central route processing is more prominent than that fostered by peripheral-route processing (Panda, 2018). According to the ELM, people who are more cognitively driven and who process information more analytically, are likely to process messaging in great detail, and those who choose the central pathway will tune into the messaging and evaluate the degree to which the messenger is attempting to manipulate their thinking.

Research shows that if the receiver is motivated and able to elaborate on the message and if there are compelling arguments to use, then the central route to persuasion should be used. If the receiver is unlikely to elaborate the message, or if the available arguments are weak, then the peripheral route to persuasion should be used” (Oregon State University [Oregon State], n.d.). The best approach is to avoid provoking employees with poorly executed communications strategies.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

It is well established in psychology that often people feel more comfortable by disconnecting from thoughts and experiences that bring discomfort. So, we see the theory of

cognitive dissonance in the workplace in organizational communications; for example, an organization's communications strategy born of groupthink where leadership leaves over-50s out of the conversation. Leadership will toe the line on this silence, though they are intellectually capable of understanding this is unethical and immoral. The newly acquired understanding — perhaps behavioral norms expected of a senior leader in the organization — that this is a topic not discussed, promotes cognitive distance and the fissure between the truth they know and the “truth” they been given. Many who violate the norms of empathy and ethical conduct soften the blow of this conduct by convincing themselves that talking about race and gender is enough to cast them as paragons of virtue. So, incessant communications about race and gender becomes the chatter du jour. The changed behavior — to talk about *other* discrimination instead — is a way to reduce dissonance and “increase the attractiveness of the chosen alternative and to decrease the attractiveness of the rejected alternative” (McLeod, 2018).

“Deeds speak volumes. When you say one thing and then do another, cynical feelings can grow exponentially. Conversely, walking the talk can be most powerful” (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, p. 92). The over-50s will note their exclusion from the narrative, and they too will become cynics and skeptics. This will not help with next year's transformation. It will serve as a reminder of the communicator's ability to, in effect, inject falsehood into the discussions about equality.

Secondary Data Analysis

I looked at a small study with 25 participants. The authors wrote that all 25 study participants reported that in their experience “once trust is created, communication is more effective” (Ballaro et al., 2020, p. 54). If one ponders solutions to the issues highlighted in this seminar paper, one way, among many others no doubt, to address disingenuous organizational

communication is through an intervention of some sort. This small study illustrates the position of this seminar paper, which spotlights problems with internal communications and why they should be addressed. This paper does not cover the natural next step: the repair.

Since a change is necessary if we want to see authentic communications that establish trust, it is worthwhile to look at a result this seminar paper could conceivably yield — a comprehensive examination and, presumably, repair, of an organization’s communication function. Therefore, it is worthwhile to consider data from a source such as a science-based process such as organization development; this helps one understand not only the problem — but the solution as well and why said solution is notable. The qualitative case study was undertaken to “explore how an organization can optimize its talents through successful organization change and performance” (Ballaro et al., 2020, p. 45). This research is germane to the discussion of disingenuous communications and change. The study authors argue that for organization outcomes to improve, behavior change must be the primary focus of any intervention activity. The data collection process for the study consisted of 25 in-depth interviews (one with each participant). The study findings produced four themes; three of which are pertinent for our examination of the data. The study revealed three important employee viewpoints that are important to employees, which help inform our understanding about internal communications:

- 1. True communication will not occur until a trusting relationship is formed; once trust has been created, communication is more effective.** People need to feel more than comfortable about the change before they advocate for it; they have to trust the organization, its culture and its leaders. If they receive the right communication first, they will trust.

2. **92% of study participants asserted that communications practices are an important skill for an effective leader to master.** This aligns with the fact that leaders need to be versed on communication intricacies. This underscores the importance of communication to employees.
3. **100% of participants agreed that the most effective way to implement and communicate change successfully is by planning for change, which a trusted relationship has been built, which fosters an alliance, which fosters a mutual agreement in which the organization and employees' benefit.** Ergo the keys to effective and lasting change transformation summed up in a small study powered by OD theory: trust, leadership communication acumen, and the idea of an alliance, with everyone working together to bring about transformational change that will benefit and perpetuate the organization and its people.

Trust Enables Sustained Change

The idea of trust is central to the hypothesis that organizational communications that promote distrust in the message, the leadership, the organization subverts change transformation since the message recipients will not respond to the change messaging the way the organization intended.

Summary

This paper explored communications, an often-overlooked organizational function. This function is critical in ensuring sustainable change. Change failure is an expensive proposition. Change experts Prosci discuss some of the numerous costs of change failure in their blog article, *The Costs and Risks of Poorly Managed Change* (Creasey, n.d.). These costs include budget overruns, diminished productivity, and opportunity costs, among others. The paper

discussed the idea that change communications should not be something that is thought of during the transformation to bring about buy-in, but that effective organizational communication should be occurring before change begins. The research also highlighted flaws in the way the organization messages its diverse population and its overall workforce as well. The way organizational messaging occurs before, during, and after transformation will directly affect the success of change transformation.

Conclusion

When organizations settle on inauthentic or disingenuous communications policies that violate ethical, moral or psychological contracts, they, in turn, assault people who experience these assaults 40 hours a week, month after month, year after year. These repeated assaults make for a battered and bruised person. Change exhaustion is something secondary. These communicative assaults set the stage for disengaged, cynical, dismissive employees who resent even being asked to advance a change. These cynics might simply ignore the calls for buy-in or even undermine change efforts. When the workforce is supportive, successful change transformation is more likely. Given the frequency, severity, and cumulative nature of the assaults, organizational trust dissipates. Repeated assaults lead to disengagement and exhausted people with no bandwidth to consider the change even if they wanted to. It will be difficult to make this group buy into a change initiative or anything else.

We should acknowledge the challenges communicators face, which forces their hand to make certain decisions. “As an organization-wide aspiration, strategic communication is shaped by multiple concerns, principles and forces that push the discipline in many different directions simultaneously” (Christensen & Christensen, 2018, p. 439). There are numerous contradictory demands for communications professionals and change agents to navigate. Some of the

challenges they face include that strategic communication is a field that “needs to accommodate the existence of conflicting concerns, principles, and forces” (Christensen & Christensen, 2018, p. 441). While aiming for consistency and alignment, organizations must simultaneously respond to divergent pressures, norms, and standards in areas such as, diversity, justice, transparency, etc. The communicative maneuverings involved in such responses are likely to produce perceptions of inconsistency, and even “bullshit” (Frankfurt, 2005 as cited by Christensen & Christensen, 2018, 446). Some of the assaults discussed in this paper are those from which people do not recover — so when it comes time for organizational transformation people are indifferent, averse, or committed to rejecting the change. Change agents and communications professionals must add another best practice to their toolkit — the ability to recognize unspoken communications issues and identify inauthentic communication. Blindness around these truths do not help or sustain organizational transformation efforts. Sadly, when the leader and their lieutenants have to be convinced to elevate communications to its rightful place in the organization, it has already meant thousands of missed opportunities to inform, persuade, influence, and prime for change. This just seems like bad business.

Recommendations

Internal communications means different things to different organizations. Some place it in marketing and sales, some in PR, some in Corporate Communications. Sometimes it is a part of HR; sometimes it is part of a catchall like HR, Marketing & Communications. It probably would not hurt for organizations to rethink the structure of internal communications; once this occurs, leaders can better gauge its effectiveness.

Organizations must reprioritize the communications function to enable authentic, meaningful messaging delivered in a manner that resonates with its intended audience. Because

the organization is always changing, it always has the opportunity to audit its communication methodologies and adjust them so that when a large transformation is underway, all the moving pieces that must be addressed — certainly, the vital communications function — has had a head start.

Leaders should consider research findings, which point to the fact that what seems like indifference toward disingenuous corporate messaging because it is not immediately confronted by the audience may hide a more subtle type of cynicism or resistance that can surface later (Mumby et al., 2017; Ybema & Hovers, 2017 as cited by Christensen et al., 2019). Indifference should not be confused with tolerance. Resistance, commonly a major barrier between the change agent and successful implementation of the change manifests in behaviors such as pushback, criticism, foot dragging, workarounds, non-responsiveness, negativity in comments, or even sabotaging the change (Anderson, 2020). Letting the bullshitter “get away” with the bullshit, so to speak, is not necessarily a tolerance for such talk in organizational practice. Bullshit piles up and may over time undermine trust and authority (Christensen et al., 2019, p. 22).

Where there is an ineffective communications strategy, the author says to do this: “Fix it. This is where experts in communication, psychology and behavior change are essential” (Nelson, 2016, p. 18). This was profound, and I thought the presence of these other parties on the communications team was something worth considering. It is possible that in addition to the Senior Manager of Crisis Communications or Internal Communications or Change Initiatives Communications or People Communications, there could be another on board — a Senior Manager – Communications Psychology, functioning as an advisor or SME or internal

consultant. There is probably a Bema case for bringing on experts versed in psychology, who could make recommendations. This is something organizations should explore.

All stakeholders involved — leaders, managers, change agents, change communication professionals, and CEOs should further understand and develop on the issues surrounding the communications delivered to the organization's workforce. They should become more informed about the consequences of inauthentic or unethical communications. Leadership should be cognizant of the should fact that change agents are faced with the challenge of working within a communications function largely ignored while they attempt to advance and sustain change initiatives. Finally, the corporate culture needs leaders who speak up and advocate for authenticity in organizational communications.

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