Effective communication brings successful organizational change

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to recognize and discuss the significance of effective communication during the process of managing changes in organizations. The paper reviews the literature investigating the relationship between communication and organizational change. The advantages of successful communication related to improved efforts of employees to plan and execute change strategies are also discussed. This paper also identifies the objectives and communication needs for each stage of the change process. Also, the various motives and benefits of organizational communication are discussed.

It defines the organizational communication and presents its various objectives. The means to achieve these objectives and their advantages are also described. The paper offers a change communication model which identifies different variables facilitating effective communication and finally ensuring successful organizational change. Also, it highlights the aspects of communication which has proven to be useful for successful changes in business organizations. It would be of value to practitioners and researchers seeking to develop their communication skills and encourage members of staff to demonstrate improved results.

Introduction

Organizational change has widely become an area of focus in management literature. Despite the growing significance and research, many of the attempts to generate organizational change fail. Recent studies reveal that change efforts often suffer a dismal fate. Some research indicates a failure rate of one-third to two-thirds of major change initiatives (Beer & Nohria, 2000; Bibler, 1989); more pessimistic results suggest a higher rate of failure (Burns, 2004) that may reach up to 80 to 90 percent (Cope, 2003) or may make the situation even worse (Beer et al., 1990). Researchers have found that at least more than half of all the organizational change programs do not reach the results which they intended to produce (Bennebroek et al., 1999). Poorly managed change communication results in rumors and resistance to change and enlarging the negative aspects of the change (DiFonzo et al., 1994; Smelzer & Zener 1992). Communication is considered to be vital for the effective implementation of organizational change (DiFonzo & Bordia, 1998).

The importance of communication during intended change has been empirically demonstrated and commonly agreed among practitioners. The empirical picture appeared indicated that organizational change and communication process are inextricably related processes (Lewis, 1999). Recent studies about communication show that communication has positive correlation with many organizational outputs like organizational commitment, performance, organizational citizenship behaviors, and job satisfaction. In contrast communication failure may cause functionless results like stress, job dissatisfaction, low trust, decrease in organizational commitment, severance intention, and absence (Bastien, 1987; Malmelin, 2007) and this can affect organization's efficiency negatively (Zhang & Agarwal, 2009). Communication during organizational change reduces resistance to change. When resistance to change levels is low within an organization, the change-effort turns out to be more productive. The change plan is dependent of capacity of the organization to change the individual performance of each employee (Goodman & Dean, 1982; Robertson et al., 1993, Tannenbaum, 1971). Since organizational change introduces variation of tasks given to individual employees, transmission of information to these employees on future change is an essential and integrative part of the change strategies.

The objective of this paper is to focus on the role of communication while managing changes in business organizations. It appreciates the need for communication during organizational change. The strategies to make employees educate and understand the need for change is also described. The paper also aims at building a change communication model by identifying the various variables which affect communication process and resulting in successful organizational change.

Organizational Communication

Kreps (1990) defined organizational communication as the process whereby members gather pertinent information about their organization and the changes occurring within it. Generally organizational communication has two objectives. The primary objective is to inform the workforce about their tasks and the policy issues of the organization (De Ridder, 2003; Francis, 1989). Organizational communication is defined as "transmitting news about the work from organization to employees and through employees (Phattanacheewapul & Ussahawanitchakit, 2008; Chen et al., 2005). The second goal of organizational communication is to construct a community within the organization (Francis, 1989; Postmes et al., 2001; De Ridder, 2003).

Meaningful communication informs and educates employees at all levels and motivates them to support the strategy (Barrett, 2002). This is important as positive attitudes to change are vital in successful change programs (Kotter, 1996), as resistance to change is one of the biggest barriers to overcome. Meaningful communication requires a degree of 'cognitive organizational reorientation' (Van Vuuren & Elving, 2008) i.e. comprehension and appreciation of the proposed change. Elving and Hansma (2008) carried out interview research between management and employees during organizational change. The most important conclusion drawn was that the success of the dissemination and adaptation of organizational change significantly depend upon communicative and informative skills of managers at all levels. Although leaders appear to be aware of fast change within organization (Bolden & Gosling, 2006), communicating that change is difficult (Lewis, 2000). Bennebroek-Gravenhorst et al. (2006) found that along with the role of management on the contribution of the workforce to the impending change, distribution of information and actual communication regarding the need for the change and the objectives of the modification in business organization are also critical.

Elving (2005) proposed a conceptual framework to study communication in organizations experiencing change. Six propositions were developed that all simultaneously influence readiness for change. The level of readiness in this framework indicates the degree of effectiveness of change. The first proposition stated that low level of resistance to change or high level of readiness for the change is an indicator for effective organizational change. The second proposition stated that communication needs to inform the organizational members about the change and how that change will alter the individual's work. The third proposition advocated that communication should be used to create a community which will increase commitment, trust, and identification with the organization and management. The next proposal looked at uncertainty in that high levels of uncertainty will have a negative effect on readiness to change. The fifth proposition focused on the effect of downsizing creating loss of jobs and feelings of job insecurity affecting readiness to change. The last proposition was related to fourth and fifth propositions which stated that communication will show impact on feelings of uncertainty and job insecurity. According to Klein (1996), the communication strategy should coincide with the general stages of the change process and the relevant associated information requirements. Based on Lewin's change model (1951), Klein has identified the objectives and communication needs for each stage of the change process.

Communicating during the 'unfreezing stage': During this stage, the primary communication objective is to prepare employees and the organization for the change. This step is also identified as "readying" the organization. Resistance will increase at the same rate with how big the change is and how much it affects the organization. However, it is much easier to overcome this resistance if the communication strategy is designed to account for the initial resistance (Klein, 1996). In order to ready the organization for the change, it is important to communicate the objective of the change and what is going

to happened and why ought to be conveyed. The first thing that needs to be communicated is the need for change, by pointing out the discrepancy between desired outcomes and actual outcomes. If the change is an organization-wide change, this first message should come from the top management of the organization. Although written communication followed by question and answers meeting has been proved to be an effective way of communication, face-to-face communication is important in this stage (Klein, 1996).

Communicating during the 'move stage': When change is being implemented, there is a lot of organizational activity. Because most of the employees are not directly involved in the change process and do not know exactly what is happening, the level of uncertainty raises and rumors appear. Thus, communication in this stage is very important and has the following objectives: to provide those not involved in the change implementation with detailed and accurate information of what is happening; to provide those involved in the process with information about their roles in the change process, as well as information about how the change will affect them, and their new roles and responsibilities; and to dismiss all the misinformation that is circulating through the organization. Because the change is beginning to have more tangible outcomes and some organizational impact, the communication should have a more specific character than in the first stage (Klein, 1996).

Communicating during the 'refreezing stage': The primary objective during this stage is to build structures and processes that support the new ways. The communication should be centered on answering employees' questions regarding efficiency, rewards, control and relationship roles. In this stage, the responsibility of communicating with employees shifts from the CEO and management, down the hierarchy to supervisory management. The information flow should be continuous, concrete and multidirectional, so that employees have enough understanding of the personal implications the change has. Because of the inevitable misunderstandings that may occur in this stage, communication should primarily concentrate on making public the success of the change and spread the word to employees (Klein, 1996).

It has been recognized that effective and appropriate communication is a vital ingredient in the success of any change program (Kotter, 1995; Lewin, 1951; Erickson, 1992). Internal communication represents the communication and interactions between the employees and members of an organization. Traditionally, internal communication was defined as "communication with employees internally within the organization" (Cornelissen, 2008). Innovative technologies have made it easier to generate, develop, distribute and accumulate written documents, to exchange messages, work together and organize meetings despite of space and time proximity. Electronic mails, intranet and video conferences are few of the communication tools used to inform employees in relation to news and activities of organization. Deetz defines internal communication as "a way to describe and explain organizations" (Jublin & Putnam, 2001). It specifies that communication is the central process through which employees exchange information, create relationship, and build meaning, values, and an organizational culture. Smythe (1996) argues that the challenge is not only managing media and using more media, but reducing communication pollution and discipline the torrent of information from management in order to increase individual understanding.

Objectives of Change Communication

Change communication should focus on addressing the issues of employees and provide a humane touch. Communication researchers have described the purpose of communication content in a change process as: spreading a vision [103], minimizing uncertainty (Klein, 1996), gaining employee commitment (Kotter, 1995), involving employees by seeking their input into the content and process of the change (Kitchen & Daly, 2002), overcoming barriers to change (Carnall, 1997), and challenging the status quo (Balogun & Hope, 2003). Few of the objectives of communication carried out during change management are as follows:

Tackle Queries of Employees: Communication must address the information of employees, the management of changes and the motivation of employees (Dolphin, 2005). Excellent communication means that everyone in the organization, at all levels, understands the need for change, what the changes are and how they will affect the business and each individual's work.

Generate Community Spirit: Organizational communication is considered as an important antecedent of the self-categorization process, which helps to define the identity of a group and to generate a community spirit, which fits into organizational requirements (De Ridder, 2003; Postmes et al., 2001; Meyer & Allen, 1997). Communication to create a community within organizations shows in for instance high commitment to the organization of the employees, in trust of employees with management and in organizational identification (Elving, 2005).

Build Trust: The dominant perspective in literature (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001) is that **trust** results in distinctive effects such as more positive attitudes, higher levels of cooperation, and superior levels of performance (Jones & George, 1998; Mayer et al., 1995). Cheney (1999) suggested that values in the workplace can be evaluated by the role communication plays. Chia (2005) affirmed that "trust and commitment are byproducts of processes and policies which are designed to make the relationship satisfactory for both parties, such as open, appropriate, clear and timely communication" (p. 7). Trust can be conveyed through effective communication (Mishra & Mishra, 1994) via openness and concern. Communication practices within an organization are expected to have an important influence on the degree to which employees trust their managers and the organization's top echelon, as well as their commitment to the organization.

Motivate Employees: Motivation is the influence or drive that causes us to behave in a specific manner and has been described as consisting of energy, direction, and sustainability (Kroth, 2007).Communication is also proved to be an effective tool for motivating employees involved in change (Luecke, 2003). Organization communication scholars have shown that the adequacy of information provided by the organization has also contributes to an employees' job satisfaction which encourages the staff. Carlisle and Murphy (1996) suggests motivating others to communicate effectively and address employees' queries.

Motivation theories explore the numerous approaches to meet individuals' needs, including expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964), need theory (Maslow, 1954), reinforcement theory (Skinner, 1971) and the broadly used goal theory (Karoly, 1993). It has been shown that predictors of motivation include job satisfaction, perceived equity and organizational commitment (Schnake, 2007). Motivation is either positively or negatively influenced by the experience an employee has inside a given work environment and with leaders (Gilley et al., 2009). Powerful motivations promote strong efforts to complete the action in spite of huge difficulties. Kantner (1983) says an important change requires a leap of faith into the unfamiliar. The higher the level of emotional experiencing, the higher will be the level of receptivity to a proposed change (Huy, 1999).

Employee Commitment: Communication studies find commitment is linked to employee voice and argumentativeness, which concepts involve freedom to speak up about concerns and ability to argue the issues surrounding these concerns (Gorden & Infante, 1991; Gorden et al., 1988; Infante & Gorden, 1991). The effectiveness and commitment of employees depends largely on their knowledge and their understanding of the strategic issues of the company (Tucker et al., 1996). Communication needs to be well managed so that at any time during the change process confusion is avoided through clear, accurate and honest messages, by using a variety of media with high coverage and impact (Abraham et al., 1999). Pascale (1984) assures that people committed to a vision is more important than a well thought out strategy as they successfully accelerates the change process (Larwood et al., 1995).

Allen (1991) tested a model of communication sources along with commitment and perceptions of support. Allen found commitment and support comes from communication with top management and

superiors. Sincere and effective communication styles among organization members enable members to integrate the organization through internalization of the organization's objectives and rules by the employees. Thus, commitment of the person who works in this atmosphere increases and as the rise of job satisfaction, employee contributes to the increase of organization's success. Miller (2003) also states that concentration and passionate dedication are necessary to achieve distinctive competence and success.

Employee Participation: A study by Parker et al. (1997) showed that employee participation was associated with higher job satisfaction and better well-being individuals tend to report higher job satisfaction when they have an opportunity to provide input into how decisions are made (Konovsky & Folger, 1987; Lind & Tyler, 1988). Hyo-Sook (2003) stated that excellent organizations enclose management structures that empower employees' participation in decision-making. According to Heller et al. (1988), increased participation in decision-making by lower-level employees has been found to have a positive effect on the efficiency of the decision-making process. Employees who participate in the decision-making process have higher levels of satisfaction and commitment to the organization.

Involvement of employees increases workers' input into decisions that affect their well-being and organizational performance (Glew et al., 1995). A growing body of research suggests that employee involvement has a positive impact on change implementation (Sims, 2002) and productivity (Huselid, 1995). Specifically, relinquishing control and allowing employees to make decisions yields constructive results (Risher, 2003). Kotter and Schlesinger (1979) posit that those allowed to participate meaningfully in change are more committed to its success because their relevant contributions are integrated into the change plan.

Reduce Uncertainty: Information is not only a pre-requisite to the ability of influencing the outcomes (Terry & Jimmieson, 1999), but knowledge about the motives for change also facilitates reducing uncertainty and creating readiness for change. Effective change communication can be viewed as a way to manage uncertainty (DiFonzo & Bordia, 1998). Uncertainty of employees during change processes will reflect on the implications for the individual employee, or the environment that employee is doing his or her work in. It comes with questions like "will I still have a job after this change", "will I still have the same co-workers after the change", and "can I still do perform my tasks on the same way I used to do them". In this sense feelings of uncertainty are about the process of the change, the personal and social consequences of the change.
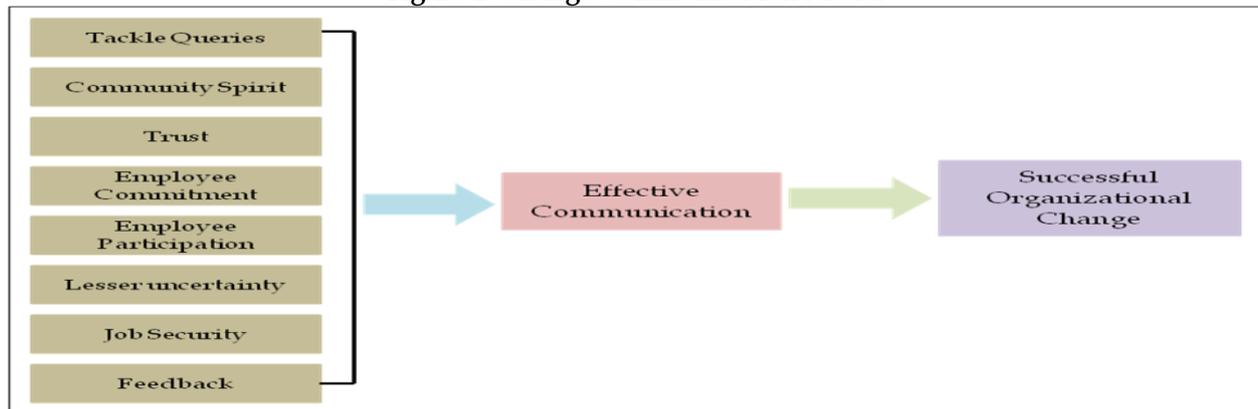
Job Security: Recent meta-analytic evidence demonstrates that employees who see their jobs as lacking security tend to have lower job satisfaction, less organizational commitment, and a stronger intention to turnover (Sverke et al., 2002). Prior research shows that those who remain after workforce reductions often believe their jobs no longer offer security (Armstrong-Stassen, 1998). The results of a cross-sectional study of 3881 employees from 20 organizations in Flanders and Brussels showed that organizational communication and participation were negatively related to job insecurity (Elst et al., 2010). Organizations can take measures to prevent the most negative impact of job insecurity from occurring by, by providing accurate information and enhancing communication, supplying retraining for alternative employment, and training their employees in how to cope with the stress created by job insecurity (Hartley et al., 1991; Heaney et al., 1994; Kets de Vries & Balazs, 1997).

Add Feedback: Appropriate communications provide employees with feedback and reinforcement during the change which enables them to make better decisions and prepares them for the advantages and disadvantages of change (Peterson & Hicks, 1996).

Figure 1 depicts the change communication model derived from the literature review. It shows the impact of various variables on communication. The level of community spirit, trust, motivation, commitment, job security and participation must be satisfied and increased so that the employees may understand the idea behind the change and address the needs competently. This gives rise to the commitment to change which finally results in successful organizational change. Future researches can be

test the model empirically to assess the individual role and impact of each of the variables in delivering appropriate communication.

Figure 1: Change Communication Model

Conclusion

The literature has identified that the role played by communication during change in the business organizations is essential for successful change management. The employees are the key sources to bring about change in organizations. To encourage employees for desired change, organizations must address the apprehensions and issues related with them. Job insecurity should be decreased and a sense of community should be created so that employees may feel their responsibilities. The need for change and its advantages will motivate the staff to participate in change plan and execute it.

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