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7 Ways to communicate change

Ask anyone, from lowliest staffer to most senior manager, what the ‘secret’ to good Change is – and you might be surprised to discover that we all know the answer. Even if we don’t have an MBA – even if we never finished high school – we all know that the so called ‘secret’ of good change is communication.

If this ‘secret’ is so well known… why is organisational change so incredibly difficult for most organisations? Based on hundreds, if not thousands, of discussions, I’ve come to the sad but inescapable conclusion that while we know that we have to communicate – we don’t really know either how or what to communicate – and in some cases – we don’t know what the word ‘communicate’ means.

We communicate to provoke a reaction in the listener. When we speak, or put words to paper, the listener/reader must be foremost in our minds. If our words cause no reaction, then speaking and writing become meaningless exercises. If, when you read an article, nothing happens in your head, then the writer has failed you and is wasting your time.

The same is true when it comes to communicating something about whatever change it is that you’re implementing. Before you put a single word to print, before you breathe in preparation for uttering a single word – what is your purpose? What reaction are you attempting to provoke in the minds of your listener/reader?

This sounds obvious (as always) but it’s also obvious that all too often we lose sight of this simple objective. A recent conversation is what prompted me to clarify my own thoughts on this topic. Speaking to a manager whose company has been trying to implement a ‘cultural change’ for the last five years, I asked a prying, and it turned out, a difficult two-part question. What exactly is their current culture, and what exactly is the new culture they are trying to change to?

Now remember… they’ve been working on this project for five years. He could not answer the question. He said he’d have to get back to me.

If you’re attempting a change – then being able to define the change in great, almost boring, details is a prerequisite – ie. Being able to communicate the change is crucial to your success. How (and what) is involved with communicating change? Here are seven approaches – the first two are “Don’t dos”, the next five are “Must dos”.

1) My way or the Highway
Sadly this approach is all too common, and deployed all too soon in the communication process. There does come a time in every major change where people must decide if they are willing to move in the new direction, but starting with this as the core of the communication strategy is guaranteed to alienate, frustrate and infuriate many of your employees. Save the big stick for the closing curtain, and not the opening anthem of a change.

2) Say Nothing
And perhaps they won’t notice? This is also too common a communications strategy. People need information as surely as they need air to breathe. There are situations, mergers for example, where not much can be said until the event happens, but most change does not fall under the Official Secrets Act. If employees need to ask “Who Moved My Cheese?” then that’s proof positive management has neglected their duty.

3) Answer - Why?
Ask anyone to undergo the simplest change and the very first question to pop into their mind is “Why?” This is not, as some believe, an act of insubordination, it’s merely an attempt to understand what is happening so that they can respond appropriately. Fact: Not all

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change is good. Another fact? Not all change is bad. Asking “Why?” is a rational attempt to figure out which category this particular change falls. If your communication strategy is focused on answering the question “Why is this change necessary?” then it can never go too far astray.

No plan is perfect, so when communicating a plan for change, identifying what might go wrong is a must.

4) Answer – What’s in it for me?
We, all of us, are ‘selfish’ in the sense that we need to know how a change will affect us directly. If a new boss is taking over our department, then the most important question is “How will this affect my job?” If our communication strategy fails to address this question then it isn’t communicating – primarily because the listener isn’t listening to anything we’re saying.

5) Answer – What’s next?
Change isn’t an event, it’s a process. Everyone knows this. We know that things happen in sequence and therefore if something changed yesterday, then something will most likely change tomorrow. So? What happens tomorrow? Next week? Yes – these questions come to mind very easily and therefore we must include the answers in our change communications. If a question is obvious, then the answers become mandatory.

6) Answer – What can go wrong?
Present anyone with a solution and they’ll immediately start poking holes into it. This isn’t because we’re nasty, vicious, trouble-makers, it’s because we’re prudent people who’d rather avoid problems than embrace them. No plan is perfect, so when communicating a plan for change, identifying what might go wrong is a must. When the audience is thinking of how things might fail, it’s a good strategy for the speaker to be addressing how we’ll mitigate the risk of failure.

7) Answer – The unasked questions
If there’s a ‘secret’ to communication then this is it. If you can answer the unvoiced question then you’ve demonstrated beyond all doubt how much thought you’ve put into the change planning process. Why people don’t ask questions is something we’ll address in another article, but answering those questions is a good idea because people like people who think like they do. If I’m thinking of a question, and then a manager says, “I know some of you are thinking…” then you’ve convinced me that you’re brilliant… why? Because you think like I do! That’s often enough to get someone on your side.

If you take a look at the seven items above – something should stand out like a sore thumb. The two items that ‘fail’ are a monologue and silence. The five better strategies are not so much monologues as they are the other half of an ongoing dialogue… they are all answers to questions the audience has about the change. That should not come as a surprise – we all know that communication is a two way street – it’s not just the transfer of information in one direction… it’s an exchange of information. Questions for answers.

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