



Communicating Change: Winning Employee Support For New Business Goals

Book summary

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THE BASIC IDEA OF THE BOOK

“How to communicate change to employees in large companies.”

That is...

Communication that aims to change behaviour – in particular, changing how they do their jobs in order to bring about a lift in performance.

Communication must be receiver-oriented in order to change behaviour. This is a golden rule that is very commonly broken. To effectively influence behaviour, communication needs to be couched in terms of what is relevant to the receiver, and not just what management want to say to people.

THREE BASIC FACTS IN COMMUNICATING CHANGE

The book is full of solid research findings and case studies that support their conclusions. Their view is that successful communication of change depends on three basic facts.

1 YOU MUST TARGET SUPERVISORS

Change programmes often involve mass communication from senior management/CEO directly to all staff – the speech, the video, the road-show.

This approach is ineffective and can actually produce more harm than good.

It carries the false assumption that head office/the CEO (etc) is the most desired and credible source of information in the eyes of frontline employees. This is wrong.

Head office/CEOs/Senior Management are often poorly understood and the subject of cynicism by frontline employees. This is supported by the psychological phenomenon called ‘attribution theory’, whereby people find it easier to attribute their problems to the influence of others (the Government, the immigrants, the IRD, the boss, ‘head office’....) than to accept that their problems might be of their own making. Talk-back radio survives on attribution theory.

Head office/CEOs/Senior Management often exacerbate the problem by speaking in confusing ‘management-speak’, imposing values and concepts that don’t mean anything to frontline employees, dealing in the symbolic



rather than the tangible, sugar-coating negative changes in fancy presentations, and not listening to what people at the frontline know needs fixing, or what will/won't work. Instead, senior management can easily come across as paternalistic, misguided and arrogant.

Consistently in studies across different countries, the most desired and credible source of information for frontline staff is their immediate **supervisor** (shift leader, department leader, branch manager etc).

To reach frontline employees, establish a direct, two-way communication between supervisors and senior management.

Supervisors:

- Know frontline staff personally and understand what is important to them
- They speak their language
- Are more likely to be trusted and listened to by frontline staff – because supervisors will share the impact of the changes on a level they can relate to
- Can relate the changes directly to the particular work area

Research shows that supervisors have one of the most powerful influences on employees entire impression of the company they work for. That is, your company is your immediate boss, and vice versa.

Furthermore, research also shows that employee satisfaction has a strong correlation with the perceived power of their supervisor. That is, frontline staff are more likely to be satisfied if their immediate boss has influence with senior management. Employees want to work for people who are 'connected' because powerful supervisors emit a stronger sense of control and power to those who work for them.

And the better the supervisor's communication to staff, the higher the level of the satisfaction with all aspects of their work life.

The major implication for attempts to change employee behaviour on the frontline is that they will fail without supervisor support. This is because staff take the lead from their supervisor, and not senior management.

So, the cultivation of strong supervisor:staff relationships is of vital importance.

Attempts by Head office/CEOs/Senior Management to communicate major change programmes by going directly to the frontline are damaging:

- 1 Because they are likely to be greeted with scepticism anyway.
- 2 They by-pass supervisors, thereby diminishing their perceived power in the eyes of staff.
- 3 They alienate supervisors by making them feel powerless.

Don't Trickle Down Through Middle Management

By nature middle management layers are prone to transforming information into power. Consequently, the intentions of a change programme can easily become distorted for all manner of political purposes, like a game of Chinese Whispers.

Middle management tends to be more accepting of communication within organisations than the frontline. Therefore, using formal, traditional means of communicating change tend to work with middle management. The problem with middle management tends to be not how to get information in, but how to get clean information *out* of middle management.



One very real issue with middle management is perspective. While very few will say they are poor communicators, many are not. A significant cause of this is that people tend to 'look up' in organisations. That is, they are more attentive and more concerned with what comes from more senior levels (frontline staff:supervisors, middle management:senior management). Consequently, it is easy for the needs of those below to go unsatisfied.

Communicating Customer Service

The biggest challenge in communicating a commitment to customer service is overcoming perceived *hypocrisy*.

Research shows that most branch offices and customer facing stores tend to see themselves as small, self-contained outposts that are constantly struggling to serve their customers. And that the biggest hurdle for them to overcome is usually dealing with an out-of-touch, unreliable and unreasonable head office (attribution theory).

So, when people from head office (who provide them with poor service) start telling them that they have to lift their service quality it can easily lack credibility, and is unlikely to be effective at changing staff behaviour.

Customer service programmes need to begin with creating an internal service culture. To motivate people to deliver better internal service by making it a key internal priority, measuring it, and sharing results. This taps into people's natural competitiveness – where no-one wants to be seen to under-perform in something that is important and public.

Only when there is a climate of service commitment internally will an external programme of service to customers shift from sloganeering to behaviour change.

Communicating New Technology

New technology is often bought based on data – productivity gains, profitability etc – and research shows that it often fails due to the lack of insight by those managing the purchase (engineers, consultants). That is, the wrong gear is bought, or it is not adapted properly to the specific needs of the company.

The best people to help alleviate this problem are usually frontline supervisors, who will typically have the best practical knowledge of operations. And they are also vital in ensuring the frontline acceptance of any new technology. Yet often their views are either omitted or ignored in the decision-making process.

Communicating Downsizing

Frontline staff don't usually care much at all about the 'why?' (eg more competitive market, time of change, painful decisions, implications of the merger). That is more the concern and conscience of senior management.

However, staff do care about the 'who goes?', 'when?' and 'how much will I get?'.

The reality is that often people are less 'attached' to their place of work than senior management imagines.

Supervisors are key sources of advice for frontline employees – far more so than any carefully worded legal letter.



Therefore, in any downsizing supervisors must be informed about how the termination programme will work and the basic facts of the severance package. The key role they can play is to provide confidence and reality into what can be wildly emotional situations.

Communication Training is not the Answer

General principles delivered in a training programme tend not to work because different work groups are all different. Supervisors need to learn how each of their team operates and how to relate to them in order to be effective.

Training courses on the 'rules of communication' only theorise what is inherently organic in reality.

2 YOU MUST USE FACE-TO-FACE COMMUNICATION

The quality of communication is often compromised by producing large quantities of 'stuff' (reports, company newspapers, videos, posters, CCT presentations etc). This is because management often confuse communication with getting their message out – as in one-way propaganda.

The problem is, in terms of communicating change to enhance employee behaviour, that the opinions of senior management don't count for much (see above).

The answer is to change the priorities, putting the corporate message at the bottom and focus on equipping supervisors with knowledge and context to deal with the change (eg briefing on the facts and coaching on how to address questions). Doing it this way builds allies with those best situated to effect the change desired.

The right goal for communication should be to give supervisors what they need to effect informal, face-to-face, verbal interactions with their immediate staff. Research across different countries consistently shows this is the most powerful influence on behaviour in organisations.

For example, with Australian workers the preferred methods of receiving information about their workplace are: verbal 90%, print 9%, video 0.5%.

And when staff say in surveys they want 'better communication' this is what they mean, not another fancy corporate video, or Powerpoint presentation.

Communication is an interaction, not a thing.

The answer is not more communication material. It is a change in approach that will increase the impact on frontline staff behaviour (supervisors, face-to-face, local workplace context).

Traditional solutions (briefings, publications etc) can have a useful contextual role to signal a shift in priorities, but are not the most impactful on staff behaviour.

Videos can be used effectively to convey technical information, or where a senior executive is responding to a crisis that effects all employees. But otherwise they are usually very bad at influencing behaviour. They use the wrong source (management v supervisors), the wrong medium (electronic v face-to-face), communicating the wrong topic (management issues not local workplace issues).



Structured briefing meetings run by supervisors for staff are also notoriously bad. They commonly lack a clear purpose, commonly disintegrate into grievance sessions and are often regarded as a waste of time. Instead, research shows that supervisors generally prefer informal, one-on-one briefings of individuals in the context of their own jobs. Think personal, practical and hands-on guidance rather than presentation courses.

Company newsletters typically carry unrealistic expectations. They are good for communicating information about managers to other managers, and can provide items of general interest about what is going on in the organisation. But they are no good at communicating change to frontline employees. Like videos, they are typically from the wrong source, about the wrong issues, in the wrong format. Therefore managers kid themselves when they believe that newsletters can improve morale, communicate internal changes and encourage employees towards greater quality.

Suggestion schemes are symbolic communication rather than real communication and are therefore of very limited value. They undermine the integrity of existing decision-making. They by-pass the role and judgement of supervisors. And they create unrealistic expectations with both staff (suggesters) and managers (evaluators). Suggestion schemes greatest value is for CEO photo opportunities in the company newsletter.

Employee attitude surveys can be useful, but only under certain circumstances. That is, when you have a clear objective and clear responses to the survey outcomes. Too often staff surveys become fishing expeditions where management has no idea what they are looking for and fill questionnaires with curiosities. And also too often the results end up filed with no response. They are not good as an upward communication tool when staff provide honest but critical responses that often end up dumbed down into meaningless graphs and not acted upon. Asking staff to comment widely and generally about the organisation and people they have no qualification to judge can also be pointlessly damaging. There is also a serious danger of getting too precise and pedantic over staff questionnaire wording. Most frontline staff make evaluations in broad terms, not fine detail.

3 COMMUNICATE RELATIVE PERFORMANCE OF THE LOCAL WORK AREA

Workplace research consistently shows that frontline staff are not interested in their organisations as a whole (eg financial results, ownership issues, senior management changes, community involvement by the company etc), but they do care about what is happening with their own area of work and their job security.

Communication designed to change behaviour will only be effective if it is anchored to those two values. Even trying to contextualise things by putting local issues into a bigger picture is false logic because the bigger picture does not matter to most staff.

What does matter is local parochialism.

Attempts to enhance frontline engagement such as industrial democracy and profit sharing are also generally ineffective motivators because the truth is that frontline staff don't care about the company as a whole as senior (and to a lesser degree middle) management do.

Communicating Quality

Most quality programmes don't work because they are communicated as a corporate value. And frontline staff don't relate to corporate values, they relate to local workplace issues.

So it is a waste of time preaching "quality" as a company mantra, or stamping it on pens and t-shirts. Instead, communicate quality without ever mentioning the word.



The way to do it is to tell people how well they perform in their job and their local area of work relative to others: better, same, worse than competitors, other branches, other departments etc.

The power of this information is that it leverages people's innate competitiveness with what is highly valued to them: their local area of work. Pride, or embarrassment in performance drive behaviour change for the better, without ever talking about a "Commitment to Quality".

Without comparative performance information people assume that all is well and it is easy to exist in cruise mode.

Quantity information without comparison (eg number of units produced, calls answered) or attitude information (job satisfaction data) only masks the problem. People need to know they have to catch up, or have a superior performance to defend in order to modify their behaviour and improve the quality of what they do.

Communicating Customer Service Quality

A lot of companies try to communicate customer service via propaganda – mission statements, slogans, t-shirts, posters, coffee cups, rousing speeches from the boss. And these attempts rarely have any effect on behaviour.

The key is for communication to link customer service to existing employee values.

Mystery shopping and other service quality methodologies, which then communicates comparative performance for branch offices or stores is one useful technique. They tap into local pride for local performance as a motivator for behaviour change. It may produce discomfort, but international research shows that service company staff generally over-estimate the quality of the service they provide.

Service quality is a direct link to future company profits (Kotler), and in order to improve it is a waste of time using propaganda methods or cloaking poor service in comfortable denial. Using comparative performance as a motivator works. You have to create an environment where there is a pressure to learn, adapt and improve.

The measurement of comparative performance needs to be independent in order to establish credibility. Management does not have any given right to credibility.

It is important to communicate performance rather than concentrating on behaviours. Management will often focus on what to do (eg answer in 3 rings) without any concern for the quality of the outcome. Rather than trying to train robots it is better to give people the responsibility and reasonable latitude to do what they feel is right to satisfy each customer. This view is supported by the fact that frontline service staff will generally know what works better at the frontline than management or external consultants. And that that the service context is inevitably fluid – different customers want different experiences (chatty, in a hurry, familiar, formal etc) and no training programme or set of fixed guidelines will be flexible enough to anticipate such real-life situations.

Values

Management in many companies are obsessed with communicating values in order to attempt to model behaviour and attitudes. The way this is usually done is to use propaganda techniques and they usually have little effect.

Values are important to organisations, but they cannot be injected artificially from outside via an elaborate communications programme.



Instead, values come from thousands and thousands of repeated behavioural episodes that lead to the formation of a value. The value then acts to reinforce the behaviours (and standards) that gave rise to the value in the first place.

True values are born from the everyday behaviour of an organisation. And behaviour cannot be instantly modified by injecting new values. And consequently, to change, or introduce a value *you need to modify the behaviour first*.

And to modify behaviours you need to target supervisors, rely on face to face communication, and focus on comparative local work area performance as the benchmark.

In order for behaviours to evolve into new/refined values you need consistency and persistence over time. And you need to gain the support of supervisors.

The communication of values should be resisted in favour of communicating performance.

Pepsi workers are there to beat Coke.

Avis staff know they have to try harder.