

Managing Change: Creating Connected Communications

How you communicate with your employees during the change process will impact and determine the results of the programme.

Rialto Associate Director, Michelle Lucas, explains that one of the keys to success is to understand the person in front of you and how individual communication is so critical.

FACT: Most change programmes fail.

FACT: The main reason for change programmes failing is “people issues.”

FACT: Organisations know that communication is critical to managing change through people.

So what goes wrong?

Our research with organisations, (especially larger ones) who are going through change, have a clear appreciation that getting communication right is vital. So much so, they put it in the hands of their communication experts. They know that it’s important to “translate” the company messages into something meaningful for the individual employee.

In-house communication and PR experts know that there is a need to have the employee in mind and answer the question “what’s in it for me”. They also know they need to integrate the messages into everything they do and provide symbols and physical reminders around the company.

Yet if we look at engagement and retention during and following change it is also clear that these communications have fallen short of their goal. A study undertaken in the last decade showed that the turnover of managers rose significantly not just after an acquisition but for 9 years following it!

So, let’s pause for a moment, when was the last time that someone convinced you to stop what you were doing and try something else? If you can remember an example, did you end up wanting to do it or did you just acquiesce because it was easier?

For those of you who can remember an example where you ended up truly wanting to try something new, when you hadn’t thought of it yourself. I would hazard a guess that the person influencing you knew you pretty well? Therefore, here lies the solution to the communication conundrum, if you want to convince someone you have to tailor your message to them individually. Yes individually, not just operationally or functionally or collaboratively – individually.

However, in the larger organisations it simply isn't possible for the central department "architects" of communication to craft messages that will hit the right note with every single employee. To do that we need to look at what is happening at the grass roots of the organisation, it's our first line managers who genuinely have a fighting chance of tailoring the message to each of their employees.

Making communications "stick" can't be done through a script (no matter how cleverly crafted) and so sadly the "architects" of the change communications can't help at this individual level. Individual consultation doesn't do it either – what kind of quality conversation can you have, when you are being pushed through a process and neither party really wants to be there? So how do we enable our first line managers to connect with their employees? I think two issues stand in their way, "time" and "capability".

What can we do about the lack of time? Now here's a thought...what if organisations allowed their first line managers to stop worrying about the customer for a week so that they could have proper unhurried conversations with their people?

What if the role of the internal communication experts was to focus their efforts on reassuring the customer base that current delays would be outweighed by quality results long into the future? A week's unthinkable, right? The cost would be just too high surely? Well just consider instead what increased employee turnover over a 9 year period will cost you...?

What can we do about first line manager capabilities? In times of change organisations can become risk averse and feel like they need to stop managers "saying the wrong thing". What if we took a bit of a risk, and rather than controlling what they say to their people, we encourage them to "listen a lot?"

Listening well is probably the one area of management skills that we gloss over in training programmes. Did you know that there are 5 levels of listening and unless you are listening at level 3, then you are not really listening at all!

The language we use when talking is another area we give scant attention. NLP practitioners will be aware that most people are "visual", some are "auditory" and others "kinaesthetic" – if you want your communication to connect with your audience you need to know what they will "tune in" to.

Consider the last business communication that went out – did it really "paint a picture" of what was needed? Similarly if you have ever completed the MBTI you will know that some people like to be communicated to and then have time to reflect, others need to talk it through; some make sense of their world "bottom up" others make sense of it "top down".

Additionally, some will want to know about the task and others about the people; some will need to know the plan way out into the future and others will be happy to see how things emerge.

Most managers will start their communications with the assumption that people want to feel safe, however, if we look to the work on Career Motivations we soon realise that there are at least 8 different drivers.

Knowing how to manage all of this can come from training, it can also come from emulating those role models in the organisation who know how to really connect with their people.

As a coach and consultant I know that most people will start their communications from their own point of reference. However, if you want to create 'connected communications' the first action you need to undertake is to understand what the person in front of you will attend to.

So, don't look at the architects of communication for help, start developing your communication role models and be better equipped for the next major change, that is no doubt, already on its way.

Not only will you be able to deliver your messages so that they are "heard", but you will also start making enduring connections with the real people who also happen to be your employees. If you can achieve this, you can then be confident that people are with you because they want to be and not just because there's a recession on outside.

Michelle Lucas will be running a free of charge taster session on the subject of managing change relating to this article at the Rialto offices in London on the 29th November 2012. If you or a senior colleague would like to attend, [please click here](#).