

5

COMMUNICATION

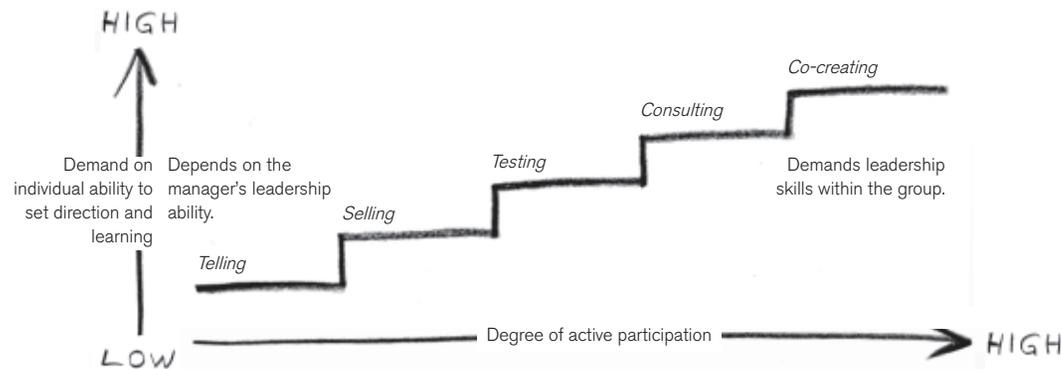
Your ability to communicate with others in conjunction with changes is very often the deciding factor in terms of whether the change is a success or not. It is through dialogue and understanding that you create an acceptance for the change and it is through communication you can capture the apprehension and uncertainty that people facing change feel.

Throughout the entire change process everyone will have a greater need to talk and vent issues, emotions, frustrations, dreams, possibilities, ambiguities, rumours, etc. The overall objective is to keep everyone informed, even if the specific goal of each meeting varies as you progress through the various phases of the change process.

Begin by determining in the management team to what degree you want employees to participate in

the change. If you feel the change will demand a high degree of individual ability to set goals and direction as well as learning, then it is best to choose a form of communication that involves a high degree of involvement. The diagram below can help you decide.

How you present your message, what you say and how you discuss things with your employees will be decisive. Demands for more information and communication will also increase in conjunction with the change. Your employees will want to be involved and influence their situation. As manager you are in charge of making sure communication functions satisfactorily throughout the entire change process.



Picture 12

Use this picture to discuss and decide to what degree you would like to involve your employees.

Source: *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*

Times of change call for more communication.

Employees will want to be involved.

Primary are "who?", "expectations on me?", "help and support", "new behaviours".

Rumours are a way to maintain power and authority and to create unity.

PRIMARY - NON-PRIMARY

There are normally many issues that need to be questioned, planned and led in conjunction with organisational changes. As leader, it is easy to believe that the primary communication issue is what structure, organisation scheme, work instructions or control systems we need to create in order to get the employees to embrace the change. And since much of the leader's daily focus is on budgets, financial and strategic targets, it is easy to believe that if we get this in place and inform our employees then we will be able to handle the change. But change from a human perspective means that the individual is primarily interested in questions such as "What are my new duties?", "Who will I be working with?", "What is expected of me in terms of new skills, new behaviour?", "What type of help and support will I receive?", "Who is my new supervisor and what will he/she think of me?".

AVOIDING RUMOURS

Insufficient and distorted information obstructs good change efforts. Rumours spread quickly during the change process. Rumours exist to a greater or lesser extent in most organisations and it is difficult to say exactly where they begin and where they end.

Rumours are often a way of relating to power and authority in the organisation – a form of counter-power that runs alongside, and sometimes in direct contrast to the official information.

Rumours arise due to lack of information and often because the message is misinterpreted. There is a significant risk that the message will be

misinterpreted and misunderstood, particularly in taxing situations such as a reorganisation. It is therefore vital to repeat the message, even if this is tedious for the person giving the information.

When a group of employees is uncertain, with threats hanging over them, rumours can be a way of creating unity. Partaking of the rumour process is a way of belonging to the group and creating a 'we' feeling.

Rumours spread because there are always active instigators and messengers who get satisfaction from the rumours. Many rumours spread not because the messenger believes them but because they may be amusing, shocking, attract attention or afford a higher status to the messenger.

Rumours can contribute to simplifying and categorising situations, making them easier to understand. They can also connect events that would appear isolated and random. Rumours can surface if the information provided does not satisfy preferences, alleviate or confirm concerns or contribute to resolving conflicts.

Long information and decision-making chains in an organisation contribute to distorting information. Spreading information through different routes can diminish the veracity of the original message. It is therefore essential to keep an open dialogue on various levels in the organisation that allows managers and employees to deal with the consequences of the message.

In summary, we can note that rumours blossom when an organisation undergoes change processes

and the employees feel they are losing control over their own futures. The spread of rumours flourishes in organisations where decisions are taken over the heads of the employees, where employees do not participate or are involved in the change process and resistance to change arises.

The spread of rumours can be kept at a minimum in an organisation where internal information works and where openness and participation exist. True and direct information is an element of good change efforts. One way of connecting with emotions and rumours in conjunction with change is to open change meetings with "Diagnostic questions". This will help you listen more actively. Read more about how in [EXERCISES](#)

ESTABLISHING A GOOD CLIMATE FOR COMMUNICATION

A really good climate for effective and credible communication can best be created when everyone in a leadership position conducts themselves in an open and honest manner over an extended period of time.

Openness and honesty is particularly important during change processes. Openness and honesty are also essential to maintain credibility and instil trust in the new situation. You can prevent rumours, concerns, misunderstandings and even mistakes by establishing an open and steady flow of communication.

Many managers often avoid presenting uncomfortable messages. They claim to be too busy with too much to do to have time to spend with their employ-

ees. But studies indicate that if the managers do not invest time in their employees early on, they will end up spending more time sorting out all the problems that arise due to misunderstandings and rumours. You will be able to nip a lot of problems in the bud if you are emotionally present and make yourself more available. It is vital that you prioritise the times set aside for information and conversations.

You have several different communication channels at your disposal: information meetings, newsletters, e-mail, video conferences, personal discussions etc. There are pros and cons with all channels.

Use the one that you feel most comfortable with but remember that you must leave room for discussion, either individually or in a group. Remember to also update employees working abroad. The organisation's customers also need to know what is happening. Keep them updated at regular intervals.

A FEW ESSENTIAL APPROACHES

Meet your staff in person. Allow yourself time to meet your staff when you inform them about the planned changes. Give them the chance to ask questions. Make it easy for them to express what they feel and allow spontaneous reactions. It is a good idea to prepare a written document that confirms what you have said. This is particularly important when dealing with major changes of a distressing nature.

Tell the truth. The more informed your employees are, the less apprehensive they will feel. If you do not have the information yourself - tell them so. You

Participation and openness minimise the spreading of rumours.

Make room for questions and discussions.

Prepare a written document.

Continue to inform even if no new information is available.

Show that you are willing to listen to both concerns and feelings.

Dare to share your feelings.

will be more credible if you explain openly what you know and do not know. Encourage questions and try to find answers to the information you do not have. Arrange meetings as soon as you have new or complementary information to share. It is better to spread too much information than vice versa. Also remember to give feedback on how the change efforts are progressing.

Express your emotions. Do not shut out your employees from how you feel. They want to know your reactions. You will gain more recognition and understanding. This also helps establish a more open communication in which your employees feel comfortable expressing their feelings. If it is appropriate, talk about how the change will affect you personally.

Before you meet your group, make sure you are well prepared for the following:

- Describe the various stages of the change in detail as you know it.
- Explain what effect the change will have on your employees.
- Open the floor to questions and try to involve everyone.
- Listen to your employees and treat them with dignity and respect.
- Share your own feelings (if appropriate).
- Ask for help and support in implementing the change.

ACTIVE LISTENING

Many managers are so busy informing their employees about the change that they talk throughout the entire meeting and allow little or no room for ques-

tions and answers. The secret behind successful change leadership is not only to speak openly and directly, but also to listen carefully to what is being said – and sometimes even to what is not being said but is in the air. Active listening not only highlights what is said, it also brings out the emotions and state of the organisation that is behind and below the surface.

Active listening shows your employees you are willing to understand and welcome the considerations and emotions that they want to express. So:

Be attentive with your entire body. Face and concentrate fully on the person in question. Do not sit sorting or reading through your own papers.

Maintain eye contact. Listen to what the person is saying and be observant of your employee's physical expressions. Try to interpret the body language with what is being said.

Show an interest. Repeat now and then what the person has said to verify that you have understood.

Ask with open questions. It often takes time to explain yourself or describe your emotions in an honest and comprehensible manner. Open questions require more than a yes or no answer. (What was your first reaction to the change? What affect do you think it will have on our team? What in your opinion are the pros and cons of this change?)

Listen to the emotions behind the words. There is always a feeling or attitude behind what a person says. If you think that the person feels something that is not evident in the spoken words, follow up with questions such as "Are you upset about this change?" or "How do you feel about this change?"

Confirm and clarify what you have heard. Make sure you have understood the message correctly by

repeating it. Try to summarise and define the most important aspects.

When you let go of your fear of facing what is difficult, you release energy and it is easier for you to create a human meeting based on your own empathy and compassion.

ASK DIAGNOSTIC QUESTIONS

It is a good idea to open all meetings intended to communicate or work on the change with a few diagnostic questions to sound out where the group is in relation to the change. You should also be prepared to adjust or completely disregard your scheduled agenda if it does not meet the group at the same level you expected. It is essential that you as leader show that you are listening and taking in what your employees are thinking and feeling about the change. This does not mean you have to do exactly what they say, but it is important to show you care about how they feel and think. The ability to show compassion and care is crucial to building trust. Read more about how to work with diagnostic questions in **EXERCISES**

RESISTANCE

It is natural to face resistance in all change processes. This stems from our basic psychological need to find security in an uncertain situation. The old, familiar patterns and routes are the security we seek.

By discovering and examining the roots of the resistance with your employees, you can find a way to meet and deal with them. This is by no means an

easy task. It takes time and you need to be prepared for many discussions with your employees.

LIVE AS YOU SPEAK

An important and sometimes decisive factor in communication is what you as leader do after you have conveyed your message. To reinforce credibility and induce your employees to follow your lead, you need to be prepared to live out your words in your actions. On the one hand, you need to follow the process planned in conjunction with the change – on the other hand, you follow your own basic values when you implement the change. Both aspects require careful consideration and planning, both yours and that of the management group. If feelings, thoughts, words and deeds harmonise, your behaviour will be congruent – linked – and you will be perceived as genuine and credible.

MANAGERIAL BEHAVIOUR TO AVOID

Not everything will go as planned, be ready on time or mean that everyone is satisfied and positive about how the change is being implemented. There are a few traps we want to warn you about:

1. **You cannot reach consensus** in a major change process.
2. **Avoiding or ignoring resistance.** Resistance is usually not a pleasant experience. It feels like everyone is angry with you and views you as the culprit. This condition is normally temporary. Denying resistance only makes it stronger and prolongs it. Include the resistance instead. Take a close look at it by listening and having an exploratory discussion.

Walk your talk – be true to your own values.

Show sincere interest and concern.

Examine resistance together with your employees.

3. **Hatchet man and saviour at the same time.**

As manager you can find yourself on two sides and you must avoid being the one holding the axe and offering comfort at the same time. If you must notify an employee of something that risks upsetting him/her, make sure there are others on hand to assume the role of caregiver.

4. **Forced team-building exercises.** When the change process is under way, you as leader may feel the team should participate in team-building exercises to function effectively again. It is usually pointless to embark on team-building exercises when the team is in the shock, reaction and early coping stages. What the team needs instead is to deal with the loss and sorrow that it feels, complain, and compare with other members of the team before it can begin building up trust and collaboration again.

5. **Emphasising productivity.** Some managers believe that if they demand extremely high productivity in the midst of change turbulence, they will get it. The employees may respond in the short term but the effect tends to ebb and even diminish. You cannot ignore the psychological reactions that are part of the process. The risk is that the organisation will get bogged down, everything collapses and no one believes in the new situation.

6. **Don't push it.** Your employees might need more time to think about the situation. You as manager must be sensitive to how hard you are progressing.

7. **Don't trivialise.** Humour is good but never trivialise a fear or question from an employee.

THE TOUGH CONVERSATION

It is no easy task to tell an employee that he or she is being transferred, given new assignments or needs to accept a cut in pay. We know from experience that many managers and leaders try to avoid such discussions.

Most difficult is telling an employee that he or she will be dismissed. There is no way of avoiding the fact that the employee will feel threatened, both with regard to existence and identity. He or she will want to defend themselves. Defence mechanisms are our protection against threats and often stem from a fear of not being good enough and not being accepted. Our defence mechanisms also kick in when we don't have a channel for our most important needs and values.

What makes this discussion particularly difficult is that you as leader must be willing to face the emotions that arise during this conversation: pain, apprehension, and anger. You need to be able to accept and carry not only your employee's emotions but also your own. It is a question of having the courage to share the loss and grieve together.

Words are not what mean the most in difficult conversations but the emotions you convey. Your employee needs to feel your empathy and that means you must be emotionally present throughout the discussion.

Developing our empathetic capability requires considerable self-awareness and knowledge of how people react in crisis.

The earlier you inform your employees about the change, the greater the chance for them to take part in the process. This will allow you to find mutual solutions much quicker, and it will be easier for your employees to move on.

Before you start the important discussion, think through what you know about your employee's work and private life. Think and speak in terms of opportunities and measures.

The best way to be supportive during the difficult discussion is to try to maintain an even dialogue where you listen actively, where you instil trust and support for the future, where you can allow room for emotions and where you are prepared to face resistance and defence. Be as honest and distinct as you can.

Remember, in most cases it is not more knowledge you need but practice and experience in conducting the difficult discussion.

FOCUS ON...

When you have a difficult discussion, remember:

you are more help:

Concentrate more on the person

The discussion is more about emotions

The present, Now, should be more central...

Better if your employee leads the discussion and decides what the most important topics are...

Try to mirror and reflect the other person's emotions...

If possible, also accept negative emotions (concern, anxiety, dislike, aggression)...

Do not solve the problems of others, but help them find new ideas and ways of thinking...

less help:

...than the problem.

...than facts.

...than the past.

...than if you lead and choose

...than asking or assuming.
(which can lead to a dead end).

...and not just positive emotions.

...instead of giving expert answers
taking over or promising too much.

Source: B Dahlbom-Hall

Emotional presence is more important than facts.

Prepare for carefully for difficult discussions.

ISSUES FOR REFLECTION

- 1.** What do you feel that you and your management group should focus on to communicate your change better?
- 2.** Do you feel secure and decisive in handling "difficult conversations"? If not, how can you develop this ability?
- 3.** Do you allow enough time and space for understanding and discussions with your employees?
- 4.** What do you find most difficult in a face-to-face meeting in a change dialogue?

