

# Change for the better



Engaging senior leaders to communicate change  
to employees throughout the organization

by Roger D'Aprix, ABC, and Chris Gay

The “Emperor’s New Clothes” phenomenon is very much alive in the 21st century, despite our protests that ours is an age in which information flows freely.

It’s a bit of a paradox, but effective senior leadership communication begins not with the needs or agenda of the leadership but with the needs of the workforce. The employee experience is the starting point because good leadership requires an understanding of what life is like in the trenches. Leaders experience the organization much differently than employees do. In general, leaders operate from a position of power, are isolated in executive suites, and have little or no access to the grapevine that, for better or worse, informs most employees’ understanding of the organization. As one wise CEO once commented, “The grapevine stops right outside my office door.”

In addition, because of the harsh realities of hierarchy and power, subordinates are often afraid to tell leaders the truth or to share negative news. The “Emperor’s New Clothes” phenomenon is very much alive in the 21st century,

despite our protests that ours is an age in which information flows freely.

How do business leaders get the information they need to respond to the needs of their internal audience? And once they have that information, how can they use it to communicate effectively? These are not simple questions, and the lack of answers has caused many leaders to communicate information no one cares about or to communicate in a manner that badly undermines their credibility and employee engagement.

Communicating during times of significant organizational change complicates the situation further. Change takes people out of their comfort zones, so the first reaction is one of irritation, or at least strong curiosity as to what the change is all about. There are some predictable questions that employees will want answered:

- What is this all about?

The success of any change strategy depends on how well people commit to changing their behavior.

- How did this happen?
- What are the causes, or who is to blame?
- How does this affect me?

If we are successful in creating the right climate for change, people will ultimately ask how management plans to deal with the change and how they can help make it work. At that point, we had better have some concrete answers.

### Common responses to change

The most critical questions in the midst of organizational change are simply: What does all of this mean to me? And how is the change going to affect my life? The chart below shows how people generally respond. On the right are those who are naturally attuned to change. These are the so-called early adapters, who are among the first to get on board with any new development. They tend to be important opinion leaders who can influence others to accept and even embrace change.

Close behind them are the people who emulate their behavior and become part of the early majority that recognizes the necessity for transformation. They tend to be optimistic that the change will be for the better. At the top of the curve are the “undecideds”—those who are in a wait-and-see mode. We can label them “fence sitters” who are waiting to see how the change is going to play out.

On the left side of the curve are those who

have to be “pushed to the future.” Once convinced that this is a positive change, they will become part of the emerging late majority. They constitute the element of the population we can identify as worried about the new situation and what it may mean to them personally.

At the end of the line are the late adapters, some of whom will never turn the corner and will remain part of the employee audience in denial. In a sense, they are a toxic part of the population, remaining consistently in opposition.

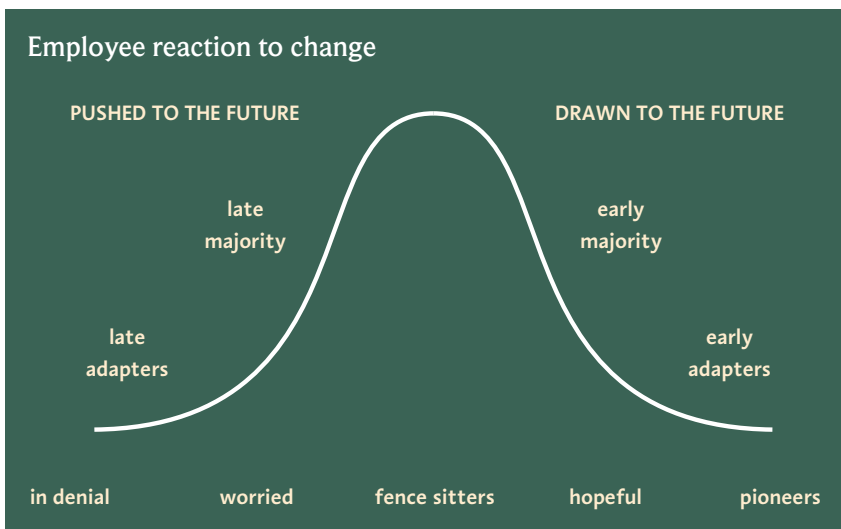
If we understand these various segments of the employee population and how employees experience change in their organizations, we are much better equipped to design an appropriate communication strategy that responds to their information needs. Gaining that understanding requires careful data gathering. You can do that in surveys, focus groups, individual interviews—actually, in any manner that provides you with useful data about how people perceive life in your organization.

For example, one company in the hospitality industry that had just settled a strike was about to reintegrate into the workplace those who had been on strike, those who had crossed the picket line, and the managers who had been doing the work during the strike. The communication team talked to each of these groups to understand their point of view, and crafted a communication strategy that honored each group’s perspective and articulated a future that everyone could get excited about. If the communication had been handled by the executive leaders, who were frustrated by the strike, the outcome would likely have been much different.

As it was, the return to work was amicable, and there was no violence. While there was some tension, managers and leaders were prepared to deal with it, making the return to normalcy a much quicker process. Managers rated the communication team’s workshops as a 4.8 on a 5-point scale. They believed that they were better able to handle tough situations and be more proactive about engaging employees.

### Principles for success

Once we have a fix on the employee experience, we are in a position to design a leadership communication strategy that will not only be



responsive to audience needs, but that also will engage the support and attention of the leaders themselves. This task can be as challenging as any part of the change communication process, but there are a number of principles that will lead to success.

First, a blinding flash of the obvious: The success of any change strategy depends on how well people commit to changing their behavior to be consistent with the changing needs and goals of the organization. If that doesn't happen, the communication has failed.

The most compelling cases for change can be found in the marketplace, with its array of challenges and forces. Business strategy is always a reaction to marketplace requirements. The communication task is to connect the two ends of change—the marketplace need that compels the change and the strategic response to that need. Consider the automotive and airline industries. The only way to explain to workers the changes the leadership must make inside their organizations is by invoking the market forces that are threatening their futures. Without that rationale, their various proposals for reducing wages and benefits can only appear as the malevolent actions of a heartless and uncaring leadership.

Principle No. 2 is that change communication must be proactive, not reactive. To work, it has to be a disciplined, perpetual system, like all other organizational systems. What's required is a clear communication strategy with a clear explanation of the critical issues, appropriate tactics, defined roles and responsibilities, and accountability and training, all aligned with the overall strategy.

In a similar vein, the next principle requires you to keep communication focused on the marketplace by turning all eyes outward. The temptation for leaders is to focus on what actions they propose to take instead of why they are taking them. This focus on what rather than why will help employees understand the bits and pieces of the leaders' action plan, but won't give them a clue as to why the trip is necessary in the first place, which is their real question.

The fourth principle is a critical one for your sanity. Communicating change is a leadership responsibility. It cannot be delegated. You do not

own it; your leaders do. You are merely the facilitator of their efforts. The dilemma is that senior leaders are too often fearful of communication and see more risk than gain. You need to help them understand the employee need for certain pieces of information, as well as the negative consequences of corporate silence. Performing that task well is what defines the true communication professionals.

The secret to this part is having irrefutable data on the employee experience and their communication needs. Here you must communicate to management the consequences of ineffective communication on performance. Without that data you are merely offering your opinion, which is always trumped by the opinion of someone higher up in the organization. It is also helpful to position what you say as what you are hearing from people in the organization as gathered from interviews, focus groups and surveys, and not your personal views.

Finally, all systems require governance if they are to work efficiently. Communication is no exception. Your strategy and communication plan require agreement on roles and responsibilities, consistent messages, and measures of progress and success. Little happens in an organization without accountability, measurement and consequences.

But accountability without training and coaching is patently unfair. So that means you must either coach leaders in performing their communication role effectively, or find someone who can coach them when and if they need it. It also means that you must lobby for effective communication awareness training as part of leadership development from the first-line supervisor up to the CEO.

The bottom line is that engaging leaders in the all-important task of communicating about change is a deliberate, never-ending process. David Kearns, the Xerox Corp. CEO who rescued the company from disaster in the 1980s, used to say that dealing with change was like being in a race without a finish line. That metaphor goes for change communication as well. There is no finish line, only occasional resting places where you can catch your breath and wait for the next round of change your organization will inevitably face. •

### keep in mind...

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2. Change communication must be proactive, not reactive.
3. Communication should be focused on the marketplace.
4. Communicating change is a leadership responsibility. It cannot be delegated.
5. Change strategy requires agreement on roles and responsibilities, consistent messages, and measures of progress and success.

### about the authors

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