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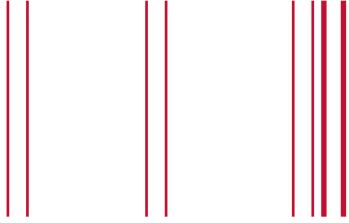
Strategic Communication

A Key to Implementing Organizational Change



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Poised on the brink of a major organizational change, most executives are fairly sure that somebody ought to be doing something about communicating the change. Too often, that understanding merely translates into one senior executive instructing some less senior executive: “I guess we need to communicate this thing. Get somebody on it.”

In a sense, you can divide the universe of executives into two distinct groups: those who view communication as an obligation, and those who see it as an opportunity. More specifically, effective leaders understand that periods of radical change offer unique opportunities for leveraging the immense power of deliberate, coordinated, and strategically targeted communication to build support, maintain stability, and reshape attitudes and behavior to achieve new objectives.

Yet, it’s all too easy to find organizations that regard the communication of major change as a relatively minor staff function, a necessary but bothersome chore that someone has to take care of while senior executives attend to more pressing matters. In those situations, the communication gets reduced to its lowest common denominator: a checklist of obligatory tactical activities aimed primarily at damage control.

When senior executives ignore the importance of strategic communication—and the necessity of their own active, personal leadership of it—they seriously undermine the value of major change initiatives. At the very least, they diminish the odds of fully reaping the intended benefits. More seriously, ineffective communication can sow dissension, heighten anxiety and confusion, alienate key individuals or groups, and damage management’s credibility with critical audiences both inside and outside the organization. In short, it can paralyze not only the change effort but also the current business operations. Consider a few recent episodes:

- A major manufacturer appointed a steering committee to implement the divestiture of one of its major businesses. The external communications director was named to the committee; the internal communications director was not. As time went on, it became clear that the committee’s sole communications issue was how the sale would play on Wall Street and in the business press; there was no interest in framing messages that might address the concerns of the thousands of employees who would be directly affected. The CEO, realizing that poor communications could seriously damage performance in both the soon-to-be-divested business unit as well as the core company, personally intervened to bring an internal communications perspective to the table. By then, weeks of valuable planning time had already been lost.
- A nationwide health-care provider tentatively agreed to be acquired by a major competitor. Six days before the deal was to be announced, the CEO instructed senior managers to start thinking about communications, and then left for a long weekend. In his absence, executives struggled to produce an informative and reassuring message for their thousands of employees in more than a dozen states. But no one had any idea what the acquiring company planned to say about consolidations and layoffs; the two CEOs hadn’t bothered to talk about coordinating their messages. What’s more, neither company’s com-

munications staff had any idea what was going on. The plan was to let them in on the secret the day before the announcement.

- With the approaching retirement of its long-time chairman and CEO, a well-known communications company mapped out what appeared to be a first-rate succession plan. But somehow, no one felt much urgency about getting the announcement documents drafted. Finally, with a week to go, the men who were about to be named to the two top positions each assigned a trusted aide to write something. When the two drafts came back, just three days before the announcement, the differences were nothing short of alarming. It instantly became clear that the two top executives had sharply conflicting views about their respective roles in running the company—differences they’d studiously avoided during months of discussions.

These incidents might seem ludicrous; it’s easy to wonder how these executives could have been so shortsighted. Nevertheless, all three episodes happened at well-regarded, nationally known corporations. The executives involved weren’t stupid people; they simply overlooked the value and benefits of strategic communication.

Episodes of large-scale change are rife with possibilities for similar mistakes. They occur in organizations that fail to appreciate the power and potential of strategic communication—a deliberate, coordinated process, actively led by the most senior executives, that employs a broad array of techniques over a significant period of time to inform, educate, and motivate people to perform and behave in ways consistent with the change agenda. In this paper, we’ll describe the basic elements of strategic communication in the context of change. Next, we’ll focus on the specific ways in which communication can be used to manage the “transition state” that is so critical to the ultimate success of any change initiative. Finally, we’ll identify some basic principles that should guide the leadership and deployment of strategic communication in today’s organizations.

Communications in the Context of Change

The episodes just described illustrate the kinds of problems that often arise when senior executives narrowly limit their conception of communication. We're not suggesting that the CEO be involved in every tactical decision or edit every article in the company newsletter. Communication managers have an important role to play, and they should be allowed to play it.

What we are suggesting is that the design and execution of effective communications ought to mirror every other aspect of strategic organizational change. First and foremost, that requires the active, personal involvement of the senior leaders, including the CEO. Strategic communication supports change by persuading and motivating people to alter their attitudes and behavior; there's an implicit understanding that enduring change can't be imposed through edicts and announcements. Strategic communication engages people in the change, rather than simply telling them about it. Strategic communication involves a process, not an event—one that requires constant feedback, monitoring, and refinement.

In normal times, institutional communications tend to be narrowly focused and tightly segmented; the substance and dissemination of messages reflect the structural patterns of the communications function. In other words, various groups of people are responsible for communicating with their assigned audiences—employees, customers, Wall Street, regulatory agencies, state and local governments, labor unions, vendors, strategic partners, and the national, local, business, and trade press. Within all but a few organizations, these responsibilities tend to be scattered and compartmentalized.

In major change situations, the normal drawbacks of that fragmented structure explode into huge obstacles. At a time when the organization desperately needs a carefully coordinated and precisely timed stream of consistent messages and targeted activities, it's more likely to get

a chorus of conflicting demands and jumbled priorities from all the different groups with communication responsibilities. Each feels that its constituency—Wall Street, regulators, employees, or whatever—is the most important, so disagreements arise over the content and timing of critical messages.

For example, the strongest possible arguments you might make to Wall Street for a merger—plant consolidations, major staff reductions, the acquisition of major market share—are probably not the issues you want to highlight on Day One with employees, unions, local officials, or the Federal Trade Commission. Defining the appropriate content, tone, and substance of public and private communications, and determining how the messages should evolve and be conveyed over time to various constituencies, requires the early involvement of senior leaders. Delegating the job of drafting the core messages to staff people robs the process of its value, and inevitably creates disappointment and frustration with those unfortunate souls who were unable to read management's collective mind.

What's more, the dramatic upsurge of strategic combinations—mergers, acquisitions, joint ventures, and other strategic alliances—provide an even stronger case for the coordination and clarity that only strategic communication can provide. Effectively communicating large-scale change within a single organization is hard enough; the complexity of communication when two independent organizations are involved borders on overwhelming. There are two overlapping sets of audiences—employees, investors, customers, regulators, reporters. There are differences in tone, style, emphasis, language, and culture. And there are serious tactical questions that go to the heart of the impending combination: Who is really in charge? Whose name will be attached to which documents? Who has final authority to review and sign off on important messages? In short, the political, legal, and organizational dynamics of these situations exponentially magnifies the importance of senior-level involvement and deliberate planning.

For all these reasons, a critical component of any large-scale change should be deliberate attention to strategic communication, which is grounded in the context of an overall approach to strategic organizational change. Consequently, it makes sense to begin with a perspective on the management challenges that typically arise from the organizational dynamics that surround major change efforts.

These major changes are being pursued with increasing frequency. Consider some of the most common types of large-scale organizational change:

- New or redefined strategy
- Design and deployment of new organizational structures
- Profound changes in culture/operating environment
- Major innovations in products, processes, or distribution
- Strategic combinations—mergers, acquisitions, joint ventures
- Breakups, spin-offs, and divestitures
- Downsizing
- Expansion into new geographies, markets, technologies, offerings
- Appointment of new senior management

Each of these changes offers the potential for major disruption; moreover, many organizations today experience several of these changes simultaneously. As the capacity to manage numerous, concurrent changes becomes more important, it becomes even more critical to plan and communicate complex messages in a clear, purposeful way that keeps the organization focused on its strategic priorities.

Dynamics of the Transition State

In a sense, the easy part of managing change is figuring out where you want to go. The hard part is getting from here to there—from the current state to the future state—and persuading sufficient numbers of the right people to overcome their fears, skepticism, and resistance and join you on that journey. Between the current and future states lies the transition state, that perilous period when the organization is no longer what it used to be but hasn't yet become what it needs to be.

The transition state can be a dangerous place. At the very least, the success of the change initiative is far from assured. Even more critically, the organization becomes uncommonly fragile. If managed poorly, the transition might not only fail to produce the desired change; it could actually erode the underlying value of the enterprise.

There are two reasons why this happens. First, from the standpoint of organizational dynamics, it helps to think of any organization as a system that transforms a set of input from the external environment, in accordance with its strategy, into desired output of products and services. According to this approach, which is known as the Congruence Model of Organizational Behavior, the organization itself consists of four critical components (see Figure 1):

- The core work required to produce output
- The people who perform that work
- The formal organizational arrangements that provide the pattern of structures, processes, and practices that organize the flow of work
- The informal organizational arrangements comprised of the values and behavioral norms that shape the patterns of social interaction

At any given time, each of these four components, along with the strategy, exist in a relative state of

Figure 1: The Congruence Model



alignment, or congruence. The tighter the alignment, the better the performance.

During periods of relative stability, managers work to maintain alignment across the organization. But major change, by definition, requires a radical alteration of at least one of the components; and one of the key principles of the congruence model is that change in any of the components has a ripple effect throughout the organization. A new strategy, for instance, might demand a major restructuring. It might require people with entirely new managerial or technological skills. It might create the necessity for different behavior—speed, autonomy, customer focus, etc. So major change radically destabilizes the patterns of congruence as managers make a broad, interrelated series of changes.

These rapidly shifting organizational dynamics trigger some predictable changes in individual behavior—the second reason why the transition

state is so fraught with peril. Organizations typically exhibit three characteristics during this period, though their intensity will vary with the nature of the change and the culture of the organization:

Instability. The transition state begins with the first rumor of change. Quickly, the formal and informal organizational controls start to disintegrate. The frequent result is transition paralysis—people are so staggered by instability that they burrow into their foxholes and keep their heads down. People assume there’s no guarantee of reward for doing “the right thing,” and too many risks associated with doing “the wrong thing.” So they play it safe and do nothing.

Uncertainty. In the absence of concrete information about the future, uncertainty runs rampant. All of a sudden people haven’t a clue as to which of their assumptions about their future—or that of the company—have any validity.

Stress. The result of all this uncertainty and in-stability is enormous stress, both for the leaders of change and those they're trying to lead.

The prevalence of instability, uncertainty, and stress during times of significant change necessitate the deliberate management of three sets of issues during the transition period. Let's look at each in turn, and then consider the implications for strategic communications.

Power

Every organization is a political system with identifiable groups, cliques, and coalitions that cling to their own values and beliefs. Radical change implies a major redistribution of power, causing an upsurge in political activity. People and groups with significant power scramble to solidify their control; those with less power see new openings and begin maneuvering for a bigger share of the pie. This intense political activity siphons enormous energy away from productive work and diverts attention from customers and competitors.

Anxiety

A few years ago, a well-known oil company launched a major change initiative. After months of planning and preparation, the president met with his 30 top executives and unveiled his comprehensive blueprint for changing the strategy, structure, and portfolio. At the end of his presentation he asked for questions, and one of the most senior executives rose to his feet. "Sir," he said. "I want you to know there are nine questions on everybody's mind. The first question is this: What's going to happen to me? The second question is what's going to happen to me? The third question is what's going to happen to me?" (The other six questions were why? why? why? and when? when? when?)

Some version of that scene gets reenacted in every change situation. The moment someone starts talking about change, and can't answer the question, "What does this mean to me?" (and odds are the speaker doesn't know), people stop hearing. After a certain point, anxiety and stress can dra-

matically diminish performance, starting with the ability to process information. Employees caught in the throes of change-induced anxiety just can't hear you; your messages are being drowned out by the alarm bells going off inside their heads. Communication plans and techniques that ignore that reality are doomed to failure.

Control

People start to detach themselves from the current state long before its formal structures have been replaced by something new. The moment people catch wind of a major change in the offing, management begins to lose control. Employees ignore their customers and fixate on internal issues: What's happening to the compensation plan? Will I keep my coverage area? Will I have to sell products I've never heard of? For managers, pushing the usual buttons accomplishes nothing: rampant uncertainty has dulled both the fear of punishment and the hope of reward.

If ignored, the problems of power, anxiety, and control can cripple the organization. They bog people down in dysfunctional office politics, divert focus from competitive demands, and seriously damage relationships with customers and suppliers. It's certainly possible to design a coordinated plan of attack that addresses all these issues and paves the way to successful change—but only if strategic communication is a cornerstone of that plan.

The Role of Communication During Transitions

Consider this episode at a well-regarded Fortune 500 company whose leaders tried to initiate some major changes in the late 1990s. The company's top 200 managers were called together for their first offsite in years; there, the top leaders described the changes they had in mind—fairly profound changes in a deeply entrenched culture. The offsite was a success; the discussion was open and lively, and everyone seemed pleased. At its conclusion, the attendees were asked for comments, and the most common one, by far, was, "How are you going to communicate this to everybody else?"

Fast forward to a meeting several weeks later. Seated around a conference table were two senior vice presidents, two vice presidents, and three other managers. The topic: How to communicate the messages from the offsite. There were various ideas—passing out laminated cards with the highlights of the new culture; a big article in the company newsletter; a meeting at each of the business units. But one question kept getting asked: “What do you want to accomplish? In other words, what do you want to see happen? What do you want people to do with this information? How will you know if the communication worked?” There was no clear answer.

Too often, the mechanics of communication assume a life of their own, devoid of any larger purpose. If a specified number of meetings are held, videos shown, and speeches given by an assigned date, the plan was a success. The required percentage of employees at the requisite number of locations was exposed to the message within the specified time. Mission accomplished.

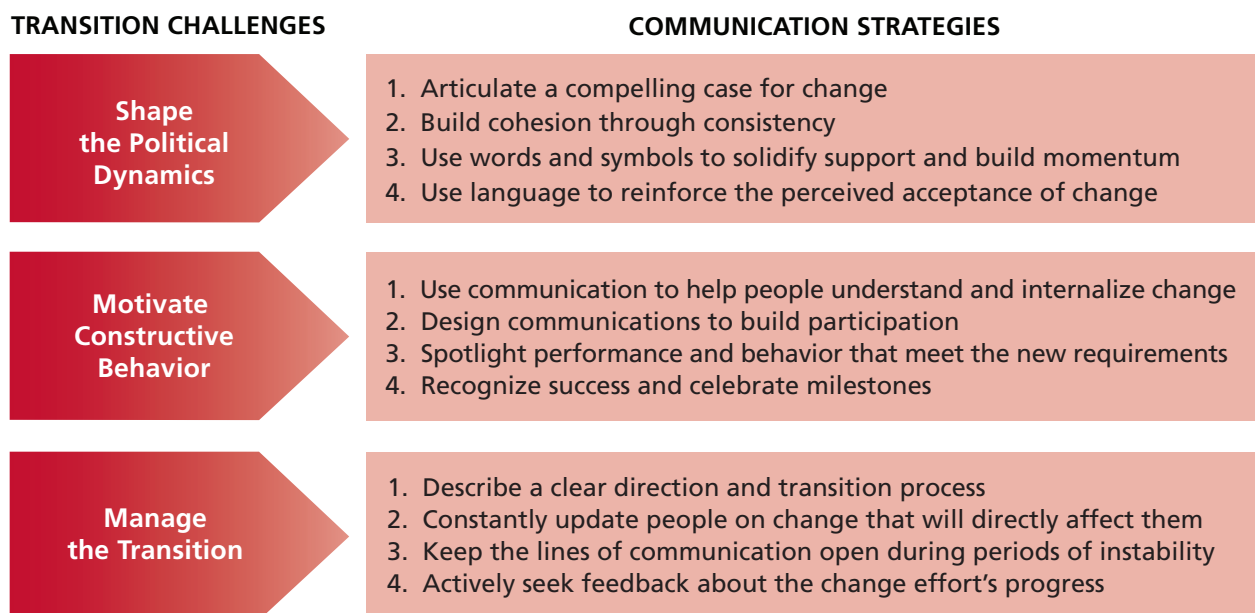
Strategic communication demands much more

than a completed checklist. It requires a process that addresses the organizational dynamics of change. More specifically, the issues associated with power, anxiety, and control require that change leaders address three critical challenges. They must:

- Shape the organization’s political dynamics in ways that generate support for the change initiative
- Motivate constructive behavior—first, by creating dissatisfaction with the status quo, and then by providing ways for people to participate in creating the future state
- Manage the transition, providing the structures, processes, and resources necessary to maintain performance during the interim period when the normal control functions are at their weakest

In a sense, the implications for strategic communication are really quite simple. The answer to the question, “What do you want your communications to accomplish?” should have a clear connection to one or more of these challenges (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Communicating Change



Shape the Political Dynamics

To shape the political dynamics and create support for the change initiative, it is important for leaders to:

- **Articulate a compelling case for change.** In terms of strategic communication, the most fundamental requirement for senior leaders is to articulate a compelling case for change—explaining why change is absolutely necessary, and then describing a vision of what the future will look like if the change succeeds. Each is essential to shaping the political dynamics of the transition. People are excited by the prospect of change until it becomes real; when push comes to shove, most of us have to be pried loose from the status quo. We have to be persuaded, both intellectually and emotionally, that it's clearly in our best interests to let go of what we've got and take a chance on the unknown. Effective leaders carefully construct the communication of their case for change, knowing this is a crucial first step in a long campaign.
- **Build cohesion through consistency.** In the acutely political atmosphere of the transition, people desperately seize on any evidence that hints at a split in management's ranks. Skepticism springs eternal; any suggestion of high-level dissension fuels speculation that the change might still stall in its tracks. Inconsistent messages breed confusion and hurt performance, providing an easy excuse for inaction on the part of anyone already inclined to resist the change.

A case in point: Preparing to announce an impending acquisition, a CEO and COO of a financial services company spent days working together on their presentations. On the day of announcement, they met with the headquarters staff of the newly acquired company. The CEO got up first and followed his script to the letter. Next came the COO, who had been designated as the acquisition's new CEO. He opened with a suitably self-effacing joke. Encouraged by the audience's warm response, he strayed from

his text. When he got to the section outlining the four priorities for the acquisition, he mentioned all four—but he reversed the order of the first two. Four days later, the managers of the acquired company were in a near frenzy, complaining that they were caught in the crossfire between the dueling priorities of their new executives. Who was the real boss? What would happen if they pursued the wrong priority? It was all sheer nonsense; but the damage was done.

- **Use words and symbols to solidify support and build momentum.** Organizational change bears some striking similarities to a political campaign; in both cases, you have to win people's minds and their hearts. While rational arguments are important, people need to feel they're part of something that is exciting, important, and likely to succeed. This requires a deft combination of words and symbols that touch people in ways convoluted business jargon and bloodless corporate-speak never can.

Henry Schacht, reflecting on his leadership of Lucent Technologies at the time of its spin-off from AT&T, has said that he failed to tap the company's tremendous reservoir of energy and excitement until he heard another executive use the phrase "the opportunity of a lifetime" at an employee meeting. Up to that point, the corporate messages hadn't sufficiently addressed the widespread anxiety about the spin-off; people weren't really sure they could make it on their own without the resources, reputation, and institutional support of AT&T. Schacht went on the offensive, telling people they'd never again have this kind of chance to build something truly special—to be the best. "The opportunity of a lifetime" was more than a slogan; it helped employees turn an emotional corner.

- **Use language to reinforce the perceived acceptance of change.** Used strategically, language takes on a life of its own, shaping perceptions of reality. If people constantly hear

others around them using terminology associated with the change initiative, the change becomes increasingly real. One reason why Total Quality Management has enjoyed such tremendous staying power while other management trends have fallen by the wayside is because it has a distinct language system all its own. If your bosses and peers are constantly using terms such as “continuous improvement” and “managing by prevention,” you eventually start to believe that this quality thing is for real and you’d better get on board.

Motivate Constructive Behavior

To address the dysfunctional behavior associated with anxiety and to motivate constructive behavior, leaders need to:

- **Use communication to help people understand and internalize the change.** Announcements and speeches are merely a first step toward helping people understand what the change involves and what’s expected of them. In order to truly comprehend the new behavior and performance required by the change, people need opportunities for two-way communication. They need the chance to ask questions, engage in conversation, restate the messages and requirements in their own words, and test their understanding.

Executives are constantly frustrated by surveys that reveal how little people really understand their formal pronouncements. There are usually several reasons. First, each successive layer of management tends to filter and distort the messages they pass on to the next. Second, people need to hear messages more than once; that’s particularly true during periods of change, when stress and anxiety block their ability to process information. The third reason is that passive, one-way communication provides only the most superficial level of understanding. People need to read, see, and hear messages numerous times in a variety of forms so they can digest, question, challenge, and ultimately understand them in a meaningful way.

- **Design communications to build participation.** Fundamental change cannot be unilaterally imposed from the top. Senior leaders can and should set a course, create a process, and provide the resources for change. But the best-laid plans will either falter in the face of strong resistance or stall for lack of support unless a critical mass of essential people commit themselves to the change. That kind of commitment flows from participation—the chance to have some influence, even if it’s relatively minor, in shaping the change. Strategic communications can play an important role. Situations designed to provide face-to-face, two-way communication have the added benefit of creating opportunities for active participation.

- **Spotlight performance and behavior that meet the new requirements.** It’s important to describe what kind of performance and behavior are required by the organizational change; it’s even more important to give concrete examples. During transition periods, managers should constantly look for people who can be showcased as models. Appointments and promotions should be aggressively communicated and directly linked to the change, so that people can understand what kind of behavior will lead to success in the new scheme of things. Best practices should be identified and communicated to the rest of the organization.

Similarly, people need to see that behavior or performance clearly at odds with the change requirements can have serious consequences. Important people who are out of step with the change become fairly visible; the rest of the organization knows who they are. Consequently, as senior leaders deal with these situations, either through reassignment or termination, they should communicate their moves in ways that send clear messages.

That rarely happens; most organizations cloud the issue by putting out the typical announcement praising the individual for years of devoted

service and valued accomplishments. A major opportunity is lost; a chance to underscore the required behavior is wasted. Of course, in these litigious times, it's practically unheard of to publicly state that someone has been fired and why. However, a stark announcement that someone is leaving, without the fulsome praise that has become so typical, is a legal and humane way to make it clear that something unusual is going on.

■ **Recognize success and celebrate milestones.**

CEOs who have been through major change episodes like to point out that nothing succeeds like success, and nothing builds support for change as dramatically as tangible evidence that it's working. Leaders should seize upon every opportunity to let people know that the change is succeeding in measurable terms—profitability, new contracts, faster time to market, reduced turnover, and so forth. Effective change leaders invariably create specific measures for gauging the progress of the change initiative; those same milestones should trigger communications that build momentum and reinforce the viability of the change.

Manage the Transition

Finally, to address the perceived loss of control and effectively manage the transition, leaders need to:

■ **Describe a clear direction and a transition**

process. In the early stages of change, leaders often have only the most general idea of where things are headed. They don't want to foreclose any options too early in the game. They need to respond to changes that keep happening in the marketplace even as their internal change proceeds. And, as we've mentioned, each organizational change tends to have a series of consequences, both intentional and unintentional, elsewhere in the organization. For all these reasons, no leader can honestly describe the future state in full detail. What the leader can—and should—say, is, "If we're going to succeed, here's the kind of organization we need to become.

I have some ideas about what we need to change. But I don't have all the answers. We're going to come up with them together—and here's how we're going to do it." What can be communicated early on is the transition process—the structures, assignments, and resources that will be used to design and implement the change, and to keep the organization running while the change is in progress. Those details can help reduce the anxiety typically caused by insufficient information.

- **Constantly update people on change that will directly affect them.** The organization tends to lose control—and suffer from diminished performance—when people don't know how they'll be personally affected by change. Lacking information, they feel powerless and disaffected; they fill the information void with rumors, gossip, and outrageous disaster scenarios. The real change, no matter how drastic it might be, is rarely as cataclysmic as what people are hearing on the grapevine. So it's in management's interests to keep rumors in check by communicating clearly and constantly; even bad news is better than no news.

Some leaders are particularly creative; for example, Scott McNealy at Sun Microsystems hosted a weekly show, "The McNealy Report," which was posted on the company's intranet so employees could listen at their workstations whenever it was convenient. On the other hand, Shay Assad, the CEO of Raytheon Engineering and Constructors, was similarly effective using more traditional methods—large and small meetings, e-mail, and monthly surveys. As one observer noted, Assad does "nothing really unusual—he just does a lot of it and does it well."

- **Keep the lines of communication open during periods of instability.** During transition periods, the normal communication channels shut down. People don't know who's safe to talk to or what's safe to talk about. At the very time when it's most important for managers to hear what the

organization is saying, the organization stops talking to them. Consequently, it's essential for leaders to employ as many communication techniques as possible—anything that will keep them in touch with what people are thinking and saying about the change. Leaders should also prepare themselves to hear lots of bad news; more likely than not, the organization's initial reaction will range from skepticism to outright condemnation. That's to be expected. If leaders want to keep the lines of communication open, they need to remember that this is not the time to massacre the messengers.

- **Actively seek feedback about the change effort's successes and failures.** Throughout the transition period, it's important to employ communication techniques to gather feedback on the progress of change, and to discern which aspects are working and which aren't. An effective change process should include benchmarks and deadlines to measure the effort's quantifiable success. Yet, quantifiable measures are the trailing indicators of the change effort's success; in order to gauge what's likely to happen next, it's important to know what people are thinking and feeling. So the full range of formal and informal communication techniques should be deployed throughout the organization, at various job levels and geographic locations, to constantly scan for potential problems and to help chart periodic course corrections.

The Principles of Strategic Communication

In the previous section, we discussed strategic communication in the specific context of the transition state. That's because the transition is so critical to the ultimate success of any large-scale change. Moreover, the importance of strategic communication is most evident as organizations face the imminent reality of having to implement a major change. However, effective leaders recognize that the underlying principles of strategic communication provide useful guidelines for managing all sorts of situations. Strategic communication represents a senior-level approach to communica-

tion as a coordinated, integrated process, with clear goals and objectives. It represents an overall understanding of communication as a way of leading an organization, rather than as a discrete program or series of events.

Our experience with organizations that successfully employ strategic communication suggests several key principles. These principles apply both to managing the transition state and to the effective management of ongoing change in complex organizations (see Figure 3).

Principle 1: Actively Involve Senior Leaders in Developing the Message, Purpose, and Approach

- **Develop communication themes in the context of organization strategy.** Effective communications should be coordinated at the most senior levels and carefully deployed to support the organization's strategic objectives across a broad and diverse spectrum of audiences. Strategic communication recognizes that the core message—the foundation for all the speeches, press releases, announcements, videos, chalk talks, and e-mails to follow—is a fundamental case for change. This includes a statement that clearly explains the vision of the future, why change is necessary, what it will consist of, and how that will affect the organization and its various constituencies. Don't let the short-term focus on communication tactics drive the long-term objective of implementing change.
- **Clearly define communications goals and objectives.** Any specific communication effort should begin with a clear definition of goals, objectives, and priorities. Communications can serve any number of functions. Is your intent simply to inform people of a new strategy or restructuring, or are you trying to change their behavior? Do you want to allay people's fears, or do you want to shock the system into a sense of urgency? Are you just trying to transmit information, or are you hoping to generate suggestions and feedback? Is your most critical goal to reassure

Figure 3: The Principles of Strategic Communication

PRINCIPLE 1:	PRINCIPLE 2:	PRINCIPLE 3:	PRINCIPLE 4:	PRINCIPLE 5:
Actively Involve Senior Leaders in Developing the Message, Purpose, and Approach	Deliberately Plan the Development and Deployment of the Communication Effort	Don't Overlook the Basic Elements of Effective Communication	The Ultimate Audience Is the Individual	Assure Your Credibility
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Develop communication themes in the context of organization strategy ■ Clearly define communications goals and objectives ■ Actively involve senior leaders in developing key messages and themes ■ Be clear about the "voice" behind the message ■ Remember how crucial timing can be 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Involve the right people in coordinating the communications ■ Use a project management approach ■ Develop consistent messages targeted at specific audiences ■ Think of communications as a series of successive waves ■ Identify the communicators and help them get ready 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Keep the messages clear and simple ■ Important messages have to be repeated over and over again ■ Use every communication tool at your disposal ■ For lasting impact, insist on two-way communication ■ Seek immediate feedback and maintain constant monitoring of the communication effort 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Answer the most important question for each individual: "How will this change affect me?" ■ Communicate up close and personal—the most effective communications are face-to-face 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Give your message <i>The Wall Street Journal</i> test ■ Identify your major themes, then resist the urge to add more ■ When in doubt, tell the truth

investors or lenders, or are you willing to soften the Wall Street message to allay fears among employees? These questions involve major policy issues that require early and active participation by senior leaders.

- **Actively involve senior leaders in developing key messages and themes.** The core messages can only come from senior leaders; they must reflect their language, ideas, objectives, and values. Hammering out the precise wording of these core messages is hard work, requiring time, patience, and attention to detail on the part of people who normally delegate such matters to subordinates. Yet, it is the discussion and debate over specific words that give the core messages

their richness and build leadership's understanding and sense of ownership of the final document.

There's great value in locking the senior team in a room and forcing them, together with the CEO, to sweat over the final wording of critical messages. It's rarely fun, but it pays huge dividends in several ways. First, precision compels clarity. It's often tempting to frame messages in ambiguous terms that sidestep touchy subjects. Put the entire senior team in the room, with each member calculating what the announced change will actually mean in terms of his or her own interests, and it doesn't take them long to cut through the fog. Seemingly minor details—the

order in which executives are named in a particular context—can touch off far-reaching discussions about structures, priorities, even management succession. Similarly, having the executive team work through the answers to a prepared list of Q&As helps to surface unaddressed issues. As uncomfortable as these discussions can be, it's far better to deal with these issues proactively and behind closed doors, rather than waiting to clean up the mess from ambiguous announcements.

Second, this group work creates value by allowing each team member a chance to participate and providing a sense of ownership. Finally, this collective effort builds understanding and consistency; when the team leaves the room, they will be much more likely to use the same words and logic to explain what's going on.

- **Be clear about the “voice” behind the message.** Public perceptions of authorship are critical; people in the organization will read huge significance into the name attached to a message, and leaders should give the matter serious consideration. Once authorship has been determined, the tone and wording of announcements, no matter what medium is used to transmit them, should sound genuine. The “voice” must ring true, or people will leap to the conclusion that the announcement represents a routine corporate initiative that has the CEO's obligatory signature. A key principle of change management is that it requires the active and personal involvement of top leaders; the tone and wording of major announcements should reinforce that perception of involvement, not undercut it.
- **Remember how crucial timing can be.** Communication never takes place in a vacuum. Carefully crafted messages can be undermined or overwhelmed by major events within the organization or in the outside world. For example, a major unit of a U.S. manufacturer was planning a huge restructuring, one that would eliminate several thousand management jobs

in the United States while expanding off-shore production capabilities. The original schedule called for an announcement that would have fallen right on the heels of a company-wide downsizing and right before the opening of labor contract talks and the start of a congressional election campaign that was sure to focus on the loss of local jobs. Fortunately, senior leaders became involved, considered “the big picture,” and rescheduled the announcement. A deliberate review of timing and its consequences—which often requires a senior-level perspective—should be an essential component of any communication effort.

Principle 2: Deliberately Plan the Development and Deployment of the Communications Effort

- **Involve the right people in coordinating the communications.** As mentioned earlier, numerous players have a stake in any major communication. A single announcement could involve investor relations, human resources, public relations, marketing, internal communications, along with the functional or geographic units involved. Once the senior leaders have agreed on the overall themes and purpose, the deployment of the plan and the development of targeted messages should include a structure and process for touching the right bases and involving the necessary constituencies. For example, there's a tendency to exclude internal communications leaders from the table when major decisions are being made; somehow, communications to employees take a back seat to pressing legal, financial, and public relations priorities. That's understandable but shortsighted. It's up to senior leaders to create a communication structure that ensures that all the major constituencies are represented at the table when important decisions are being made.
- **Use a project management approach.** When talking about a major communications effort, you can't just assume that “HR will get the word out.” Any major communication program or event requires a project manager who develops

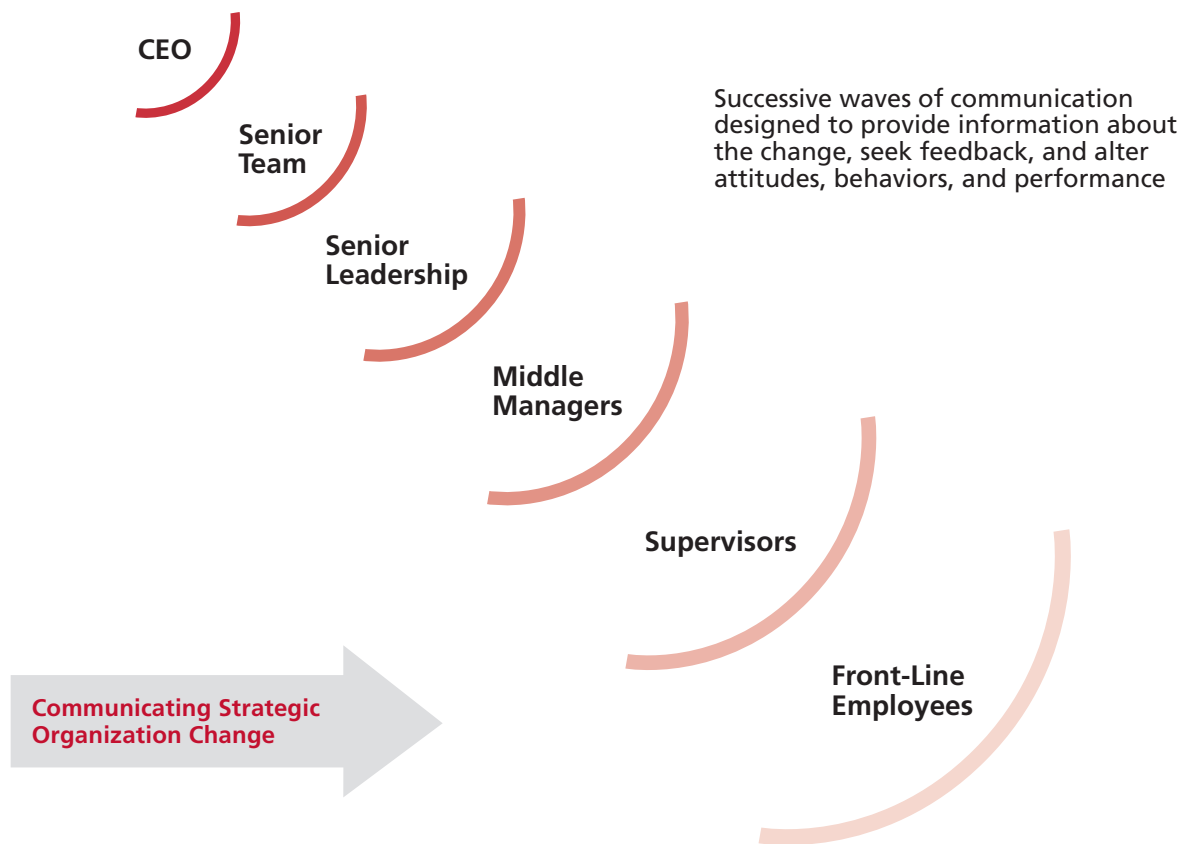
timelines and action steps, hands out assignments, monitors progress, and holds people accountable. Moreover, that manager should be part of the senior group deploying the overall change effort, so that communications issues become a normal part of their discussion.

- **Develop consistent messages targeted at specific audiences.** Within the strategic context, the communications group should create a set of messages tailored to achieve the desired objectives with each internal and external audience. The two keys: audience focus and overall consistency. Messages to different audiences can differ in emphasis, and to a certain degree they can differ in tone, but they can't differ when it comes to the underlying substance. Every message, both internal and external, has to flow from and reinforce the same basic themes. Always assume that messages will seep from one audience to

another; particularly in these days of e-mail and the Internet, it's foolish to think that you can compartmentalize your communications and get away with sending out conflicting messages.

- **Think of communications as a series of successive waves.** Too often, communication boils down to a single event—a speech, a memo, a video. The initial event is only the kickoff. An effective program will push the communications out through ever-widening concentric circles, with successive waves of communication eventually reaching the entire organization (see Figure 4).
- **Identify the communicators and help them get ready.** In the final analysis, the senior leaders and communications specialists can only set the stage and provide the basic themes; the real communication happens between each employee and his or her supervisor. Consequently, there

Figure 4: Successive Waves of Communication



has to be a major effort to provide each of the supervisors with the backup materials and skills training they'll need to pass along the communication with some degree of consistency and accuracy. Without substantial support, most supervisors will either mangle the message or simply not deliver it.

Principle 3: Don't Overlook the Basic Elements of Effective Communications

- **Keep the messages clear and simple.** That might seem obvious; but most companies tend to make their messages too complicated. Give people as much substantive information as possible without overloading them with minutiae. Beyond a few basic messages, it just turns into noise. The more traumatic the message, the simpler it should be. You can go back and fill in the blanks as time goes on—and when you have something more substantive to say.
- **Important messages have to be repeated over and over again.** As we discussed earlier, anxiety blocks people's capacity to hear and to process information. Experience suggests that in periods of stress, people typically need to be exposed to a message approximately half a dozen times before it really starts to sink into the collective consciousness. When in doubt, over communicate. What seems like too much communication might, in fact, be far too little.
- **Use every communication tool at your disposal.** Messages are infinitely more effective when communicated through more than one medium—formal and informal methods such as written announcements, speeches, videos, voicemails, e-mail, large and small group meetings, company Web pages, site visits, brown-bag lunches with employees, toll free call-in lines. Effective communication programs employ multiple media to repeat and reinforce the key messages.
- **For lasting impact, insist on two-way communication.** Truly effective communication involves the flow of information in both directions.

Events and programs should be designed in ways that allow people the opportunity to ask questions, react, and probe for relevant information. Interaction helps people understand and internalize the information. Passive listening merely fuels boredom, frustration, and misinformation.

- **Seek immediate feedback and maintain constant monitoring of the communication effort.** Effective communication programs include processes for quickly gathering, reporting, and analyzing feedback. That information is vital for making decisions about what information to revise, emphasize, or clarify in successive rounds of communication. Just as communication shouldn't be a one-time event, feedback on the effectiveness of the communication can't be done all at once. It's important to periodically test how effectively the messages were conveyed, to find out if they were communicated both widely and deeply, and to keep an eye out for signs that the messages are starting to fray around the edges.

Principle 4: The Ultimate Audience Is the Individual

- **Answer the most important question for each individual: "How will this change affect me?"** During periods of instability, it's important to remember that this question is uppermost in everyone's mind. Until it gets answered, virtually nothing else gets heard. Communicators should find ways to address that question as quickly as possible for as many people as possible. That involves moving swiftly from mass communications to more informal and personalized communication.
- **Communicate up close and personal—the most effective communications are face-to-face.** Internal communication packs the greatest punch when the message delivered from afar by senior management is repeated in person by each person's immediate supervisor. The goal should be to have every manager and supervisor communicate

a meaningful and consistent version of the company message to his or her direct reports.

Principle 5: Assure Your Credibility

- **Give your message *The Wall Street Journal* test.** It's very easy: look at the internal memo you're about to distribute or the speech you're about to give. Then ask yourself: "How would I feel if I read that tomorrow morning on page one of *The Wall Street Journal*?" There are two issues. First, you should operate on the assumption that sooner or later, internal communications will make their way to the outside world—to competitors, customers, the press, stock analysts, etc. When dealing with any group beyond the most senior executives, operate on the assumption that nothing newsworthy stays secret for long. Don't say or write anything to groups of employees, customers, or others you would not mind seeing in the newspaper tomorrow. Second, if there's some reason you'd be uneasy about being publicly tied to your comments, then perhaps you should take another look at what you were planning to say.
- **Identify your major themes, then resist the urge to add more.** One health-care company started out with a simple vision and mission. Then, over time, came the three-pronged strategy, the six values, the five key competitive plays, the eight critical success factors, and the four quality goals. It was too much. On average, the top 100 managers could only identify 40 percent of the key messages; it's frightening to think how little the average employee had digested. Particularly in times of change, message clutter is common because there's so much important material to be communicated. Top leaders have to resist that urge, and steadfastly stick to no more than three or four major themes that are constantly reinforced for a significant period of time. If you replace more than half of your themes from one year to the next, people will quickly conclude the themes are passing fads rather than core concepts.

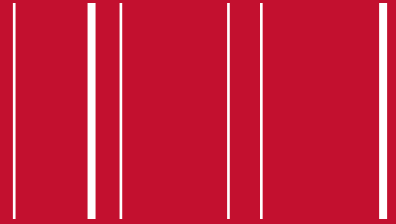
- **When in doubt, tell the truth. In all seriousness, honesty really is the best policy.** The key to effective communication is credibility. Every communication event should be viewed as an opportunity to enhance credibility among key internal and external audiences. Conversely, attempts to manipulate or shade the truth in pursuit of short-term goals inevitably result in long-term disaster—a fundamental lack of trust that typically takes years to rebuild.

Summary

Depending upon the situation, strategic communication doesn't necessarily require enormous time or resources. Instead, it involves a way of thinking about communication—one that places communication squarely in the broader context of strategic organizational change.

What is required is a senior-level commitment to actively leading a coordinated change effort with specific objectives. The creation of the initial announcement and communication strategy requires the active, hands-on involvement of top leaders. The transition period provides opportunities to use communication to build support, increase participation, and maintain performance during a period of instability and uncertainty. In the latter stages of change, strategic communication helps to sustain momentum and keep the organization focused on critical priorities and objectives.

Under any circumstances, strategic communication provides a conceptual approach and some guiding principles that can substantially increase the effectiveness of leadership in today's complex organizations.



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