

COURAGEOUS CULTURES



Communicating Change

A Dozen Tips in a Nutshell

Below are twelve tips, gathered by Harvard, on how to make change communications work.

1. Specify the nature of the change

Slogans, themes and phrases don't define what the change is expected to achieve. Instead, communicate specific information about how the change will affect customer satisfaction, quality of product, market share or sales or productivity.

2. Explain why

Employees are often left in the dark about the business reasons behind corporate changes. This may happen because the people announcing the change have spent so much time studying the facts that it never occurs to them that their employees aren't equally in the know. Managers should share information with employees about the various options they considered and rejected before they came to the final decision.

3. Let employees know the scope of a change, even if it's bad news

Some changes may affect only a few individuals within the organisation, while others may affect everyone. In either case, it's best to end speculation. Don't sugar-coat news. Management at one company felt they couldn't tell employees they were searching for a buyer, because 'morale would plummet.' Morale plummeted anyway as the story seeped out as a series of rumours.

4. Repeat, repeat and repeat again the purpose of the change and actions planned

If the initial announcement doesn't generate questions, don't assume that employees accept the need for change – it may only mean that it came as a surprise. Later, they'll begin to worry, which is when the communication process has to rev up. Follow up that first meeting with a second meeting, a third and so forth, to get a dialogue going.

5. Use graphics

Hand-drawn pictures on a flip chart or projector can simplify corporate restructures. Drawings can help employees visualise the new organisation.

6. Make sure communication is two-way

Small, informal meetings on a local level enable managers to respond to employees' specific concerns and to gauge the level of likely resistance within the organisation.

7. Target first line supervisors

All the experts say first line supervisors should play a key role in corporate change plans, communicating the need for change and its nature from the start.

8. Support change with new learning

Training can answer the question, 'Why should I change how I've been working?' Good training includes an awareness that you have to change. Acceptance of that fact creates commitment to change. Training also provides skills to get to the right outcome.

9. Point to real progress

Include communications that show what has been achieved to date: people trained, new logos defined, branches re-branded, new systems installed, sales increased, costs reduced, new customers won and so on. This makes the change tangible now, rather than a theoretical 'some day' event.

10. Don't limit communications to meetings and print

As email becomes the main means of internal communications, many people won't even look at paper memos or reports. You can also create videos that run continuously in the cafeteria and reception areas. Pod casts, text messages and screen savers can also be used to spread the word.

11. Institutionalise information flow about the change

Set up regular, cross-function and cross-region communications. Get people to talk about the changes. Welcome questions and a bit of rational cynicism; by questioning, we deepen our understanding and therefore our commitment.

12. Model the changes yourself

Too often, managers and directors in change efforts don't do a good enough job of making sure that their actions are consistent with their words. If this is perceived to be happening, employees become frustrated and alienated. Communications must translate into reality.