Communications during Organisational Change



In organisation after organisation, poor communication has turned a difficult situation into a crisis. Life changing announcements are made in brief impersonal memos or e mails. When problems are spotted by those leading the change another electronic communication is sent out. Few organisations have channels of communication that are adequate for the demands of change.

The age of technology and instant communication has done as much to decrease effective communication as it has to improve things. In all of the high tech, organisations are missing the high touch.

The challenge of creating truly effective communication is complex even when only two people are involved so imagine how much more complex it becomes when people across the organisation and customers and stakeholders also need to be involved and informed of a change.

Here are several approaches to ensure that communication is up to the challenge that comes with significant change.

* 6 x’s rule

People need to hear the same message several times before we begin to pay attention to it. Those leading change must be prepared to repeat the same message before everyone starts to take it seriously.

* Vary the Medium

Some people like to read things, others would rather have someone tell them, in a group or individually and on occasion people might read something in a newsletter or bulletin board. Always seek a variety of mediums to communicate the message.

* Ensure it’s two way

It is crucial that people have a chance to voice concerns, ask questions, seek clarity and understanding in a way that works for them. Asking questions in an auditorium filled with staff will not elicit any of the above. Seeking ways to get feedback is crucial as it is a sounding board for what is actually going on and ensures that ongoing communication addresses these real issues as well as the progress of the change. Ways that some organisations have dealt with this include using hotlines, bulletin boards, focus groups or transition monitoring teams to get close to people impacted by the change.

* Appropriate Timeliness

This has different elements to it. For instance, the end of a shift or the end of the week is unlikely to be the best time to make major announcements. People need time to process information and get clarification as soon as possible. On the other hand, too much detail can be difficult to digest. Getting balance is important and allowing opportunity for follow up is important.

* Ensure Consistency

Organisational levels are often built in filtering systems. Important information

must be consistently delivered. Perhaps a written set of notes can go out to all managers who deliver the messages to each team affected by the change. Or maybe, one of the key leaders needs to join each manager in all key communication sessions to ensure the same message is being heard across the organisation.

* People trust behaviour over words

‘What you are speaks so loudly I cannot hear what you say.’

*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

It is what you are and what you do that people pay attention to, not what you say. People trust what the leader’s actions are telling them more than what their words are saying. There is little that can sabotage a change effort as quickly and thoroughly as when the words and actions of a leader are not consistent.

* Understanding is more important than agreeing

People need to understand what is going on and why it is happening before making up their minds to agree with the decisions being made. It is the leader’s job to ensure that everyone understands the essentials such as:

-Why is change necessary?

-What is at stake organisationally and personally if we don’t change

-Where are we going?

-What is the plan to get there?

People will make up their own minds in their own time. Pushing for blind agreement when staff have little or no understanding of what is going on does not support successful implementation

* Listening is twice as important as talking

The forgotten art of listening often provides the small breakthrough that an individual needs to help them get on board with a change. It is truly a gift to someone when they feel genuinely listened to, even more so if the listener takes notes based on what they are hearing and commits to taking action and follows that action up in a few days with feedback.

* Tell people the truth, the good news and the bad

Nothing destroys trust faster than not telling people the truth. It is always best to give people as much information as possible as soon as possible, and to keep it coming.

* People usually complain before they create

This is human nature. People need opportunities to vent their concerns and frustration in safe ways.

Essential Principles of Communication

* Communicate directly with front line managers and supervisors
* If it isn’t face to face, it isn’t communication
* Focus on the impact at the local work area.