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The role of communication in organisational change

Communication
in organisational
change

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129

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide a conceptual framework for the study of communication during organisational change. Although there is an enduring interest in studying (internal) communication during organisational change, there is still little or no empirical research on the topic.

Design/methodology/approach – In this conceptual paper a framework is presented on how to study communication during organisational change and how communication could prevent resistance to change. The framework leads to six propositions in which aspects of communication, such as information, feelings of belonging to a community, and feelings of uncertainty, have an influence on resistance to change, which will affect the effectiveness of the change effort.

Findings – A distinction between the informative function of communication and communication as a means to create a community was made. In the suggested model communication has an effect not only on readiness for change, but also on uncertainty.

Originality/value – This framework can be used by researchers and practitioners to study, guide, frame and model empirical research into this area in the future, and can be used to compare different change programs, within different organisations, to study the contribution of (internal) communication in the success or failure of the change.

Keywords Organizational change, Corporate communications, Competences

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

“The only thing constant within organisations is the continual change of these organisations.” This line is widespread and famous within organisational and management literature. Organisational change has become a topic of many textbooks and other scientific and management literature. Despite this growing attention and research, still many of the efforts of organisational change fail. It is computed that at least more than half of all the organisational change programs fail, reach a deadlock, or do not reach the results, which they initiately were aiming at (Bennebroek Gravenhorst *et al.*, 1999). There are many reasons for the failure of so many organisational change efforts, such as the organisational culture, the timing of the change effort, and the role of change-agents (Bennebroek Gravenhorst *et al.*, 1999). In this paper I will focus on the role of communication during organisational change.

Communication is vital to the effective implementation of organisational change (DiFonzo and Bordia, 1998; Lewis and Seibold, 1998; Schweiger and Denisi, 1991). “The general importance of communication during planned change has already been empirically demonstrated and generally agreed among practitioners” (Lewis, 1999). Poorly managed change communication results in rumors and resistance to change, exaggerating the negative aspects of the change (DiFonzo *et al.*, 1994; Smelzer and Zener, 1992). “The empirical picture that is slowly emerging indicates that



communication process and organisational change implementation are inextricably linked processes” (Lewis, 1999, p. 44). Why communication is important during organisational change is also demonstrated by the model of the dynamics of planned organisational change (Robertson *et al.*, 1993). Robertson *et al.* state that the change effort is dependent of the ability of the organisation to change the individual behavior of individual employees. If organisational change is about how to change the individual tasks of individual employees, communication about the change, and information to these employees is vital. Communication with these employees should be an important, and integrative part of the change efforts and strategies.

Although the general conclusion about the importance of communication in organisational change is demonstrated and agreed on, specific communicative actions, approaches and effects are still left unexplained (Lewis, 1999). Armenakis and Harris focus on how to develop messages and distinguish five different message domains within change communication (Armenakis and Harris, 2002). Clampitt *et al.* (2000) focus on the strategies used by managers in communicating organisational change. Lewis (1999) focus is on which medium is used in communicating change. The findings, recently published in this journal (Daly *et al.*, 2003) support also the picture that internal communication is important in communicating change. Others, focus on the constructional phases of change, where communication is vital to mutual understanding of the problems organisations have to face in order to meet the challenges, and need to change (Bennebroek Gravenhorst *et al.*, 1999). These empirical contributions clearly help to understand the process of communicating organisational change.

In this paper I will focus on the purposes or goals organisations have with communication during organisational change, which could help of a better understanding of the process of change, and vital communicational efforts organisations should make. Therefore, I will present a model and six propositions of how to study communication during organisational change, which could guide empirical research. It is about how a designed or planned change effort is communicated within the organisation. This brings a limitation within itself, that is that the focus is on communicating the designed or planned change effort, regardless if this effort is a developmental approach or a planned approach. I will not go into the phases where diagnosing problems, mutual understanding of the problems, which makes the change necessary. Communication in that stages is vital as well, but will not be the focus of this paper.

Theoretical background

In order to have an effective change, it is necessary to first define this effective change. When do organisations evaluate a change effort as effective? This question, although there is a clear trend on managers to examine their performance, little or no empirical research is available on effective change. There is an immense amount of practitioner-oriented literature on how to effectively manage change (Champy and Nohria, 1996; Kotter, 1996). Common prescriptions for effectively managing change include encouraging participation from as many employees as possible, addressing their concerns in the change program, or ensuring that leaders act as role models for the changes (Heracleous, 2002).

“Increasing scarcity of resources will put pressure on managers to examine their performance in using resources wisely. The cry for accountability in management that demands demonstrated results will be continued and intensify” (Garnett and Kouzmin, 2000, p. 62). This means that managers and organisations have to find ways of proving that the change-effort was effective and made sense. Using the model of dynamics of planned organisational change (Robertson *et al.*, 1993), an effective change will result in employees who have successfully adopted the change. When employees have to change, or are changing, low levels of resistance to change within the organisation should exist, to make the change effort successful.

One purpose of communication during organisational change can be to prevent resistance to change, or at least try to reduce this. When resistance to change levels are low within an organisation, one could argue that the effectiveness of the change-effort will be higher. Since an organisation’s functioning depends on the actions of its members, the organisation can change only when members’ behavior changes (Goodman and Dean, 1982; Tannenbaum, 1971).

Altering the work setting is a potent lever for inducing change in member behavior. This notion is rooted in social cognitive models of behavior (Bandura, 1997; Porter and Lawler, 1968). From this perspective, “all effective intervention activities must generate change in the way targeted individuals actually behave on the job” (Robertson *et al.*, 1993, p. 622). Readiness for change is the cognitive precursor to the behaviors of either resistance, or support for, a change effort (Armenakis and Harris, 2002). In this sense the concept of readiness for change consists of both resistance to change and support for change as a continuum with on one end resistance to change and on the other end readiness for change. The assumption can be made that when employees are ready to accept the change, and experience large feelings of readiness for change (or low feelings of resistance to change) that the change effort will be more effective.

- P1.* Effective organisational change will be showed in low levels of resistance to change, or high levels of readiness for change by employees.

Goals of organisational communication

According to Francis (1989) organisational communication commonly has two goals (De Ridder, 2003). The first goal of organisational communication should be to inform the employees about their tasks and about the policy and other issues of the organisation. The second goal is communication with a mean to create a community within the organisation. Roughly, a distinction can be made between organisational communication as a mean to provide information (“communicatio”) and organisational communication as a mean to create a community spirit (“communicare”; Francis, 1989; De Ridder, 2003).

In line with these goals, within organisational change we can distinct between the information given about the change, and the sense of a community within the organisation before, during and after the change. The information given by the organisation about the change should address the reasons to change, and the worries employees initially will have. The information given by the organisation usually comes from management as the sender, and with employees as the receiver of information. In this sense, common communicational theories of sender, message, channel, receiver and noise could be applied to this communication. Specific aspects are if the

information of the change was in time, that the information was understandable, that it contained no errors and so on.

- P2. One of the main purposes of change communication should be to inform the organisational members about the change, and how their work is altered because of the change. This informative function of communication will have an effect on readiness for change.

The second goal of organisational communication is to create a community (Francis, 1989; De Ridder, 2003). Organisational communication can be considered as an important antecedent of the self-categorisation process, which helps to define the identity of a group and to create a community spirit, which fits into organisational requirements (De Ridder, 2003; Postmes *et al.*, 2001; Meyer and Allen, 1997). Creating a community within organisations has theoretical foundations within social psychological phenomena as social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) and its sister self-categorisation theory (Turner, 1985), often jointly described as the social identity approach (Postmes *et al.*, 2001).

The social identity is “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his or her membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). Social categorisation can be described as the subjective order of social reality in terms of social categories, or groups of persons who have a meaning for the observer. These groups could be the social groups the observer has contact with (or is participating in), or social groups in broader contexts such as men, women, Germans, Italians and so on. Social categorisation influences our observations and judgments of persons. Characteristics, which are stereotypical associated with the social category, are attributed to the person, and associations who do not fit in the original social category probably would be ignored (Turner, 1985).

It has often been observed that communication creates the conditions for commitment, and hence should be seen as one of its important antecedents (Foy, 1994; Katz and Kahn, 1978; Meyer and Allen, 1997; Postmes *et al.*, 2001). An meta-analysis (Postmes *et al.*, 2000) reveals that:

... employees were strongly committed if they obtained adequate information to perform their task, and this information was presented to them via formal bureaucratic channels rather than informal channels. Interpersonal communication with peers, and direct superiors predicted commitment less than communication with more senior management did, and communication with a socio-emotional content was less predictive of commitment than formal communication was (Postmes *et al.*, 2001, p. 231).

As Postmes *et al.*, stated:

... people’s sense of belonging to the organisation does not primarily depend on the quality of their informal and social-emotional interactions with peers and proximate colleagues, but it is related more strongly to their appreciation of the management’s communication (Postmes *et al.*, 2001, p. 240).

This strongly relates both goals of organisational communication to one another, because information is necessary, as Postmes and colleagues state, to create feelings of a community.

Another factor that could influence feelings of belonging to a community within the organisation is trust between management and employees. The dominant perspective in literature (see Dirks and Ferrin, 2001) is that trust results in distinctive effects such as more positive attitudes, higher levels of cooperation, and superior levels of performance (Jones and George, 1998; Mayer *et al.*, 1995). Dirks and Ferrin suggest that trust can work in two ways, as a main effect on workplace outcomes, such as cooperation and motivation, or as moderator effect, “as it helps the individual assess the future behavior of another party and/or interpret past behavior” (Dirks and Ferrin, 2001, p. 461). In that sense, trust guides the actions of individuals in ambiguous situations; it will shape the perceiving of the partner, and in this way will guide the individual response to that action.

Commitment and trust clearly are linked to organisational climate and organisational culture. Organisational climate is defined as: the shared perceptions of organisational policies, practices and procedures, both formal and informal (Schneider and Reichers, 1983). Organisational climate refers at the perceived representation of the organisation’s goals and the means and ways adopted for goal attainment. Research with organisational climate usually is about organisational misconduct (Vardi, 2001), organisational identification (Smidts *et al.*, 2001), and has links with ethical climates (Victor and Cullen, 1988).

In summary, communication to create a community within organisations shows in for instance high commitment to the organisation of the employees, in trust of employees with management, in organisational identification.

- P3.* Communication to create a community, resulting in commitment with the organisation, trust in the organisation and its management and organisational identification will have an effect on readiness for change.

Uncertainty and job insecurity

Uncertainty during change processes is typically about the aim, process and expected outcomes of the change and implications for the individual employees (Buono and Bowditch, 1993). Knowledge is not only a pre-requisite to the ability of influencing the outcomes (Terry and Jimmieson, 1999), but knowledge about the motives for change will also help reducing uncertainty and creating readiness for change. In that sense effective change communication can be viewed as a mean to proper manage uncertainty (DiFonzo and Bordia, 1998). Uncertainty of employees during change processes will reflect on the implications for the individual employee, or the environment that employee is doing his or her work in. It comes with questions like “will I still have a job after this change”, “will I still have the same co-workers after the change”, and “can I still do perform my tasks on the same way I used to do them”. In this sense feelings of uncertainty are about the process of the change, the personal and social consequences of the change.

- P4.* High levels of uncertainty will negatively affect readiness for change.

A special notion within uncertainty is job insecurity. Especially feelings of uncertainty occur when the organisation is undergoing changes with loss of jobs. Job insecurity has been defined in different ways. Many have adopted a global view in which job

insecurity is conceived as an overall concern about the continued existence of the job in the future (de Witte, 1999; van Vuuren, *et al.*, 1991).

Job insecurity has three components (van Vuuren, *et al.*, 1991), first of all, it is a subjective experience or perception. The same situation might be perceived differently by different employees. Job insecurity also implies uncertainty about the future, for the person it is uncertain whether he/she will be able to continue to work, or whether he or she will be made redundant. Finally, doubts about the continuation of the job as such, are central to job insecurity, these aspects of specific aspects of the job (changes in income or position within the company) are commonly not seen as part of the concept of job insecurity (De Witte, 1999).

P5. When organisational change results in downsizing, and loss of jobs, job insecurity will have a large effect on readiness for change

Both described goals of organisational communication in itself will probably also have an effect on feelings of uncertainty and job insecurity. Uncertainty will reveal when the organisation did not communicated clearly what changes individual employees have to adapt. Uncertainty can lead to rumors and other forms of informal communication. The extend in which informal communication occurs during the change effort could be an indicator of the amount of uncertainty and on the (lack of) quality of the information given about the organisational change. So besides of direct effects of the informative function of communication, and communication as a mean to create a community within the organisation, I expect also an indirect effect on uncertainty and job insecurity.

P6. Communication will have an influence of feelings of uncertainty and on feelings of job insecurity.

Research model

The six propositions lead to a research model of the function of communication during organisational change (see Figure 1).

Research

The propositions made in this paper are that information of the change, feelings of a community within the organisation which is undergoing the change, and uncertainty have an influence on readiness for change. The variables on information could be

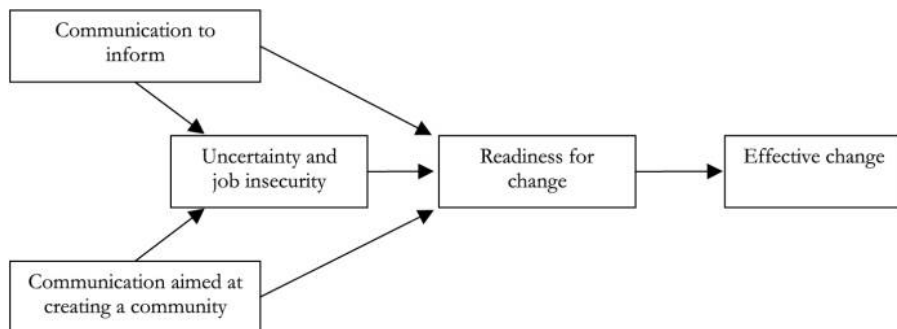


Figure 1.
Conceptual model of communication during organisational change

measured by asking employees about the quality of the change communication, by reviewing the different messages and media used to inform employees about the forthcoming change. Questions about the knowledge of the objectives of the change, and about the expected results also could be included.

Feelings of belonging to a community could be operationalized in several ways. One possibility is to ask employees about their commitment with the organisation they work for, for instance using Meyer and Allen (1997) commitment questionnaire. Other possibilities is asking employees about the communication climate, or measuring feelings of trust between management and operating core. An alternative measure could be organisational identification. Finally, uncertainty and job insecurity can be measured with standard questionnaires such as by Schweiger and Denisi (1991). These variables will, as we predict, have an influence on readiness for change.

The effectiveness of the change will be more complicated to measure. Retrospectively management and employees could be asked to rate the effectiveness or successfulness of the change, but this may possibly be influenced by other factors as well. The effectiveness of the change, or its success, is also dependent of the correct diagnosis of the problems and the change itself.

Limitations

Communication is not the only key factor of successful organisational change. The actual design of the change and the strategic choices made within the design are of course precursors of effective changes. As stated before, many of the academic literature focuses on the constructional phase of organisational change. The aim of the model presented in this paper, is not to give organisations a tool of creating effective communication and as a result design changes that will make sense. The aim of the model is more empirical, in that sense that it could guide future empirical research.

The suggested relation between readiness for change and the successful implementation of organisational change has, as far as we know, never been found in research, although numerous handbooks on organizational development (OD) have (implicit) propositions supporting this relation (see for instance French *et al.*, 2000; Harvey and Brown, 2001). Although not original, the proposition helps in guiding empirical research. It will also be hard to find such a relationship because every organisations has its own characteristics, just as every change process will have particular goals and aims. It is, however, remarkable that in the huge amount of literature concerning organisational change, no or little emphasis is brought on evaluating organisational change efforts. Despite the growing notion of organisational learning, and the continuous change efforts on various terrains of organisations, little or no attention is made to evaluate previous change efforts and learn from those efforts to design better changes in the future.

A managerial limitation has to be made with the community variables as suggested in the model. A community already exists within the organisation. Trying to create a positive climate will take, in line with organisational culture, a long time. Interesting enough, from a communication viewpoint, day-to-day communication within the organisation will contribute to this climate. Even considering mergers, the history of the merging partners on the organisational climate level will have an influence on the readiness for change of the individual employees.

A more empirical limitation is that it will probably take lots of time finding enough organisations who are willing to participate in these kinds of research. Combined with the special goals every organisation has, and the specific change these organisations will undergo it will be hard to draw up general conclusions.

Conclusions

In this paper I tried to explain the role of communication during organisational change by reflecting the goals of internal communication (Francis, 1989), and discuss them in relation to organisational change. A distinction between the informative function of communication and communication as a mean to create a community was made. In the suggested model communication has not only an effect on readiness for change, but also on uncertainty.

The model could guide empirical research, but as is the case in much applied organisational research it is hard to find organisations that are willing to participate on the one hand, and on the other hand, limit the influences of specific characteristics of the change which will be conducted at the specific organisation.

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