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Change Management and Employee Communication Strategies

By Marcia Xenitelis



If your employee communication strategy to communicate change focuses on stakeholder communication plans, an intranet site, CEO forums and Staff Information Bulletins via email, stop right there. Your efforts are focused on information, not communication and the likelihood of engaging employees in change is remote.

My interest in employee communication is to distinguish between the tools communicators use that inform and those strategies that engage employees and therefore impact business outcomes. The concern is that there seems to be confusion in the market place where roles are advertised for "Change Managers", when the organization is really looking for an internal communication professional, not a change practitioner.

So what's the difference?

Well clearly both information and engagement tools are important. An internal communication professional focuses on tools to impart information and in some cases create dialogue including:

- the corporate intranet
- staff information bulletins
- emails
- providing information for managers to brief their teams face to face
- organizing staff forums for the CEO
- briefing kits for supervisors and team leaders

While all of this activity is important and provides the support that employees need to find out what is happening. But, and it is an important distinction, what if you tell people what is happening? Will it

change their attitude and therefore change their behavior? In my experience, which is across many sectors, industries, professional roles and all types of change programs, I have to say no. And this is the problem; when a CEO and senior executive team think "change" will happen because they have hired someone to communicate the changes taking place and then when there is no impact on the business or the outcomes they were looking for they are disappointed.

Think of it this way. Smokers buy a packet of cigarettes, The health warnings are featured on the packet and yet we see intelligent, literate people continue to smoke, packet after packet. The only time they truly become engaged in changing their attitude toward smoking and therefore behaviour is when they are in the doctor's office and are personally facing a health risk. And then Aha! they finally get it.

So how do we use this analogy when we are trying to communicate change? Let's look at this example. An organization wants to communicate the financial results to employees and the usual approach is to post the employee annual report on the intranet. But this time they need to do something different. They wanted employees to understand why the company needed to improve and what shareholders base their decisions on. So they decided to run free lunchtime information sessions for their employees on how to invest in the share market. They held them for one hour each week for four weeks. The topics progressed from understanding the share market, categories of companies listed, etc, till the final week they examined annual reports. So in this final session they were reviewing annual reports and came to the last one for the session, and after reading through the data the question was asked of employees, so *who* would invest in this company? Few put their hands up. And you guessed it, the company was their company and with a collective Aha! the employees finally got the message.

As in this instance, a large transformation program including HR, training and operational initiatives was developed to build on this.

So here is the important message for any change program. Information is important, employees need to know what is happening, when, why, who, what and by whom. However, equally as important when it comes to organizational change, employees need to be involved in the process to be truly engaged. This is where change professionals need to focus on the Aha! moments and engage their employees in the process of change.

About the author:

Marcia Xenitelis is a recognized authority on the subject on employee communication and business transformation and has spoken at conferences around the world. For access to case studies and more information visit <http://www.changemanagementtips.com>

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