

# Managing organizational change Part 5 Communication and change

This article is the fifth in a series dealing with the issue of managing change in organizations. The previous one, which dealt with the stage of awakening to the need for change, showed that communication has a major influence on the process of organizational change. Therefore, before going on to the transition and ritualization stages, we shall deal in this article with **communication** since understanding the issues at stake in this connection will prove very useful in the following phases.

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## Introduction

When you listen to people talk about their experience of change, problems of communication are usually at the forefront. In spite of the persistence of this shortcoming, very few serious studies have been made of the subject with a view to identifying effective practices. Nevertheless, the scant information available provides a number of interesting indications. Among them, it shows that in general, top management

has an over-simplified idea of what is at stake in communication and that desirable communication practices are far removed from management's usual reflexes. One common mistake, in particular, is to confuse information with communication.

## The experience of Euram Laboratories

Euram Laboratories, specializing in the development and marketing of anti-influenza drugs, employs 850 staff

spread over five sites in Europe, America and Asia. The range of products varies somewhat from one site to another and each is relatively independent at the operational level. For historical reasons, until 2000 each site had its own quality management programme. In a highly competitive setting and with a view to obtaining ISO 9000 certification, top management then decided to introduce a single, unified quality management programme.

A working group was assigned by corporate headquarters to draw up a programme suited to the company. A one-year, on-site pilot project was conducted to fine-tune the programme, after which it was extended to the whole company. The responsibility for its implementation was entrusted to the management team on each site.

At the yearly management review, the company's management was informed about the programme and the pilot project. The staff received the same information in the company's internal magazine, published on its intranet. The following year, a progress report on the implementation of the project was given through the same channels.

Barbara Turenne is in charge of the Dutch site. Although in agreement with the programme, which was periodically discussed in meetings at headquarters, she made a decision to address the implementation problems early on and asked the public relations (PR) department to put forward a communication plan.

Although somewhat surprised, the PR manager nevertheless submitted the following plan:

- Prepare a poster explaining the new programme and place it where it would easily be seen by staff.
- Circulate a newsletter-type leaflet explaining the programme and announcing the launching of its implementation.

**Top management has an over-simplified idea of what is at stake in communication**

- Circulate relevant information about the programme on the company intranet.
- Make available on the intranet a guide to the new system procedures.
- From time to time, convey information about the programme to the staff by e-mail.
- Distribute to each staff member a colour leaflet describing the new programme.
- Offer the staff training to introduce them to the new programme.



Launched in April 2002, the programme's implementation was to be completed by the end of June of that year. Many problems arose, however, and in September, it had to be acknowledged that the procedures and mechanisms had been applied only to a very limited extent. To everyone's dismay, it was just about necessary to start again from scratch. It was not until March 2003 that the programme became operational and even then with deadlines and costs that were well beyond forecasts, and with a high level of discontent among staff and middle

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management who generally deplored the lack of communication.

The communication plan, however, had been fully implemented and one can certainly not accuse Barbara of having acted in bad faith. Nevertheless, she fell victim to the usual illusion of believing that the key issue was that of information – which led her to lay emphasis on the quality and quantity of information, on its presentation and means of diffusion. Unfortunately, things are just not that simple and some of the real issues at stake lie elsewhere.

### Communication and its challenges

Contrary to a widespread belief, the function of communication is not merely to exchange information, but also, and above all, consists of an attempt to reach a common understanding of life's experiences. In fact, it involves a continual process of adjustment to establish and maintain a relationship that will evolve in the direction that the participating "players" expect.

Let us take, for instance, the case of a manager making a presentation to his staff on a new process he wants to introduce in the department. On the one hand, the content of the presentation is flawless: clear, detailed, documented. On the other hand, his tone is authoritarian and pontificating. What will the staff first react to when they come out of the session? To the content of his presentation? No! They will first react to his manner of communicating, the content being relegated to the background. Relational and personal considerations will dominate and will significantly contaminate the interpretation of the content. In other words, the staff will endeavour to adjust to the relationship; therefore, aspects other than content are at stake and will take precedence.

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The researcher Alex Mucchielli (1995) identified five major issues in communication, only one of which concerns the information content:

1. Exchanging information: for example – "The meeting will take place at 10:00".
2. Defining one's position in relation to that of others – "I do not intend to associate with this project".



3. Influencing the entourage – "You should adopt the same procedure as the other division".
4. Maintaining a relationship – "I'm glad to see you again! How are you?".
5. Adjusting the relationship – "You're talking too loud: that irritates me!".

Our research (1995) and experience suggest that in the context of change, the information issue is not paramount. Our work leads us instead to conclude that if the adjustment to the relationship has failed to succeed to the satisfaction of all those present, the information will not be adequately

processed by those for whom the change is intended. In other words, communication addresses first of all the relational aspects and only afterwards is the information conveyed taken into account, except in urgent cases, where the information content takes precedence. Consequently, if the leader lays the emphasis on the transfer of information, however good it may be, he may be on the wrong track and waste his time and energy.

It should be understood that apart from the information that is being explicitly circulated, an act of communication conveys several implicit messages that will affect the reception given to the information. Indeed, we are usually attentive to a variety of signs that enable us to position ourselves in relation to the information received:

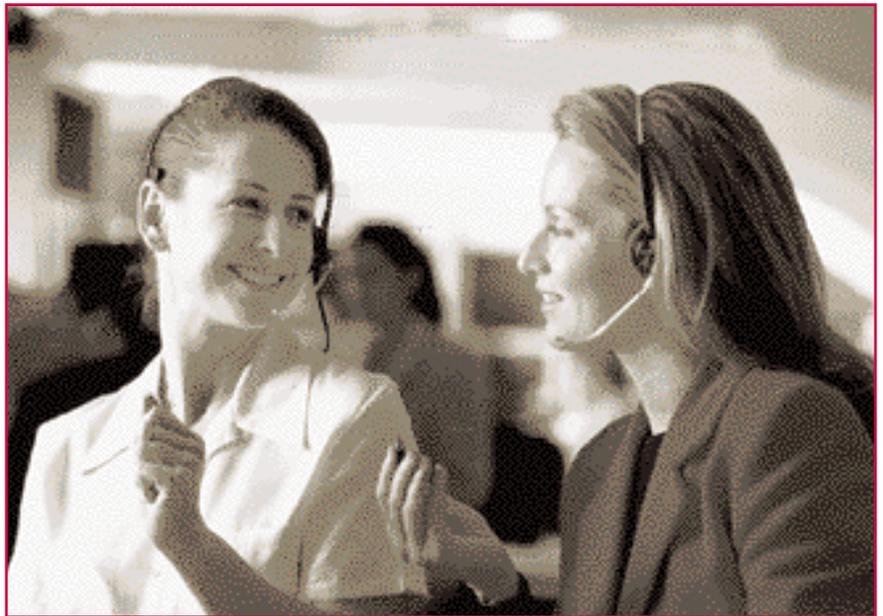
- Is the speaker being sincere?
- Does he have the support of his superiors?
- Was he successful with his previous projects?
- Does he seem to believe in the project?
- Is his tone appropriate?

In short, we closely observe many aspects of the players, their behaviour and the context before turning to the information as such, in order for us to decide how to deal with it. Should we:

- Try to understand it?
- Reinterpret it?
- Figure out what is behind it?
- Guess what is being said "between the lines"?
- Reject it? etc..

Based on these considerations, we would define communication as being "any expressive behaviour perceived by the interlocutors" (Mucchielli,

1995). This means that all the gestures of management are part of the communication and not only the information dealing explicitly and intentionally with the change. One day, for instance, during a tense working session where staff were visibly uneasy at the anger expressed by their departmental head, the latter exclaimed: "Don't look at what I'm doing! Listen to what I am saying!" Evidently, that is something they just could not do!



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In fact, research on communication shows that if people perceive inconsistency between words and actions, they will dwell on the actions rather than on the words, as if that were the real message (Watzlawick et al., 1972). If you need convincing, put it to the test by telling somebody, "We're good friends, aren't we?" as you raise your fist, to see if he reacts to your words or to your gesture!

The credibility of those who promote change and their ability to inspire trust are other important factors in relation to the effectiveness of communication. Larkin and Larkin

(1996) quote two, not very encouraging studies on this topic. One indicates that 43 % of employees believe that management cheats and lies (*National Productivity Review*, 1989) and the other informs us that 64 % of employees believe that management lies often (*Council of Communication Management*, 1994). This data clearly demonstrates that the prime challenge is not about information, but indeed about relationships.

- They organize their objectives so as to find common ground with their interlocutors, or work with them to achieve such a common framework.
- They use lively language and provide tangible evidence.
- They adjust their emotional tone to that of their interlocutors.

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Jay Conger emphasizes that it is not a marketing operation aimed at selling ideas, but a challenge in terms of sharing ideas, of seeking convergence.

One basic principle,

therefore, would be to maintain the most direct line of dialogue with those affected by the intended change. Research indicates that significantly more effectiveness when top managers themselves becomes involved in promoting the change. The account given by Greg Brenneman (1998) of how he saved Continental Airline from bankruptcy in 1994 is quite enlightening in this respect. He describes a number of situations where, by becoming directly involved, he was able to motivate people and obtain changes that at first sight had seemed impossible.

In 1998, the result of a study conducted by ProSci among about 100 companies showed that the absence of visible involvement of top management was a significant failure factor. From another study made in 2003 by the same firm among 288 organizations in 51 countries, we learn that the most effective sources for communicating change are top management and the immediate supervisor. This apparent dichotomy is explained by the fact that it is the immediate supervisor who has the greatest control over the everyday activities of his or her staff, while top management has the greatest control over the company's policy.

Our own observations point in the same direction: a visible commitment by top management plays a very important symbolic role in communication. In the eyes of staff, the active presence of

### Opportunities for exchange

When you ask people what it is the main feature of communication, they often evoke the need for exchange. From a number of interviews we conducted within an organization which had succeeded in implementing major change with few communication problems, it came out that the aspects which had contributed most to the effectiveness of communication

were not linked to the information conveyed, but instead to the relationship fostered by management.

One lady concluded the interview by stating that she would have liked the exchanges and spirit of "togetherness" to have been even stronger, and that this was where there was a real need. She was underlining a fundamental principle: exchanges enable the participants to arrive at a shared understanding of the problems and the solutions – a necessary precondition to being receptive to change.

In a research paper on leaders acknowledged for their persuasiveness, Jay Conger (1998) came to similar conclusions, identifying four practices common to such leaders:

- Before trying to influence the targeted audience, they first establish their credibility.



**Face-to-face communication has a number of aspects that are missing in electronic media**

top management means that “this change must be really important”. Absence or even discretion are interpreted as a lack of interest and that is the message that sticks. Active involvement of the immediate supervisor is just as important in reinforcing the momentum for change in actual practice.

The usual reaction of top managers is to say that they are too busy to become so involved. It may be true for some of them, but that solves nothing! Endeavouring to have frequent – even brief – contacts may be a less demanding alternative, while still producing good results.

**Communication media**

Studies on the effectiveness of communication media in the context of change (Smeltzer and Zener, 1992) have shown that it is primarily the confidence in management and the “richness” of the means utilized that have the greatest impact. Considered in terms of “richness”, communication media can be subdivided into two groups: the “poor”, which do not allow mutual adjustment, and the “rich”, which provide opportunities for direct interaction (see **Table 1**).

**Table 1: Communication media and their influence**

**Poor communication media**



Company’s internal magazine

Newsletter, information bulletin

Intranet

Internal memos

Leaflets, brochures, posters

Mass electronic mailing

Procedures manuals

Training sessions

Video and audio cassettes

**Rich communication media**



Face-to-face meetings

Small group discussions

Large group discussions

Presentations to small and large groups

Working groups

**Table 2:**  
Desirable  
communication  
behaviour  
in change  
context

	Agree	Rather agree	Rather disagree	Disagree
1. You have direct and frequent exchanges with those affected by the change.	+2	+1	-1	-2
2. You are present and visible in the activities linked to the change.	+2	+1	-1	-2
3. If the proposed change implies new ways of operating, you clearly spell out the new rules of the game and you apply them yourself.	+2	+1	-1	-2
4. Your behaviour is part of the message you are conveying and will have a considerable influence on people. You make sure that your actions are coherent and consistent over time.	+2	+1	-1	-2
5. The natural leaders in an organization act as middlemen in communication between top management and employees. You cultivate a spirit of partnership with them. Otherwise, you talk directly to the individuals involved and you interact with them, knowing that the communication efforts will require more time.	+2	+1	-1	-2
6. You initiate and maintain rich and quality communication with the staff.	+2	+1	-1	-2
7. You provide those involved with opportunities for discussing the change amongst themselves. Small groups are often suitable because they allow direct exchanges in an unthreatening atmosphere.	+2	+1	-1	-2
8. In order to move towards a shared understanding with staff, you open yourself to being influenced by others.	+2	+1	-1	-2
9. You provide regular opportunities for exchange among managers in order to promote consistency within the management team.	+2	+1	-1	-2
10. You are clear with those who will be affected by the change about its impacts on them.	+2	+1	-1	-2
11. You regularly align the issues at stake in relation to the interests of the organization as a whole.	+2	+1	-1	-2
12. You sustain your efforts to ensure quality communication throughout the change process.	+2	+1	-1	-2
Your score ?				
Your management approach...	24 to 13 clearly promotes communication	12 to 1 promotes communication a little	0 to -12 does not promote communication	-13 to -24 is detrimental to communication

The greater the extent of the change involved, the more those affected require rich communication. Paper-based information is the poorest form, because it is impersonal, and face-to-face exchanges are the richest (Covin, 1993). Once again, we come back to the notion of direct and real-time dialogue.

The use of mass communication media is rather attractive because they make it possible to reach a large audience quickly and at a relatively low cost. If the aim is to provide people with factual information or purely operational data, then this is an inexpensive approach. However, if the intent is to influence people, the approach is somewhat ineffective.

The speed and the user-friendliness of information technology is also particularly attractive. To date, however, experience is far from conclusive in situations of change – quite the contrary. For example, a recent study (Friedman and Cural, 2002) shows that in a conflict situation, e-mail can make misunderstandings even worse, sometimes to the extent of causing irreparable damage to the relations between correspondents. There are some useful lessons to be drawn from that study, even though it did not specifically refer to contexts of change. The authors explain that face-to-face communication has a number of aspects that are missing from electronic media:

- co-presence, which enables each party to decode the non-verbal language of the other;
- perceptibility, which allows the players also to perceive intonation;
- concurrence and sequentiality, which allow the interlocutors to receive immediate feedback;
- simultaneity, which means that each player is constantly issuing and receiving a whole range of messages.

### Mass communication media remain precious tools.

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According to the authors, these properties enable speakers and listeners to tend towards the same understanding of the issues at stake and to adjust their efforts to seek agreement. Electronic or paper-based communication is more limited in that respect: not only does it introduce a time lag before any reaction, but above all, it removes all possibility of adjustment to the implicit aspects of the relationship.

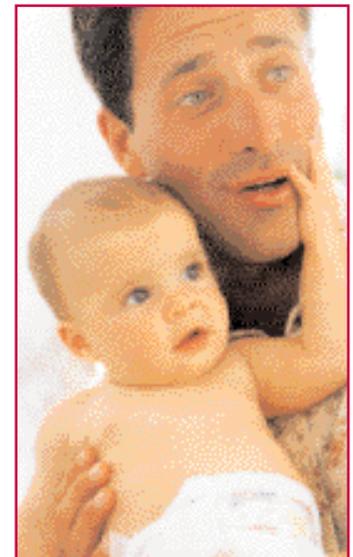
However, there should be no misunderstanding: mass communication media remain precious tools. It is simply that they are insufficient for ensuring successful communication. In a context of change, they usually have a limited impact if they are not accompanied by other, richer mechanisms that enable dialogue. This makes things far more complicated for management – but that is real life!

### Euram's experience, revisited

In the light of the above, what are the major shortcomings in the approach followed at Euram? Essentially, the communication plan provided to Barbara:

- was based on “poor” media (paper and electronic);
- was mainly concerned with the information to be circulated;
- did not encourage contacts and meetings with management;
- did not provide a forum where people could have developed a shared understanding of the problem and the solution;
- management was scarcely visible.

In a nutshell, the approach was largely based on technical media, when the situation would have required direct and more frequent exchanges.



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**Table 2** sets out in the form of a guide a number of suggestions which could have been applied to obtain better results. This guide can also be used to self-assess your own communication practices in a change context.

### The change context

The following elements will constitute important assets for introducing and maintaining effective communication in a context of change:

- Close contacts (face-to-face exchanges between management and those affected by change).
- Frequent meetings (short, rather than long).
- Clear and truthful messages (express things as they are, in a straightforward manner).
- Congruence between management's messages and behaviour (do what you say you do).

It should be borne in mind that communication is the main vector of change and that the approach will have to be adjusted at each stage. Thus:

- At the *awakening* stage, one should endeavour to provide clear and reliable information that demonstrates the actual situation to be different from existing conceptions.
- At the *disintegration* stage, one should create opportunities for exchanging views on existing approaches and practices and for calling them into question.
- At the *reconstruction* stage, one should provide a framework and rules that make it possible to experiment and discuss new ways of doing things.
- At the *ritualization* stage, opportunities for exchange should be provided for assessing the results and agreeing on adjustments.

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**Restricting  
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It goes without saying that communication needs are even stronger in situations where people believe that the change will bring them nothing positive, or is even detrimental to them. It is in such circumstances that distortion is at its strongest and that dialogue is most necessary.

### Conclusion

Let us keep in mind that communicating means exchanging views with those concerned. Restricting the communication challenge to information alone is an over-simplification. The principal challenge consists of building and maintaining trust and sustained dialogue. One of the keys to achieving this is to say what you do and do what you say.

Things would of course be far easier if content were the last word; but the truth of the matter is that all our behaviours contribute to communication and that people give more credit to our actions than to our words. In 1967 already, the communication expert Marshall McLuhan asserted that "the medium is the message". ■

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