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Designing a Communication Programme for Planned Change: Being Clear about the Aims

Von Eike Wagner

Introduction

Changes in an organisation's strategy, structure, processes and/or technology are necessary from time to time in order to remain competitive but many planned change efforts do not achieve the desired results (Bungard and Niethammer, 2003; Die Akademie, 1999). A main reason for the failure of planned change is that those affected by the change do not understand and/or accept the change (Mast, 2002a; Mohr, 1997; Quirke, 1996). As communication is considered the key mechanism for increasing understanding and acceptance (for example, Armenakis et al., 1993; Axley, 2000; Mohr, 1997), a main challenge for those responsible for change implementation (implementers) is to design a communication programme that creates understanding and acceptance among those that were not involved in the planning of the change (recipients).

The first step towards an effective communication programme is to be clear about the intended effect. There is agreement in the literature that, the clearer the definition of the communication aims, the higher the likelihood of success (Blakstad and Cooper, 1995; Mercer, 2000). Though much has been written about communication in the context of organisational change, the appropriateness of and relationships between different communication aims did not appear to have received adequate research attention. Drawing on the literature on organisational change and communication as well as theories and concepts from psychology, this paper develops a tentative structure of communication aims that can serve as a broad framework for further research. As understanding and acceptance should be created before the introduction of the change (Buchholz, 2002; Rogers, 1995), the focus of this paper is on the communication aims that are relevant between the announcement of the change and its introduction.

Communication Aims

There is agreement in the literature that the overarching aim of the communication programme should be influencing recipients' behaviour (Klein, 1996; Lewis, 2000a; Mohr, 1997; Quirke, 1996). Specific aims are important because different communication activities are appropriate to achieve different aims (Blakstad and Cooper, 1995; Buchholz, 2002; Mast, 2002a; Quirke, 1996). More than fifty specific aims could be identified from the literature. These include, for example, to encourage higher performance (Barrett, 2002), increase a sense of stability (Eadie, 1997), address recipients' concerns and forestall complaints (Lewis et al., 2001), help employees understand the change (Mercer, 2000), maintain performance during the change (Clampitt et al., 2002), increase willingness to change (Lewis, 1999) and provide identity (Gill, 1996). There appears, however, little detailed discussion of the relationships between different aims. This is problematic because achieving certain aims is a prerequisite for achieving other aims and, therefore, the relationships between different aims need to be understood. For example, understanding increases the likelihood of acceptance (Streich et al., 1997) and uncertainty is likely to trigger anxiety (Lundberg and Young, 2001).

As the overarching aim should be influencing recipients' behaviour, an appropriate first step towards the definition of specific communication aims is considering the determinants of human behaviour. A distinction can be made between situational factors, which can be divided into social norms (such as the way certain things are usually done in an organisation) and material context (such as the availability of a room for a meeting), and individual factors, which can be divided into intention to perform the behaviour and the ability to perform the behaviour (Ajzen, 2001; Rosenstiel, 1997). Situational factors, by definition, define the context in which the communication takes place and the ability to perform the behaviour is usually influenced by training activities (for example, Streich et al., 1997). The factor that is most likely to be influenced by communication activities is the in-

intention to perform the behaviour. Furthermore, the intention to perform the behaviour is a critical factor in the context of organisational change because a lack of willingness to adopt the desired behaviour is argued to be a main reason for the low success rate of organisational change efforts (for example, Armenakis et al., 1993; Streich et al., 1997).

An appropriate way to look at intention and its determinants in detail is the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991, 2001). It postulates three conceptually independent determinants of recipients' intention to adopt certain behaviour. The attitude towards the behaviour refers to the degree to which a person has a favourable or unfavourable evaluation or appraisal of the behaviour in question. Subjective norm refers to the perceived social pressure to perform or not to perform the behaviour. Perceived behavioural control, which is closely related to the concept of perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982), refers to the perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behaviour. As a general rule, the more favourable the attitude and the subjective norm with respect to behaviour and the greater the perceived behavioural control, the stronger should be an individual's intention to perform the behaviour under consideration (Ajzen, 2001). Important regarding the definition of communication aims is that the „perception of behavioural control, attitude toward the behaviour and subjective norm each reveals a different aspect of the behaviour, and each can serve as a point of attack in attempts to change the behaviour“ (Ajzen, 1991, p.206).

The concept of attitude deserves more detailed attention because several theories in social psychology (for a comprehensive overview, see Frey and Irle, 2002) support claims made in the change management literature (for example, Mast, 2002a; Mohr, 1997) that attitudes are an important determinant of the behaviour that recipients adopt in response to the change. For the purpose of this study, an attitude is understood as "a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor" (Eagly and Chaiken, 1998, p.269). According to the tripartite view of attitudes (Eagly and Chaiken, 1998), attitudes can be structured along three dimensions: cognitive, emotional and intentional. The cognitive dimension refers to an individual's belief about the attitude object. "Beliefs express positive or negative evaluation of greater or lesser extremity, and occasionally are exactly neutral in their evaluative content" (Eagly and Chaiken, 1998, p.271). The emotional

dimension refers to an individual's feelings in response to an attitude object. Eagly and Chaiken (1998, p.272) define this dimension as "the feelings, moods, emotions, and sympathetic nervous-system activity that people have experienced in relation to an attitude object and subsequently associate with it". The intentional dimension reflects an individual's evaluations of an attitude object that are based on past behaviours and future intentions. An intention in this context means a plan or resolution to take some action, rather than a plan to try to achieve some goal (Bagozzi, 1992). The existence of three dimensions of an attitude suggests that three important communication aims are to address recipients' thoughts, feelings and intentions.

Whereas the theories and concepts discussed above are relevant for any behaviour, other concepts focus on the determinants of the behaviour adopted during organisational change. Resistance to change, for example, has long been recognised as a critically important factor that can influence the success or failure of an organisational change effort (for example, Die Akademie, 1999; Waddell and Sohal, 1998). Consequently, the reduction of resistance is frequently mentioned as a communication aim (for example, Axley, 2000; Lewis et al., 2001; Mast, 2002a). Zaltman and Duncan (1977, p.63) defined resistance as „any conduct that serves to maintain the status quo in the face of pressure to alter the status quo“. More recently, Brower and Abolafia (1995) defined resistance as a particular kind of action or inaction and Ashforth and Mael (1998) defined resistance as intentional acts of commission (defiance) or omission. The difficulty with the concept of resistance is that managers and academics alike have frequently presented a too simplistic view of resistance to change and that resistance has come to include „anything and everything that workers do which managers do not want them to do, and that workers do not do that managers wish them to do“ (Davidson, 1994, p.94).

For the purpose of this thesis, it is the variety of the facets of resistance that is helpful. Therefore, it is important to recognise that resistance to change has been conceptualised along three dimensions: behaviour, cognitive state and emotional state. The conceptualisation of resistance as behaviour, which has already been implied in the definitions above, began with the work of Coch and French (1948) who focused on the undesirable behaviour of workers in response to management-imposed changes. The idea that resistance can be overcome cognitively suggests that it includes a component

of negative thoughts about the change or a lack of understanding of the change (for example, Ford and Ford, 1995; Piderit, 2000). Axley (2000) considers the accuracy of recipients' understanding of the change as so important that he only differentiates between an inaccurate understanding of the change and other reasons for resistance. The notion that individuals' resistance is based on rational examination of the possible implications of the change is also echoed in attribution models (for example, Fiske and Taylor, 1984), the supposition of which is that individuals look for realistic and logical explanations of events and base their feelings and behaviour on these causal explanations. With regard to the emotional dimension of resistance, Diamond (1986) pointed out that the underlying nature of resistance is portrayed as highly emotional and Vince and Broussine (1996) found that managers' responses to changes in structure were often very emotional. The existence of these three dimensions supports the claim that preventing undesired and activating desired behaviour should be the overarching aim of the communication programme and that two specific communication aims should be addressing the cognitive and affective states responsible for not adopting the desired behaviour.

Whereas the concept of resistance to change addresses negative reactions to change, other concepts deal with positive thoughts, emotions and/or behaviour. These concepts are as important as the concept of resistance to change because successful organisational change also requires generating employee support and enthusiasm (Piderit, 2000). One of these concepts is readiness for change, which can be defined as the cognitive precursor of the behaviour adopted in response to the change (Armenakis et al., 1993, Armenakis and Harris, 2001). Two concepts closely related to readiness for change are willingness to change (Lewis, 1999; Streich et al., 1997) and acceptance of change (for example, Armenakis et al., 1993; Ford and Ford, 1995; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Reger et al., 1994; Sillince et al., 2001). Bungard and Niethammer (2003) argue that, from a psychological perspective, employees' acceptance of the change and their willingness to change is central during organisational change efforts. Another helpful concept is receptivity to change (Huy, 1999) because it addresses more clearly the role of emotions in determining the behaviour recipients adopt in response to a change. According to Huy (1999), individuals go through a two-stage appraisal process. Through primary appraisal individuals evaluate the significance of a new event for their

own wellbeing. Through secondary appraisal individuals evaluate their own resources and capability for dealing with the stressor. Primary appraisal determines the extent to which an individual is receptive to change, whereas secondary appraisal determines the extent to which the individual mobilises for change. Huy (1999) argues that receptivity to change can be characterized by varying gradations of willingness to accept a proposed change and, therefore, represents „the alter ego“ to resistance to change. These concepts support the claim that a communication programme needs to address recipients' cognitions and affects because both influence the behaviour that recipients adopt during the change.

In order to illustrate the relationships between understanding, acceptance and behaviour, Buchholz (2002) adjusted the work of Rogers (1995) on the diffusion of innovations to the context of organisational change (Figure 1). Previous work on the micro-process of change (Broadfield, 1997; Lewin, 1947) supports the relationships between these factors.

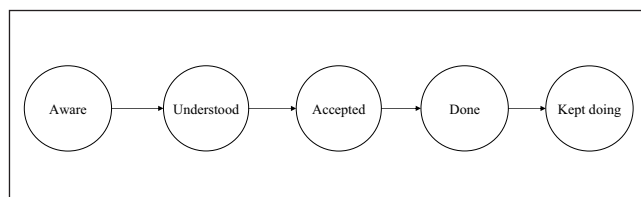


Figure 1: Relationship between awareness, understanding, acceptance and behaviour

Source: Adapted from Buchholz (2002, p.6)

This model is a first step towards a structure of communication aims but the emotional dimension, in particular, has not been considered in sufficient depth yet. Several authors (Carr, 2001; Kiefer, 2002) complain that emotions are hardly written about in the context of organisational change. A first challenge with regard to the role of emotions during organisational change is that even a cursory examination of the scattered but growing literature on emotions in work settings reveals an enormous definitional confusion (Lundberg and Young, 2001). The terms feeling, affect, emotion, emotionality and mood, for example, are not defined and used consistently and often are used loosely if not synonymously. Sometimes these terms are seen as antecedents, sometimes as consequences. They may be associated with general or specific stimuli. They sometimes refer to internal traits, sometimes to states. In short, the basic terminology of emotions is notably confusing. For the purpose of this thesis, emotion is

used as the umbrella term and refers broadly to "all subjectively experienced orgasmic arousal" (Lundberg and Young, 2001, p.531). The terms affective reactions and mood are used to refer to two more specific phenomena. Affective reactions are considered to vary from weak to strong in intensity, are relatively short in persistence and have particular stimuli. Moods, in contrast, are considered as less intense, typically of longer duration and diffuse in that they are not associated with anything in particular (Frijda, 1993; Lundberg and Young, 2001).

A second challenge with regard to the role of emotions during organisational change is a lack of understanding of how emotions and cognitive processes relate to each other. One view is, and „common sense tells us“ (Lundberg and Young, 2001, p.532), that emotions are triggered by thoughts reactively. This view neglects the influence of emotions on thoughts. Another view is that the generic process of how emotions relate to observable behaviour begins with a perceived event, which then triggers an affective reaction (Goleman, 1995; Lundberg and Young, 2001). These affective reactions are heightened or dampened by a strong mood. Affective reactions primarily, and moods more distally, are considered to have an impact on cognitive processes such as attention, judgement, reasoning, analysis, decision making and the like (Schein, 1999). The cognitive processes, influenced by affective reactions and moods, then result in social behaviour. This view neglects the influence of thoughts on emotions. A third view is a combination of the first two views. Kiefer (2002), for example, argues in favour of "viewing emotion and cognition as an interwoven process" (p.5) and Lundberg and Young (2001) and Goleman (1995), though tending towards the second view, admit that the perceived event already includes one's own thoughts. The third view is the most appropriate framework for this study because it considers the influence of emotions on cognition as well as the influence of cognition on emotions (Figure 2).

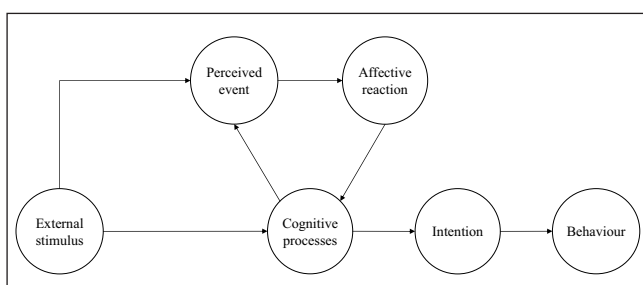


Figure 2: Relation between emotions, cognition and behaviour

A third challenge with regard to the role of emotions during organisational change is to identify likely emotional reactions to change in order to be able to define specific communication aims. Much previous work focused on negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, frustration or disappointment (for example, Lundberg and Young, 2001; Orgland, 1997). The model of Lundberg and Young (2001) is particularly beneficial because it links perceived circumstances to specific affective reactions (Figure 3).

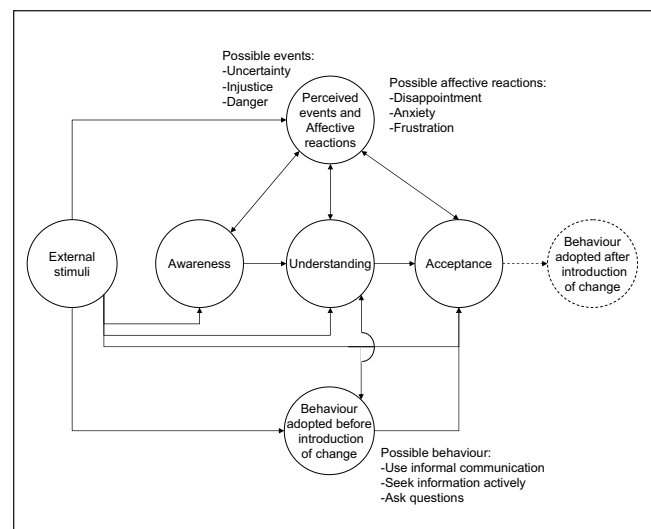


Figure 3: Perceived circumstances and related affective reactions
Source: Adapted from Lundberg and Young (2001, p.534)

The model of Lundberg and Young implies that specific communication aims should be preventing the four negative circumstances and addressing the affective reactions triggered by the perception of these circumstances. The importance of addressing uncertainty and anxiety, in particular, is supported by many authors in the field (for example, Clampitt et al., 2002; Kitchen and Daly, 2002; Lewis, 1999). Additional input regarding the existence of typical negative emotions is provided by authors who applied the work of Kubler-Ross (1969) on death and personal loss to the context of organisational change (Bridges, 2002; Streich et al., 1997). These authors claim that denial is a natural reaction to any change and that denial is often followed by anger, panic, depression and acceptance.

The limitation of these models is the lack of empirical evidence in the context of organisational change. Kiefer and her colleagues (Kiefer et al., 2001; Kiefer, 2002, p.6) warn that "it is necessary not to fall into the trap of applying stereotype assumptions and heuristics about the role of emotions during

change". Furthermore, the single-sided focus on negative emotions has recently come under severe criticism by authors who claim that people can experience a range of positive and negative emotions during organisational change (Kiefer, 2002). These authors argue that, instead of considering emotions as unwanted, undesirable or dysfunctional reactions to change, emotions are best viewed as part of the individual experience of change because human experience is widely characterised by emotion. Eadie (1997, p.55) argues that emotions have a lot to do with positive energy and commitment and Kiefer (2002) argues that supporting and enabling positive experiences such as happiness, joy or satisfaction is important because positive emotions can positively influence the processing of information about the change.

The importance of addressing recipients' emotions is also reflected in the variety of relevant aims put forward in the literature. These are, for example, „increase positive emotions“ (Mast, 2002a), „make recipients“ feel safe“ (Pfannenber, 2003), „reduce anxiety“ (Smeltzer, 1991), „create a sense of security“ (Eadie, 1997) and „mitigate fear“ (Axley, 2000). The importance of influencing recipients' perceptions of the circumstances is reflected in aims such as „reduce uncertainty“ (Mast, 2002a), „reduce the perceived risk“ (Lewis, 1999) and „reduce confusion“ (Kitchen and Daly, 2002).

A next step towards the definition of specific communication aims is implied in the work of authors (Klein, 1996; Mast, 2002a; Pfannenber, 2003) who argue that different aims may be appropriate at different phases of the macro-process of change. It is obvious that a change in behaviour cannot take place before the introduction of the change because adoption of the desired behaviour requires the existence of the new structure, processes and/or technology. But the creation of understanding and acceptance could take place before the introduction of the change because it is influenced mainly by the communication about the change (for example, Mast, 2002a; Reger et al., 1994). As understanding and acceptance are important determinants of the behaviour recipients adopt after the introduction of the change, implementers should try to create understanding and acceptance before the introduction of the change (Buchholz, 2002; Rogers, 1995). The more accurate the understanding and the higher the level of acceptance, the more likely it is that the desired behaviour can be mobilised after the introduction of the change (for example, Armenakis et al., 1993; Huy, 1999). Emotions, it has been outlined, need to be addressed throughout the change process.

So far, only the behaviour that recipients adopt after the introduction of the change has been considered and other factors (such as understanding or uncertainty) have been considered as determinants of this behaviour. But the communication aims put forward in the literature include aims such as „make recipients seek information actively“ (Buchholz, 2002) and „ensure performance during the change“ (Clampitt et al., 2002). This suggests that influencing the behaviour that recipients adopt between the announcement of the change and its introduction should also be a communication aim. There appears to be little discussion, however, with regard to the relationships between different behaviours (such as using informal communication or asking questions) and other factors. This is insufficient because a prerequisite for the development of a structure of communication aims is, for example, understanding how the asking of questions relates to the accuracy of recipients' understanding of the change and how not answering recipients' questions relates to negative affective reactions such as anxiety.

In a last step, the existing understanding of the relationships between different aims (outlined in Figures 1 and 2) can be combined with the existing understanding of specific behaviour, affective reactions and perceived events. This leads to a structure of communication aims (Figure 4) that can serve as a broad framework for further empirical research. The box „Behaviour adopted after the introduction of the change“ is dotted in order to illustrate that this effect cannot be expected when analysing the effect of the communication activities used before the introduction of the change.

Figure 4: Structure of communication aims used as broad framework

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that several communication aims have been prescribed but it has also demonstrated that the appropriateness of and relationships between different communication aims have not received adequate research attention. The unstructured lists of communication aims put forward in previous work do not provide the same benefit for the design of a communication programme as a structured overview of aims. In particular, the lack of a distinction between different categories makes it difficult to see which communication activity is intended to achieve which aim(s). In this paper, categories of aims and the relationships between these categories have been defined. The aims and the

relationships between different aims included in Figure 4 are supported by the literature on organisational change and communication as well as by different theories from social and cognitive psychology.

On the basis of the literature, the relationships between many specific aims could not be defined. Whereas the claimed relationships between some aims (such as perceived justice and disappointment) have rarely been supported by empirical research evidence, the relationships between other aims have not been addressed at all. This gap in the literature suggests further research that explores the actual effects of the communication activities used and thereby contributes to a detailed structure of communication aims.

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