Chapter 8

OCC Dimension 6: Communication Systems

The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.

- George Bernard Shaw

Good communication is as stimulating as black coffee, and just as hard to sleep after.

- Anne Morrow Lindbergh

8.1 Communication Challenges in Modern Organizations

All communication involves the transmission of a message from a sender to a receiver. Communication is central to organizational effectiveness and survival because the essence of organizations is cooperation, and no cooperation is possible without effective communication.Barnard (1938). While communicating effectively has never been easy to do in organizations, there are some special challenges to communication in today's organizations.

Information Overload

Every organization must solve the problem of what pattern of communication shall be instituted, and what information shall be directed to what offices. One issue in establishing such a pattern is information overload. There are limits to the amount of communication that can be received, coded, and effectively handled by any one individual.Katz and Kahn (1966), p. 257.

John Kotter has an interesting anecdote that illustrates this problem. He asserts that the typical employee receives approximately 2,300,000 words or numbers communicated to him or her in a 3-month period. He estimates that the typical communication of a change vision over 3 months is one 30-minute speech, one hour-long meeting, one 600-word article in the firm's newspaper, and one 2,000-word memo, which amounts to about 13,400 words. Consequently, roughly one-half of one percent of all the words or facts that an employee receives over 3 months will be focused on the change vision.Kotter (1996), p. 89. Clearly, routine information can easily overwhelm change messages.

Sterility of Electronic Communication Technologies

We live in a time of disruptive electronic technologies, some of which have led to new and powerful information and communication technologies. Data-based reporting systems, e-mail, voice mail, intranets, bulletin boards, Websites, and video conferencing are cost effectively breaking down large distances and providing information to huge numbers of people in relatively inexpensive but fast ways. Unfortunately, these mediums of communication are rather sterile and impersonal, and not as powerful or meaningful to people as more personal modes of communication.

Because change initiatives can arouse strong and passionate emotions within an organization, these marvelous information and communication technologies are

often not up to the task. Since visual cues are so important in all human communication, non-visual mediums disconnected from context, such as e-mail, just don't communicate well. Since human relationship is so important to communication, mediums that do not add to the relationship, such as electronic bulletin boards, can convey different messages to different receivers. And since impersonal "digital" communication is relatively fast and easier to do than more personal communication forms, senders are often not as practiced or as skilled in the more personal modes. In sum, electronic communication systems are invaluable to today's organizations, but they have considerable limitations when it comes to bringing about change.

8.2 Organizational Communication and Change

Due to the aforementioned reasons, as well more traditional communication problems such as sender arrogance or receiver resistance to change, change initiatives often fail to meet their objectives. For instance, John Kotter flatly states that ineffective communication of the change vision is one of the primary causes of failed organizational transformations.Kotter (1996). T. J. Larkin and Sandar Larkin, two noted communication consultants, assert that change-oriented communications are too often lofty, vague, and impersonal so the message is never really understood and therefore change initiatives founder.Larkin and Larkin (1994). And Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones observe that most change communication lacks authenticity, so the rest of the organization doesn't trust what is being said and consequently the change effort stalls or goes in unintended directions.Goffee and Jones (2006).

Unfortunately, there is much more written about how communication fails to support change than what works. Consider the title of one article arguing for more communication within organizations: "If communication isn't working, nothing else will."Taylor (1998). In another article, a leadership expert states,

Transformation is impossible unless hundreds of thousands of people are willing to help, often to the point of making short-term sacrifices. Employees will not make sacrifices, even if they are unhappy with the status quo, unless they believe that useful change is possible. Without credible communication, and a lot of it, the hearts and minds of the troops are never captured.Kotter (1995), p. 60.

Also, many change consultants point out how pervasive rumor and innuendo are within organizations today due to the ineffective communication at work. For example, Jeannie Duck states, "In the absence of communication from the leaders, the organization will seek information from other sources, whether those sources know what they are talking about or not. Your silence does not stop conversation; it just means you are not participating in it."Duck (2001), p. 143.

Unfortunately, many if not most of the communication prescriptions made tend to be overly simplistic or overly complex. On the simplistic side, some observers argue that all change communications simply need to be face-to-face, frequent, and informal.Anastasiou (1998). While these practices have merit, they do not consider such contextual factors as the organization's size and geographic diversity, the urgency of the change initiative, or the availability of communications technology.

On the other hand, some change communication prescriptions are overly complex. For example, one change consultant recommends that a formal change communication action plan be developed for every change initiative. These action plans were recommended to include (a) careful consideration of change targets, (b) deliberate change messages, (c) prespecification of change messages, (d) timing and frequency of the message(s), (e) establishment of ownership for the communication, and (f) measurements planned for the change. Of course, then the change leaders are supposed to execute this plan and iterate as necessary.Bennett (2000). One wonders if the change leaders will have any time to do anything other than communicate to the rest of the organization!

8.3 Using the Communication System to Bring About Change

One of the primary reasons why communication within organizations tends to be fragmented is that the organizational leaders think of it as a collection of tools rather than an overall system.Katz and Kahn (1966). An organization's communication system consists of a particular message, the change leader(s) personal attributes, the change targets' collective readiness to change, feedback loops between leader(s) and target(s), and the variety of channels of communication operating within an organization. Robust organizational communication systems are essential for bringing about organizational change. The following section discusses each aspect of the communication system.

The Change Message

When communicating with others, it is important to consider the nature of the **message**[1] in order to make sure that it is heard. For example, downsizing and layoff messages evoke strong and often powerful emotions within organizations. Consequently, the timing and medium of that message should be tailored to address the delicate nature of the information intended. Similarly, the message must be clear and direct if there isn't much time to make the change. And if the message is complicated, such as the need to replace an old technology with an entirely new one, then the communication system must take this into consideration.Kotter (1996).

Change Leader Attributes

If the change leader is perceived to be honest and authentic, then the message is likely to be heard—no small task in our information overload world. Authentic leader(s) display their true selves throughout the changes of context that require them to play a variety of roles. Authentic leaders also nurture their relationship with followers by highlighting their strengths, while revealing human weaknesses; they maintain their individuality while conforming enough to hold the organization together, and they establish intimacy with followers while keeping enough distance to command respect.Goffee and Jones (2006).

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1. A message that communicates organizational change. The timing and medium of the message should be tailored to address the nature of the information.

Related to the notion of authenticity is the ability of the change leader to listen well. Warren Bennis and Bert Nanus state, "A leader must be a superb listener, particularly to those advocating new or different images of the emerging reality. Many leaders establish both formal and informal channels of communication to gain access to these ideas."Bennis and Nanus (1997), p. 96.

A third and final characteristic of the change leader is his or her credibility with the rest of the organization. As we discussed in the trustworthy leadership dimension, credibility brings trust. What we add in this chapter is that this credibility-induced trust also facilitates communication and information sharing.

Followers' Readiness to Change

Employees within an organization vary in their readiness to change. Some individuals just don't like any change, while others will leap at the opportunity to try something new. Most individuals vary between these two poles of readiness depending on the perceived costs and benefits of a particular proposed change. In other words, if the employee perceives a change as relatively easy to adopt (i.e., low cost), and the change brings about many advantages or solves existing problems (i.e., high benefit), then the employee will be relatively open to the change.Armenakis, Harris, & Mossholder (1993).

Another way to think about the employee's readiness to change is to consider all change proposals as a diffusion-of-innovation problem. Everett Rogers devoted his lifetime to understanding how innovations diffused within social systems, and he discovered a very interesting fact: When confronted with a particular change, individuals tend to sort themselves out into a normal distribution in terms of readiness to change. In other words, roughly 16% of all employees will be early adopters of proposed changes; 34% will then follow the early adopters. Next, another 34% of employees will be late adopters. And finally, 16% of the employees will resist the proposed change as long as possible.Rogers (1983). In sum, when attempting to communicate to an entire organization, it is very helpful to know something about the nature of the change targets before, during, and after a change initiative is launched.

Feedback Loops

Most systems have feedback loops, and communication systems are no exception. Just because a change message is issued is no guarantee that the message is heard. Furthermore, even if the message is heard at the time that it is issued, it may not be remembered later on. And even if the message is remembered, it may not lead to new behavior. Hence, feedback loops are essential for uncovering what was heard, what was remembered, and what new behaviors, if any, have resulted.

In addition to message assessment, feedback loops are also helpful in improving the change initiative, for a variety of reasons. First, the change designers may not see the entire situation, and feedback loops help them to broaden or refine their perspective. Second, some change initiatives are just wrong-headed, and the

communication system should enable the rest of the organization to weigh in on its overall worth and efficacy. Finally, new things are learned as change initiatives are rolled out, and these lessons need to be distributed to the rest of the organization so that the lessons can be leveraged.

Barry Oshry points out that most feedback loops within organizations are "filtered" so that the established reality perceived by senior management, middle managers, or frontline workers goes unchallenged. Furthermore, in complex social systems, such as an organization, feedback loops often provide conflicting information. When this happens, most social systems tend to ignore the information because sorting out the discrepancies can be difficult, upsetting, and time consuming.Oshry (1993). Effective communication systems have many feedback loops, and the information conveyed as feedback is weighed and considered.

Channels of Communication

There are a wide variety of communication channels possible within organizations. **Communication channels**[2] involve both formal and informal mediums of information exchange. Formal mediums include such things as town hall meetings, newsletters, workshops, videos, e-mail, bulletin boards, manuals, roadshows, and progress reports.Balogun and Hailey (2008), p. 195. Informal mediums include such things as hallway discussions, one-on-one meetings, departmental briefings, and having senior leaders walking the talk. In both cases, the invisible social network within the organization plays a powerful role in interpreting the message.Farmer, 2008.

While most organizations tend to prefer using certain communication channels in all situations, the selection of the channel should be based on the specific change context. The reason for this is that communication channels vary in their efficiency and information richness. Rich communication channels are typically interactive and face-to-face, and they provide an abundance of contextualized information. Some channels, such as e-mail, are extremely efficient but not information rich at all. Other channels, such as one-on-one private meetings, are not efficient at all, but extremely information rich. In general, the more complicated and emotionally charged the change initiative, the more communication channels will be needed, and they need to be information rich, particularly in the beginning of the change program.

2. Information exchanges that involve both formal and informal mediums.

8.4 Practices of Good Communication Systems

Once again, we conclude our chapter discussion with seven action items that can be pursued to develop this particular dimension of organizational capacity for change. These suggestions are not comprehensive, but research and common sense suggest that they can work to enhance your communication system.

Practice 1: Hire, Develop, and Retain Effective Communicators

In a 1998 survey of 480 companies and public organizations by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, communication abilities are ranked number one among personal qualities of college graduates sought by employers. Work experience and motivation are second and third.Bennett (2000), p. 73. Clearly, one of the reasons why communication skills are so important is that these skills are essential for facilitating organizational change. A less obvious reason why good communicators are essential is that these individuals understand how to design and enhance the communication systems within an organization so that information flows more effectively.

For example, Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones argue that effective leaders "communicate with care." Communicating with care means that the leaders choose their channels of communication strategically, tailor their message to the aims of the change initiative, authentically disclose intimate details when appropriate, and are very sensitive to the pace and timing of their communications.Goffee and Jones (2006). Clearly, any employee with this subtle set of skills is a rare and valuable human resource, and the organization does well to enhance this skill set in as many individuals as possible, since their skill can be leveraged into improved communication systems for the entire organization.

Practice 2: Invest in Information Technologies and Experiment With New Formats

The number one capital investment for most organizations is in information technologies; the primary new means of communicating within organizations. By some accounts, information technologies account for 35% to 50% of all business capital investment in the United States.Anonymous (2010). There are several obvious reasons for this high level of investment—the clear benefits of productivity gains due to improved information, the transition from an industrial to an information-based economy, and the declining cost of information technologies coupled with increasing capabilities.

However, information sharing is the essence of communication, and so effective information technologies are an essential ingredient to making an organization change capable. Information is being shared more extensively with not only senior executives but also with the entire organization. Examining trends in information sharing in trying to understand organizations that were "built to change," Ed Lawler and Chris Worley reported that of the five common types of information within an organization, all were being shared with a wider range of employees. The five typical types of information being shared were (a) corporate operating results, (b) unit operating results, (c) new technologies, (d) business plans and goals, and (e) competitor's performance. Interestingly, more than half of all employees in all organizations received regular information in these five areas in 2005; whereas in 1987, only corporate and unit operating results were reported to half of the employee base.Lawler and Worley (2006), p. 123.

Effective information systems do the following six things for an organization to make it more change capable. First, they provide comprehensive data on key processes. Second, these systems integrate data across departmental boundaries. Third, they monitor organizational capabilities as well as performance. Fourth, they are linked to goal setting and reward systems, which are central to organizational change. Fifth, they include information on customer and competitors. And finally, effective information systems make measurements visible throughout the organization.Lawler and Worley (2006), pp. 125–126. Clearly, good communication is not likely to occur without good information, and effective information technologies are a necessary ingredient to make that happen.

Practice 3: Talk the Walk and Walk the Talk

There is nothing more devastating to change initiative and overall change capability than for the senior leaders to espouse the benefits of change and then not act in alignment with those espoused benefits. In other words, when the behavior from prominent people within an organization is inconsistent with the change vision, then all other forms of communication are disregarded.Kotter (1996), p. 90. In short, "walking the talk" is an essential part of the communication system within an organization.

This process begins with the chief executive of the firm modeling the behavior being sought by the change vision. Next, it requires the top management team to police themselves to act congruently with the change vision. And if there are sponsored change agents by the senior executive team, these individuals clearly need to "walk the talk" as well. Change leaders are in a fish bowl, and they must be as if not more willing than the rest of the organization to change their behaviors. As Mahatma Gandhi stated, "Be the change you wish to see in the world."

Practice 4: Use Stories, Metaphors, Analogies, and Pictures as Much as Possible

Effective communication systems connect the hearts and minds of the rest of the organization. Stories, metaphors, and analogies are powerful ways to communicate complex information in compelling ways. John Kotter emphasizes that this is particularly important for communicating the change vision. He restates the truism that "a verbal picture is worth a thousand words."Kotter (1996), p. 90.

However, figurative communication in the form of verbal pictures or graphic depictions is also essential for building confidence in the change program. Stories are pithy narratives with plots, characters, and twists that are full of meaning. Leaders are discovering that the telling of actual "success stories" can often be the catalyst for momentum behind a change initiative.Denning (2007). Metaphors and analogies are inferential techniques to transfer the meaning of something that is known to another thing that is unknown. For example, Plato compared our perception of reality to shadows on the wall of a cave. Darwin used diagrams of trees to help explain his theory of evolution. And Shakespeare saw the world as a stage.Wormeli (2009). Organizational change, by definition, requires employees to try something new and move into the unknown. Communication systems that rely on stories, metaphors, and analogies can make the unknown future state more attractive and understandable.

Practice 5: Repeat the Message Many Times in Many Forums, but Keep It Fresh

It is common for change leaders to announce a new change program and pull out all the stops to communicate it to the rest of the organization in the early part of the change initiative, only to move onto other pressing issues after it has been launched. This is a mistake, and it leads to the change cynicism that pervades many organizations today. Furthermore, organizational changes take time to adopt, often years, and this requires focused attention on the part of the rest of the organization.

Consequently, the change message must be repeated many ways in many different contexts using multiple communication channels.Kotter (1996), p. 90. However, this does not mean that daily e-mails with the same message need to be sent out to the entire organization. It does mean that creative and different versions of the same message need to be distributed periodically in various channels. For example, the change vision could be communicated to large and small groups in formal and informal ways at the launch of a major change program.

Furthermore, forums for listening to the employees' reactions to the change need to be set up, and sometimes the change initiative needs to be adjusted. Furthermore, progress reports on implementing the change program can be circulated electronically or visually. Paycheck stuffers might provide factoids that related to the proposed change. And town hall meetings can be used to discuss the change initiative to those who have complaints to voice, are curious, or both. As Marshall MacLuhan noted, "the medium is the message,"McLuhan (1964). so repeated, pervasive, and fresh change messages help to gain the attention, interest, and eventual adoption of an information overloaded workforce.

Practice 6: Seek to Discuss the Undiscussable

In every organization, there are undiscussable issues. An undiscussable issue is a taboo subject, something people in an open forum don't talk about in order to avoid an emotionally charged discussion. These issues are undiscussable because people are fearful of releasing "negative" emotions that could jeopardize working relationships. (What some people express colorfully as "naming the elephant in the room.") Common undiscussables are challenging an existing reality, questioning those in power, sharing concerns about an idea that is being sold as "perfect," or simply agreeing to disagree when perspectives clash.Hammond and Mayfield (2004).

In addition to emotionally charged undiscussables, there are also logical inconsistencies that need to be addressed by the communication system. Organizational change is complicated and there are often inconsistencies when moving from one organizational state to another. If the communication system does not address these inconsistencies, then the credibility of the entire change initiative is called into question.Kotter (1996), p. 90. Furthermore, it is much more honest and productive to discuss undiscussables.O'Toole and Bennis (2009).

There are a wide variety of ways to successfully discuss the undiscussables, but it all starts with having an attitude of seeing everyone as being in partnership around the success of the overall system.Oshry (1996). Therefore, blaming leaders or employees is usually not constructive, but structuring in debate and conflicting viewpoints is. Being defensive is rarely helpful, but being curious is. Avoiding discussions of delicate issues will hold back progress, but playful and humorous treatments of tricky issues can help. Emphasizing individual responsibility to the exclusion of collective responsibility clearly leads to an imbalance. Sometimes enabling anonymous discussion of undiscussables using Web-based technologies can shine a light on "the elephant in the room."Hammond and Mayfield (2004).

Practice 7: Leverage Informal Social Networks

A social network is "the structure of personal and professional relationships you have with others. Social capital is the resources—such as ideas, information, money, and trust—that you are able to access through your social networks."Carpenter (2009), pp. 5–6. Social networks and capital exist inside and outside of the organization, but the internal organizational networks can be most powerful in dealing with organizational issues. Informal social networks consisting of simple things like friendships outside of work or regular lunch gatherings during work can have a major influence on change implementation success. Unlike the formal organizational structure, the informal social network is nonhierarchical, constantly evolving, and essentially based on trust, reciprocity, and common values. The informal social network complements the formal organizational structure of an organization.

It is a mistake to communicate only through the formal organizational structure. Indeed, Peter Drucker observed that in more than 600 years, no society has ever had as many competing centers of power as today. In addition, he noted that as we move to a more knowledge-based economy, informal social networks are increasingly important to organizational success and survival.Drucker (1992).

Informal social networks in the form of ad hoc peer groups can spur collaboration and unlock value as well as thwart collaboration and destroy value. If internal social networks are ignored, they can be a source of role conflict, rumor mongering, resistance to change, and conformity of thought and action. If they are successfully leveraged, they can complement the formal organization, be more fluid and responsive, and magnify the impact of advocates of change. Consequently, in order to leverage the social network, the first order of business is to be aware of it, and the second priority is the attempt to influence it so that the organization can more effectively enhance its communication system.

In sum, effective communication systems are an essential element of any change capable organization. These systems complement the systemic thinking dimension in such a way that the knowing-doing gap is bridged.Pfeffer and Sutton (2000). Figure 8.1 "The Sixth Dimension of Organizational Capacity for Change: Communication Systems" contains a graphical summary of this sixth dimension of OCC.
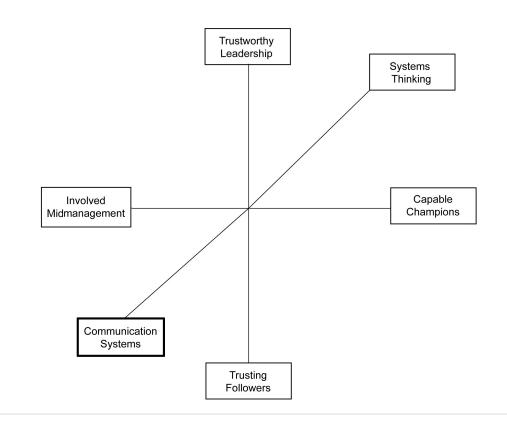
Figure 8.1 *The Sixth Dimension of Organizational Capacity for Change: Communication Systems*