

# **BUILDING AN ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE COMMUNICATION THEORY**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Studies from the Academy have seldom focused on organizational change communication specifically. More broadly, the topic remains relatively under-researched with organizational change communication research in its infancy (Eisenberg, Andrews, Murphy, & Laine-Timmerman, 1999; Lewis & Seibold, 1996). This paper addresses the lack of organizational change communication research and contributes to theoretical development of communication during organizational change. A model of change communication during continuous change is presented from the analysis of two longitudinal empirical studies. Subsequently, Van de Ven and Poole's (1995) typology of change theories is extended to accommodate the sequencing of three change communication models, monologic and dialogic change communication, and the background talk of change.

## **COMMUNICATING CHANGE – A MISMATCH BETWEEN RHETORIC AND REALITY**

It is noted that within much of the change management literature, “communication” is important to the success of change programs (Kanter, Stein, & Jick, 1992). Research from within the UK (Buchanan, Claydon, & Doyle, 1999; Doyle, Claydon, & Buchanan, 2000) found that change managers find communicating change difficult despite the recognition of communication being a critical area of change implementation. The difficulty that Buchanan et al (1999) allude to is further increased when within the management literature “communication” is considered a monolithic entity, the black box of the organizational studies. Despite the recognition that communication is an integral component of organizational change, only a small body of change communication specific research exists (Eisenberg et al., 1999). Those studies that do focus on change communication can be categorized as either belonging to the instrumental perspective or to the constructivist perspective of communication.

Typical of the instrumental studies are those that recognise change communication as an instrument to manage change. One study addresses the critical aspect of “issue selling” within change and represents an instrumental perspective of change communication. The better we understand the fundamental process of issue selling, the better we can manage change (Dutton, Ashford, O' Neill, & Lawrence, 2001). The way issues are sold to organisational members becomes an instrument of change.

In contrast, Ford and Ford's (1995) work represents the constructivist perspective. They contend that organizational communication is the context in which organizational change occurs and that the change process unfolds through a dynamic interplay of four types of conversation. In

essence the conversations create and construct organizational change. The techniques, practices and models of communication during change need better elaboration at both organizational and individual levels. This need establishes the first research question of this paper: RQ 1: *What does change communication consist of within continuous organizational change?*

## **Unpacking the Black Box**

Previous studies have established that three communication models exist within continuous organizational change (Frahm & Brown, 2004). The three models consist of monologic and dialogic change communication, and the background talk of change. Monologic change communication (*instrumental*) approaches reflect unilateral communicative action, where deviation from the norm requires a corrective and controlling communicative response (Bokeno & Gantt, 2000). The second and third models represent the constructivist perspective of change communication. Some argue that dialogic change communication (the second model) is more appropriate for continuous change contexts (Eisenberg et al., 1999; Weick & Quinn, 1999). Dialogic change communication includes speech acts or texts that suggest a constructive and relational dialogue (Bohm, 1996). In this sense, the purpose of communication is to instigate change through the use of *dialogic processes, in dialogic settings*, and by people who are *dialogically competent* (Bokeno et al., 2000).

The third model of change communication is the background talk of change (Frahm & Brown, 2004). Conversations of resistance, complacency and cynicism occur within the background of the organization (Ford, Ford, & McNamara, 2002). "A background conversation is an implicit, unspoken 'back drop' or 'background' against which explicit, foreground conversations occur" (Ford et al, 2002: 108). Frahm and Brown (2004) contend the background talk surfaces when organizations are deficient in monologic and dialogic change communication. Thus by considering the three change communication models, greater knowledge regarding continuous change is advanced.

If the three change communication models provide an overview of what occurs within the black box at an organizational level, other studies point to more specific individual level phenomena. It has been argued that managers need to develop competences in change management that accommodate continuous change efforts (Buchanan et al., 1999). This paper suggests that communicative competence during organizational change is determined by the purpose of the communicative act. Within change it is reasonable to expect that there will be monologic competences and dialogic competences. Those who are communicatively competent know not only when to use these competences separately, but also when to integrate the two, thus demonstrating 'fit for purpose'.

## **Integration of Communication Models**

Consideration of the monologic and dialogic communication activities and the background talk during change and recognition of the concept of fit for purpose leads to questions of the potential utility of integration of the instrumental and constructivist models of change communication. This consideration influences the next research question of this paper; RQ 2: *"How does the sequencing of different communication models (monologic, dialogic and background talk) inform our understanding of communication during continuous change?"*

Van de Ven and Poole's (1995) typology of change theories offers a framework to facilitate the staged sequencing of change communication models. This represents a significant contribution to knowledge as the four typologies of Van de Ven and Poole (1995) assist in understanding the theoretical basis of change but do not consider the communicative implications of their typology.

## **CONTINUOUS CHANGE: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Four basic theories (life cycle, teleology, dialectics, and evolution) offer explanations of the different sequencing of change within organizations (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). The fundamental characteristics are the motors that drive the change, and the levels at which they operate. Continuous change, according to the literature (Pettigrew, Woodman, & Cameron, 2001) is described as an evolutionary model of development.

## **TWO CASES OF CONTINUOUS CHANGE**

Two case study organizations undergoing continuous change were used in this study. Both of the cases were comparable in size and undergoing continuous market reform and moves to commercialize. One was a state government agency (Tech D), the other a business unit (Highsales) in a state Government Owned Corporation (GOC). Both organizations were comfortable in permitting access for longitudinal studies and thus afforded the opportunity to observe change communication with continuous change programs and the potential utility in Van de Ven and Poole's (1995) typology.

### **Procedure**

Congruent with case study methodology, multiple methods were employed, including participant observation, focus group interviews, and organizational surveys for data collection in both organizations (Yin, 2003). This paper reports on the findings of the qualitative work, as the surveys focused on another part of the study, the change receptivity over time. Further details of the methodology can be obtained from the authors.

### **Analysis**

One of the central challenges to researcher investigating processes is the inherent messiness, as the complexities of temporal embeddedness, multi-level data and analysis, and dynamic emergent themes interplay and obfuscate the analysis. This study has used Langley's (1999) *alternate templates to ground* the data (categorise and classify) with the use of theoretical constructs (monologic, dialogic) and emergent constructs (background talk). In order to *organize* the data, the data was collated in an in-depth *narrative* for each case. A narrative uses the raw data to construct a detailed story (Langley, 1999) and often provides context for the analysis (Pettigrew, 1985). The in-depth narrative is high in accuracy, but usually used as an intermediate step in developing analysis.

## **RESULTS – A MODEL OF CHANGE COMMUNICATION**

### **The Sequencing and Interplay of the Three Templates**

In developing theory, Whetten (1989) stresses the importance of providing the “what”, or

the core constructs of the theory, which in this case is the monologic, dialogic and background talk. The relationships between monologic and dialogic change communication and the background talk provide the “how” (Whetten, 1989). The three are intrinsically related to the conditions for sense-making (Weick, 1995). Monologic change communication is required in order for employees to receive information so that they can then make sense of the changes. Second, dialogic processes allow for collective sense-making and opportunities to clarify meaning and consider alternate explanations to reduce ambiguity. The background talk is both a product of the sense-making, but also a critical sense-making process, where employees voice concerns, opinions and thoughts about change and test for veracity amongst peers. The findings suggest that Monologic (M) and Dialogic (D) communication present as the “front-end” process of change, or foreground conversations (Ford & Ford, 1995) with the Background Talk and the informal sense-making (BT) occurring in the absence of change communication. This is illustrated in the following diagram where continuous change is conceptualized as a pipeline.

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Figure 1 about here  
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## **DISCUSSION**

Table 1 provides an adaptation of Van de Ven and Poole’s (1995) process theories of change to include the sequencing of the monologic and dialogic change communication.

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Table 1 about here  
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This analysis contributes to the development of a bimodal theory of change communication, and with subsequent testing over a greater number of cases could provide the rigour necessary for comprehensive theory development. No attempt at theory development is complete without providing the why (Whetten, 1989). From this study, it is argued that the sequencing of the three change communication models is dependent on the match between change communication expectations and change communication competences. For example, in Highsales both the change agent and the business unit manager were adroit at switching from dialogic to monologic to strong effect. In this sense they were making conversational shifts (Ford and Ford, 1995) and pushing back the background talk. At some point of their dialogic exchanges, closure was required and they used monologic change communication to move the “talk” to action.

## **CONCLUSION**

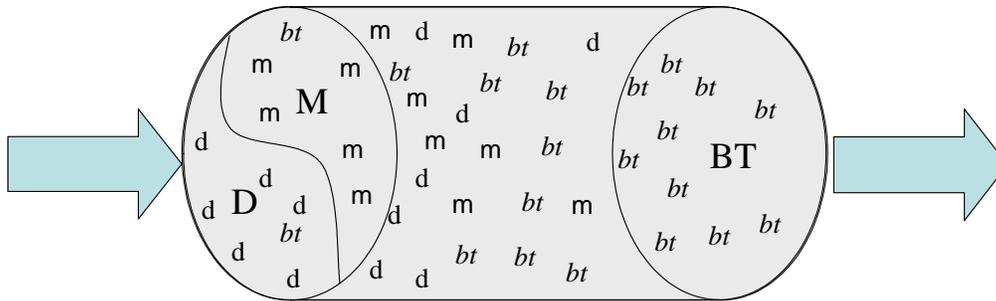
In answering the first research question, this paper has shown that communication within continuous change consists of a dynamic interplay of instrumental models of change communication (monologic change communication) and constructivist models of change communication (dialogic change communication and background talk). More specifically, that sequencing is informed by individual competences and group expectations. For the models to operate successfully there needs to be matching competences and expectations. The second question is answered by aligning Van De Ven and Poole’s (1995) typology with the communicative models. Future research must consider the issues associated with sustaining and

embedding this sequencing, in order to avoid organizations becoming reliant on exceptional managers to achieve continuous change.

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**FIGURE 1.0:  
The Pipeline of Continuous Change Communication**



**TABLE 1.0  
Dominant Communication Models of Change and Extension of Van de Ven and Poole's  
(1995) Process Theories of Change**

	<b>Interplays among Generating Mechanism</b>			
	<b>Lifecycle</b>	<b>Teleology</b>	<b>Dialectic</b>	<b>Evolution</b>
	<b>Prescribed motor within entity</b>	<b>Constructive Motor within entity</b>	<b>Constructive motor between entities</b>	<b>Prescribed motor between entities</b>
	<i>Immanent Program</i>	<i>Purposeful Enactment</i>	<i>Conflict &amp; Synthesis</i>	<i>Competitive Selection</i>
Dominant Comm. Model	Monologic Change Model.	Dialogic then Monologic.	Dialogic Change Model.	Dialogic then Monologic.
Implications (Sequencing)	Expectations are met with matching monologic competences. Background talk rises in response to lack of monologic change communication. Eg Tech D's expectation of how the change process would occur.	Monologic is used to primarily create action. Eg change agent initiated cross functional discussion groups. When nothing new added, then moved to monologic as action focus, eg "to do" list.	Dialogic change competences required to be able to move to synthesis. If lacking in dialogic competence, then stalemate occurs. Synthesis: Highsales and dialogic exchange between unions and licensees. Stalemate: Tech D CEO and engineers.	The monologic emphasizes hierarchy and power. First we discuss, then I tell you what to do. Some of you will be disappointed. Can't please everyone. Eg CEO of Tech D, Business Unit Manager of Highsales

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