



Communicate for Buy-In

Toward Successful Large-Scale Change

EXCERPTED FROM

The Heart of Change:

Real-Life Stories of How People Change Their Organizations

By

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STEP 4

Communicate for Buy-In

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**STEP FOUR
Communicate for Buy-In**

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IN SUCCESSFUL CHANGE EFFORTS, THE vision and strategies are not locked in a room with the guiding team. The direction of change is widely communicated, and communicated for both understanding and gut-level buy-in. The goal: to get as many people as possible acting to make the vision a reality.

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Vision communication fails for many reasons. Perhaps the most obvious is lack of clarity. People wonder, “What are they talking about?” Usually, this lack of clarity means step 3 has been done poorly. Fuzzy or illogical visions and strategies cannot be communicated with clarity and sound logic. But, in addition, step 4 has its own set of distinct challenges that can undermine a transformation, even if the vision is perfect.

More Than Data Transfer

When we communicate about a large-scale change, common responses are: “I don’t see why we need to change that much,” “They don’t know what they’re doing,” “We’ll never be able to pull this off,” “Are these guys serious or is this a part of some more complicated game I don’t understand?” “Are they just trying to line their pockets at my expense?” and “Good heavens, what will happen to me?” In successful change efforts, a guiding team doesn’t argue with this reality, declaring it unfair or illogical. They simply find ways to deal with it. The key is one basic insight: Good communication is not just data transfer. You need to show people something that addresses their anxieties, that accepts their anger, that is credible in a very gut-level sense, and that evokes faith in the vision. Great leaders do this well almost effortlessly. The rest of us usually need to do homework before we open our mouths.

Preparing for Q&A

From Mike Davies and Kevin Bygate

Three years after we initiated all the changes, everybody in the organization, from senior management on down, had a different job. Pulling that off without disrupting our customers was quite a trick.

The basic communication about the new team-based organization

was carried out by twenty managers, all of whom had helped develop the idea. Eventually, they talked to every worker and trade union. To help the twenty managers, we did a great deal of work, both on the presentation and the preparation for the Q&A. We thought a great deal about how the changes might affect people. Within the uncertainties and the timetables, there were limits to what we knew, but we pushed the limits. We wanted to be able to answer as many questions as possible of the “what does this mean to me” variety. Without that sort of Q&A, we felt it would be very difficult for our people to buy into the direction we were heading and to understand why the team-based strategy was right.

In preparing for the Q&A, we used role plays. The twenty presenters would be themselves and the rest of the management would play the workforce. We would ask every tough question we could think of. We would try to tear the presentation to bits. So some chap would make his pitch and a hand would shoot up and say, “If I’ve only got experience of forklift truck driving and none of this other stuff, does that mean I’m going to be made redundant? Are you going to throw me out?” And before you could do much with that, another person would say, “How are we going to decide who the new team leaders are? How will we know that the process is going to be fair? We have a union because once so much was not done in a fair way. Won’t the union have to have a big role?” About the time your head was spinning, another would ask, with a suspicious look on his face, “I’ve heard this is nothing but a way to disguise cost cutting.” The first time you tried to deal with all this you usually ended up looking like a fool, confusing everyone, including yourself, or causing a riot in the “workforce.”

We created a question-and-answer back-up document for the presenters. It had some 200 questions that came up in the role plays. Each had an answer. For example, one of the questions was “What will happen to the existing management structure, in particular the plant supervisor’s role?” Now, you could have talked for ten minutes trying to begin answering that question. The response in the document took less than thirty seconds. The idea was always to be as clear, simple, and accurate as possible.

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Our twenty “communicators” practiced and practiced. They learned the responses, tried them out, and did more role plays until they felt comfortable with nearly anything that might come at them. Handling 200 issues well may sound like too much, but we did it. Remember that this was not like answering questions about beekeeping first, then about fixing a tire, then who knows what topic. Everything was about us and where we were headed. The clearer that is in your mind, the easier it is to remember the issues and answers, and the easier it is to respond in a way that can be communicated well.

In some cases it was just a matter of learning information you did not know. In many cases the problem was how best to respond with the information you had. Questions can come out as statements, not questions. They can be driven by a lot of feeling, not thought. You need to respond to the feeling in the right way. With practice, you can learn to do it. Our people did, and most of them were very effective, even though they were not communication specialists. They didn’t get beat up. They walked away feeling successful, which they were.

Self-confidence was often the key issue. I think you can often tell in thirty seconds whether the person presenting information really believes in it, really understands what is going on. This makes the message more acceptable. For us it was critical that the workers and unions found it acceptable.

I can’t believe that what we did is not applicable nearly everywhere. I think too many people wing it.

Some employees, upon hearing that there will be a merger, or that there is going to be a commitment to developing a revolutionary new product, or whatever, will cheer. “It’s about time.” Some will just need help in understanding. “I’m sure this is great—just say the vision again, I’m not sure if I get the third strategy.” But most people will be nervous, even if they feel a sense of urgency to do something, even if they think the change drivers

Preparing for Q&A

Seeing

Employees are given a well-prepared presentation about the change effort and are encouraged to ask any questions. During Q&A, each presenter responds quickly and clearly, with conviction, and without becoming defensive. This shows people that the ideas are not muddled, that the presenters have faith in the vision, and that those answering the questions think the changes are good for employees.

Feeling

Fear, anger, distrust, and pessimism shrink. A feeling of relief grows. Optimism that the changes are good, and faith in the future, grow.

Changing

Employees start to buy into the change. They waste less time having angry or anxious discussions among themselves. When asked, they start to take steps to help make the change happen.

are okay, even if the vision is sensible. All sorts of insecurities bubble to the surface. People have a fear that softly whispers: “Will this hurt me?” In “Q&A,” they dealt with this reality by creating a play of sorts that spoke to these feelings, that quieted them, that even generated some excitement and new hope for the future. The play came in two acts: presentation, then questions and answers. They wrote the play with the audience constantly in mind. Who are they, what do they need to know, how will they respond? They chose the actors. They rehearsed. The second act was ten times as difficult as the first, so they rehearsed with a simulated, tough audience. Only when the actors were comfortable did they put on the performances. Then:

- They showed the audience a capacity to respond quickly and clearly, suggesting that the change ideas were not muddled.
- The actors responded with conviction, suggesting that they had faith in what they were doing.
- They handled tough questions without becoming defensive, suggesting that they thought what they were doing was good for the enterprise and its employees.

Yes, the audience received information, but, more important, their feelings were addressed and modified. With that, minds opened to hear more clearly any direction for change, and energy developed for helping make it happen.

Cutting through the Avalanche of Information

Imagine a Q&A session, as carefully planned as in the previous story, being given only for twenty minutes at the end of a day-

long meeting, a meeting that included four other discussions, nine speeches, and more. Sounds ridiculous, but we do the equivalent of that all the time.

Our channels of communication are overstuffed. Such is the nature of modern life. But most of the flood of information is irrelevant to us, or marginally relevant at best. An interesting (although disturbing) experiment would be to videotape your day, filming all the conversations, mail, e-mail, meetings, newspapers read, TV watched, and so forth. Then study the tape and see what percentage of that information you really need to do your job well. You'd have to do this with some sophistication because, for example, a seemingly irrelevant short conversation might be important because it builds a relationship with someone upon whom you depend. But still, the results of the experiment would be clear. You are hit daily with a fire hose blast of information, only a fraction of which is required to be an excellent employee. Believe it or not, "a fraction" could mean 1 percent. With clogged channels, even if someone is emotionally predisposed to want to understand a change vision, the information can become lost in the immense clutter.

Part of the solution has to be removing some of the clutter.

My Portal

From Fred Woods

One of the largest obstacles preventing meaningful change in our company is our inability to get important messages to our 120,000 employees. Our people get masses of communication, coming from all different areas. First there's a message about your 401k. Then there is a memo from your supervisor. Then there is a message from our IT director about internal information security.

Then maybe a brochure from a political action committee trying to raise money. All this arrives first thing in the morning, every morning. Sometimes I think people just get paralyzed and don't read any of it.

When I travel with Doug, our CEO, he'll inevitably get a question from an employee during a town hall meeting saying, "I didn't know about such-and-such," or "Why don't we talk more about blah, blah, blah?" And Doug's response is always, "There was a story in *Barron's* last week that was just about that" or "We talked about that three times in our staff meeting last month." Doug will then glare at me because he apparently feels I'm not doing my communications staff job. He thinks I'm not getting this information to them. But we *are* getting the information to employees. They just don't remember it because even if they read it ten days ago, they've had so much information since then they've forgotten. Or they got a huge pile and were paralyzed because they knew that in fifteen minutes six customers were going to be in front of them, so they dumped the whole pile in the wastebasket.

We're in the process of trying to change this.

Leadership needs to hold the primary responsibility for communication. There is no question there. It can't be assigned to a communications staff. But we can help them by clearing the channels. That's what we're now focused on.

We've looked at the nature of the communication that flows to employees. What we found was that 80 percent of what they got every day was being pushed out to them. They didn't ask for it, and they probably didn't need it. They just got it, like it or not.

To tackle this problem, we've taken a lesson from Yahoo.com. We are in the process of developing an employee Web site where we push out information every day for our employees. Using the My Yahoo! idea, we have started to develop what we are calling My Portal, which will let employees tailor the information they see on their desktop. From all the more routine stuff—and that's what I am talking about, the routine stuff—employees can get information concerning their specific needs in the workplace. And just that information—

nothing more unless they want more. They'll get information that is easy for them to understand, information that they either act upon that day or can put away until they need it.

Once it's up and running, My Portal will be a huge step in lightening the flood of routine communication landing on employees and make it easier for us to get the big, important, nonroutine messages out. We don't have precise measures, but all the initial feedback we have says people are very excited about the potential of getting much less irrelevant stuff and designing a tool that will allow them to better understand the important issues. Not only will My Portal help the firm, I think people will really appreciate our efforts to lighten their load.

My Portal is far from a panacea. But it's an interesting use of new technologies to reduce the information clutter. It will run into resistance. "What?" says the marketing, personnel, or finance bureaucrat, "Everyone *must* know this information about X. It must be sent to them!" You have to deal with situations like this, where people cling to the old ways of communicating. But remember, without a clear channel, you can't influence feelings and create needed behavior.

The unclogging concept is a good one and can be applied in many places. With today's technology, why should everyone get the same company newspaper crammed mostly with information of low relevance? We already know that instead of receiving 100 pages of your local city's newspaper, you can get 2 pages from the Internet each day on topics of relevance to your life. If that's possible, why not in an organization? In a similar vein, why should large numbers of people be stuck in meetings of marginal importance? We all hate this. It adds to information overload (and to our anger). All this was a problem in a slowly changing world. With a much faster-paced world, the problem grows greatly.

Matching Words and Deeds

People in change-successful enterprises do a much better job than most in eliminating the destructive gap between words and deeds.

Deeds speak volumes. When you say one thing and then do another, cynical feelings can grow exponentially. Conversely, walking the talk can be most powerful. You say that the whole culture is going to change to be more participatory, and then for the first time ever you change the annual management meeting so that participants have real conversations, not endless talking heads with short, trivial Q&A periods. You speak of a vision of innovation, and then turn the people who come up with good new ideas into heroes. You talk globalization and immediately appoint two foreigners to senior management. You emphasize cost cutting and start with eliminating the extravagance surrounding the executive staff.

Nuking the Executive Floor

From Laura Tennison

When we presented our vision of the future, I thought we were getting acceptance, and some enthusiasm. But then I began hearing that a few employees thought it was outrageous that we talked about being a low-cost producer while our executive offices were so grand. They said, in effect, "How can you be serious about improving productivity when you are wasting so many resources maintaining such an elaborate executive area?" In my judgment, they were right. And the more they talked, the more other people began to think the same thing.

The executive floor in our headquarters building was a world unto itself. The rooms were huge. The joke was that you could play a half-court basketball game in the chairman's office. Almost every office

included an adjoining conference room and private bath. Many of the bathrooms had showers. There was enough polished wood all around to build a very nice ship. There was a private express elevator going to that floor. There was an elaborate security system that required a staff of at least four people. There was expensive art on the walls. It was incredible.

All of this had some reason for being. We once didn't pay that well, and the offices were a big part of the attraction for wanting to be in top management. Big clients once upon a time often judged whether they should do business with us by the prosperity (or lack thereof) shown in the executive area. The security was put in after some unpleasant incidents in the 1970s.

We had discussions about how to deal with the problem. We could take out the bathrooms except the one in the chairman's office. Maybe we could turn a few of the conference rooms into offices. Or maybe take the most expensive art and give it on loan to the museum. But the discussions went nowhere. "These ideas will cost more money. We're trying to save money." "We've got big competitive issues, why are we worrying about furniture?"

Two years ago we got a new CEO. I remember wondering if he would do anything about the executive offices. I didn't have to wonder long.

Almost immediately after taking the job he nuked the entire floor. We tore everything down to the outside walls and rebuilt. People were relocated on another floor while the construction was in process. Offices were reduced in size. The bathrooms disappeared. We put in plenty of conference rooms, but not one per office. The new décor is lighter, looks more contemporary, and was not nearly as expensive as the old mahogany. We added more technology and reduced the number of secretaries. We converted the express elevator to a local one, used by all. We sold the art. We also made the security less noticeable and less labor intensive.

I think just the announcement that we were going to do all this had a powerful effect. When people saw the end result, and lived with it every time they visited that floor, the effect built. You can't

believe how different the executive area looked and felt. The rich men's club was completely gone.

The one criticism of this was that all the construction was an additional expense. But we could show that by adding offices, reducing secretaries, selling art, reducing security costs, making it easier for employees to move around the building (because of the freed-up elevator), we could pay for the changes in twenty-four months, and after that operating costs would be significantly lower. I'm not sure how many people know that, or care much. They just care that the executives seem to be better at walking the talk.

For at least three reasons, matching words and deeds is usually tough, even for a dedicated guiding team. First, you sometimes don't even notice the mismatch. "What does the size of the offices have to do with the real issues: duplication of effort, too many levels of bureaucracy, a sloppy procurement process?" Second, you see the mismatch but underestimate its importance and then spend too little time seeking a solution. "Redoing the floor will cost more money. There is no way to get around that reality." Third, you see the answer but don't like it (a smaller office, no bathroom!).

In highly successful change efforts, members of the guiding team help each other with this problem. At the end of their meetings, they might ask, "Have our actions in the past week been consistent with the change vision?" When the answer is no, as it almost always is, they go on to ask, "What do we do now and how can we avoid the same mistake in the future?" With a sense of urgency, an emotional commitment to others on the guiding team, and a deep belief in the vision, change leaders will make personal sacrifices.

Honest communication can help greatly with all but the most cynical of employees. The guiding team says, "We too are being asked to change. We, like you, won't get it right immediately. That means there will be seeming inconsistencies between what

we say and do. We need your help and support, just as we will do everything to give you our help and support.”

By and large, people love honesty. It makes them feel safer. They often love honesty even when the message is not necessarily what they would most like to hear.

New Technologies

Great vision communication usually means heartfelt messages are coming from real human beings. But new technologies, as cold and inhuman as they are, can offer useful channels for sending information. These channels include satellite broadcasts, teleconferencing, Webcasts, and e-mail.

Although a satellite picture of the boss is not the same as having him in the same room, it can be a lot better than a memo. Even a videotaped interaction with the boss and some employees can show others more than information on paper.

New technology can solve communication problems very creatively. For example, one problem is that messages come and go. The president is in the room, but then she leaves. The memo is good, but it eventually goes in the trash. So what doesn't leave the room? What could stay day and night, beaming a message on and on?

The Screen Saver

From Ken Moran

There was no set screen saver before we introduced this. Everyone chose their own—some sort of wallpaper, something they downloaded from the Internet. Your normal morning went something like this: You walk into the office, get your coffee, greet your coworkers, go to your desk, log on to the computer . . . and your day begins.

Now imagine walking in, getting your coffee, greeting friends, logging on, and discovering that something is different. You take a closer look at your computer screen and realize that the picture of fish that usually greets you every morning has been replaced with a multicolored map of the UK surrounded by a bright blue circle. As the image slowly moves around your screen, you read the words surrounding the circle: "We will be #1 in the UK market by 2001." This was exactly the image we presented to all employees one morning about two years ago.

Because the screen savers appeared on all computers the same morning, we surprised everyone. We had recently announced our new vision, so the concept wasn't new. The point was not to introduce the vision in this way, but to show our commitment to it and to keep it fresh in people's minds. The aspiration to become number one is pretty infinite. We wanted people to know that this was not just another fad, or just a warm and fuzzy hope. This was an absolute, a constant. By putting the message on people's computers so that they saw the logo every time they logged on, we found a simple way to continually reinforce our message.

Needless to say, the arrival of the screen savers had everyone talking. That day, you'd hear people in the halls saying, "The strangest thing happened when I logged on this morning . . . Oh, you got one of those new screen savers too? Did everyone get one? What's this all about?" Over the next few weeks, the conversation moved toward "Do you think we can become number one by 2001?" At a later department meeting, they might talk about new metrics: having five new products in the UK by 2001, growing at a rate of at least 15 percent a year, and being number one in sales each year. "If we hit those targets," people said, "I think we'll definitely achieve the vision."

Of course there were the skeptics who didn't appreciate the fact that we had removed "their" screen saver. They probably felt like we were forcing this down their throats. On the day the screen savers arrived, their conversations were more like, "How dare they change my computer! What happened to my old screen saver?" These were

the people who had a problem accepting the fact that they would have to change, so it wasn't really the screen saver that was the issue. These were the people who wanted to ignore our new vision, to write it off as just another fad and wait for the initiative to go away. The new screen saver and the conversations it sparked, on top of all the other communications circulating around the company, made it very difficult to ignore our vision.

After a while, we updated the computer image to include other metrics. We still had the UK map surrounded in the blue circle, but we changed the message around it. This sparked new conversations about our goals and our vision. I could walk around the office and ask people what last year's results were and what this year's target was and many could respond without even having to think about it. These were people that, a year before, might not have even been able to quote the company's vision, let alone its targets.

We continued to update the screen saver, and it's become a sort of corporate icon around here. It's great because, instead of a newsletter or flyer that's here today and gone tomorrow, it is a constant reminder of our company's goals. It's amazing what can happen if large numbers of us all understand what the goals are.

Done poorly, a new and unexpected screen saver could seem like Big Brother in the most Orwellian sense. But look what they were able to do here.

The visual image is an important part of this method. People read, yes, but they also see, with all the power of seeing. Other new technologies offer similar benefits. The satellite broadcasts a moving picture. The teleconference with an executive people know sends more than voice—an audience can conjure up an image in their minds. A video over the intranet is like the satellite broadcast. We will be seeing increasing video over the Internet, even though the words could come much cheaper as text.

As with the issue of urgency (step 1), none of these methods are remotely sufficient by themselves. You generate a gut-level buy-in with Webcasts and a screen saver in conjunction with well-prepared Q&A sessions, new architecture, and more. At times, you might think all the communication absorbs an inordinate amount of time and resources. But it's all relative. If we have been raised in an era of incremental change, with little vision and strategy communication required, then what is needed now can seem, quite logically, like a burden. Yet most of the burden is in up-to-speed costs. Learn new skills, unclog the channels, add the new technology, and it is no longer a tall mountain to climb. It becomes just another part of organizational life that helps create a great future.

An Exercise That Might Help

The goal is to assess accurately how well those around you understand and have bought into a change vision and strategies.

Method 1

Find a group of individuals who employees see as “safe.” Perhaps Human Resource people who have good relations with the workforce or consultants who swear confidentiality and look credible. Have them talk to a representative sample of employees in your organizational unit (always focus where you have influence). The questions are: “We need to know how well we have communicated the change vision and strategies. What is your understanding? Are they sensible? Do they seem compelling? Do you (really) want to help?” The interviewers can aggregate the information without naming names and give it to you. This need not be expensive, even in a large organization. That’s the beauty of sampling.

Method 2

If your enterprise already polls employees each year with an “attitude study” or the like, add some items related to the communication issue. “Do you understand the change vision? Do you buy into it?” This method is very cheap and easy, but you must wait until the yearly cycle.

Method 3

Construct a special questionnaire and send it to employees. You can ask more questions than in method 2, and do it when you want, but it will cost more and draw more attention.

More attention is both good and bad. If you are feeling fragile and risk averse, for whatever reasons, forget it.

Method 4

Just talk to people informally about the issues. Listen to the words, yes, but also pay attention to the underlying feelings.

STEP 4

Communicate for Buy-In

Communicate change visions and strategies effectively so as to create both understanding and a gut-level buy-in.

WHAT WORKS

- Keeping communication simple and heartfelt, not complex and technocratic
- Doing your homework before communicating, especially to understand what people are *feeling*
- Speaking to anxieties, confusion, anger, and distrust
- Ridding communication channels of junk so that important messages can go through
- Using new technologies to help people see the vision (intranet, satellites, etc.)

WHAT DOES NOT WORK

- Undercommunicating, which happens all the time
- Speaking as though you are only transferring information
- Accidentally fostering cynicism by not walking the talk

STORIES TO REMEMBER

- Preparing for Q&A
- My Portal
- Nuking the Executive Floor
- The Screen Saver