Communicating Organizational Change: Strategies For Communicating Change
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this case study was to explore experiences and perceptions of employees regarding organizational change communication to improve change results in an organizational setting. Building on a conceptual framework of organizational theory, 25 full-time online faculty at an institution of higher learning in the southwestern United States participated in open-ended interviews. Data were analyzed for like terms, coded, and prioritized to identify prevalent themes. The most prominent themes included that (a) face-to-face communication was preferable for important information and e-mail was appropriate for less important information, (b) continuing communication was important for long-term change endeavors and frequent communication was effective for communicating about short-term change processes, and (c) effective communication of organizational mission and values allowed employee-organizational ethical congruency to develop. Participants indicated that communication modality affected an employee’s perception of organizational change. Business practices can improve because of this study as the findings identified opportunities for leaders to lessen the communication difficulties often associated with organizational change.

Keywords: Organizational Change; Communication

INTRODUCTION

Organizational leaders are facing increasing pressure to implement change initiatives to respond effectively to growing competition and fluid operational environments (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). Change often entails organizational restructuring, developing new job functions, or creating new organizational departments (Mahesh & Suresh, 2009). Although the need for organizational change is often recognized at higher levels in organizations, developing strategies on how to communicate successfully change programs has not been forthcoming (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011; Nelissen & van Sale, 2008; Parent & Levitt, 2009; Petrou & Demerouti, 2010). The focus of this study was on the development of effective organizational communication strategies to improve organizational change outcomes.

As issues such as competitiveness and operational complexity are constantly examined in organizational operations, organizational leaders have found it increasingly necessary to adapt traditional modes of functioning to a change-oriented operational paradigm (Arevalo, 2010; Nelissen & van Sale, 2008; Weiner, 2009). Organizational leaders are compelled to implement operational changes based on existing marketplace trends and projected marketplace trajectories (French & Holden, 2012). Because businesses are composed of individuals, an escalating need exists to develop organizational change communication strategies emphasizing employee participation (Cutcher, 2009; Pulmer & Dunford, 2008; Shin, Taylor, & Seo, 2012). Developing effective change communication strategies could create an organizational culture and workforce more willing to undertake the substantive task of developing and implementing operational change. Though organizational change poses significant challenges, understanding the multidimensional processes of effective organizational change communication could lead to more successful change strategies and techniques to mitigate resistance to organizational change.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organizational leaders are under increasing pressure to implement change (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). The ability to implement organizational change rests primarily on the ability of organizational leaders to communicate
the need for organizational change, change processes, and to garner the perceptions and experiences of employees concerning organizational change. Literature about organizational change is comprised of three main categories: implementing organizational change, communication strategies for catalyzing organizational change, and employee interpretation of organizational change.

**Implementation**

Fuchs (2011) noted employee perception of organizational justice could have a salient influence concerning willingness to engage in organizational change processes. The importance many employees attach to his or her organizational identity directly effects organizational change, and organizational leaders’ ability to executing change. Perceptions of organizational justice include distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice (Fuchs, 2011). Employees who believe the change process has not satisfied these justice paradigms are likely to exhibit antichange behaviors. Organizational leaders focusing on meeting these justice paradigms are more likely to create an environment in which employees’ exhibit prochange behaviors (Bernerth, Walker, Walker, & Hirschfeld, 2011). The establishment of procedural and distributive justice during change periods had a significant effect regarding employee perception of organizational change while interaction justice has a lesser effect.

Organizations are complex entities containing diverse groups. Accounting for organizational diversity in promulgating change communication is critical for successful change fruition (Agboola & Salawu, 2011). Organizational change can produce ambiguity, but employee resistance to change can lessen when managers are available to listen to his or her concerns (Gilley, Gilley, & McMillan, 2009). The change process often disrupts the functions within the organization, which could lead to conflict (Jain, 2011). To promote adaptations to new functionalities, functions need to be rapidly clarified (Allen, Jimmieson, Bordia, & Irmer, 2007).

Khalid and Rehman (2011) noted the frequency of organizational change is increasing. This increase has caused many organizational leaders to interpret change as a continual process to be included in operational strategies. Developing managers with competencies concerning managing during change is an essential for change readiness (Bond & Seneque, 2013). Such competencies should include analytical, insightful, influential, emotional, interpersonal, political, and technical attributes (Khalid & Rehman, 2011).

**Communication**

A divergence exists concerning the frequency and level of communication shared with employees and the proper delivery modalities (Kupritz & Cowell, 2011). Given the improvements of communication and information sharing technologies, organizations have more resources though communicate change. The complexities of the process combined with human emotions can complicate the change process (Bisel, Messersmith, & Keyton, 2010). Effective communication also entails an understanding of the nuances of organizational operations as well as the organizational culture (Summers, Humphrey, & Ferris, 2012). Communication strategies that work well in one organization are not necessarily transferable to other organizations (French & Holden, 2012). Although no communicational principles universally apply, the following section provides an overview of organizational change communication paradigms.

Whittle, Suhomlinova, and Mueller (2011) stipulated change communication is a process of mediating, not a process of intermediating. The intermediating approach entails addressing issues from an inert state, whereas the mediating approach involves interpreting and reinterpreting ideas and processes in a linear protracted fashion (Whittle et al., 2011). To create positive perceptions or perceptions of opportunity among employees during organizational change, organizational leaders need to frame organizational change as an opportunity to enhance for employees’ to enhance their skills, and provide direction for the postchange organization (Nelissen & van Sale, 2009).
Communication skills among organizational leaders should extend beyond traditional skill sets such as personality traits, sociability, extraversion, and assertiveness, to include nonverbal capabilities (Riggo, Riggo, Salinas, & Cole, 2003). Gill (2011) noted storytelling is an underused communication strategy during organizational change. Given the complexity of organizational communication, the quality of communication is important (Allen et al., 2007).

Different types of information necessitate specific types of intraorganizational communication (Kupritz & Cowell, 2011). Given the improvement of information and communication sharing technologies, organizational leaders have used these technologies based on their perceived time and monetary benefits (Barachini, 2009). These technologies might not always provide the subtle nuances needed when communicating organizational change.

Schallock (2009) stipulated the importance for organizational leaders to create a space for alternative perspectives and experiences during organizational change. To communicate organizational change in an effective manner, radical new perspectives and experiences need inclusion into the organizational construct to change status quo operations (Soonsawad, 2010). Organizational leaders must encourage diverse entities within the operational milieu to participate in the change process (Werkman, 2009).

Experience

Experiences can vary significantly because some employees thrive during organizational change periods while other employees suffer (Parent & Levitt, 2009). Although individual employee attributes concerning change often developed prior to his or her change experience, this phenomenon was not universally true as change processes, communication, and outcomes often shape employee experiences (Meyer, Srinivas, Lal, & Topolnysky, 2007). Though strategy development and change implementation are often the main focus of organizational change, the following literature provides a more human-centered perspective on the change process (Prison & Lawrence, 2009). The variances in employee change experience can have a profound effect on organizational change outcomes, given that organizations are comprised of diverse individuals (Choi & Rouna, 2011; Driver, 2009).

Understanding how the organizational environment influences employees’ abilities to adapt to organizational change is critical to communicating change (Lamb & Gordon, 2010). Although previous management literature focused on employee attributes regarding organizational change (Fugate & Kinicki, 2009), the change process and the organizational culture have a substantive role concerning change implementation. Change processes must be psychological empowering (Reissner, 2010).

The role of value systems in organizational change has become increasingly important (Marginson, 2009). To overcome organizational inertia, the culture of an organization must become change-oriented (Lamm, Gordon, & Purser, 2010). Aligning value systems can help organizations develop cultural congruence to change (Raukko, 2009). Engineering new value systems oriented to change can provide organizational leaders a useful mechanism for conveying the need for change to multiple organizational actors (Marginson, 2009).

Chaudhry, Coyle-Shapiro, and Wayne (2011) explored the use of sensemaking by employees to develop psychological contexts during organizational change. Psychological contexts consist of two primary elements: contextual factors and cognitive factors (Pirson & Lawrence, 2009). Within the contextual realm, factors such as novelty, discrepancy, conscious deliberation, uncertainty, and personal influence were central concerns.

Organizational leaders often ignore how employees make sense of organizational change in terms of future positioning within the organization’s hierarchy (Bisel & Barge, 2011). Central to assuaging employee resistance to change is establishing discursive discourse within the organizational construct (Jones, Watson, Honman, Bordia, Gallois, & Callan, 2008). A significant problem with intraorganizational discourse, though, is the lack of understanding regarding the purpose of discourse (Jain, 2011). Though organizational leaders have attempted to communicate change, such communication paradigms are typically top-down and one-way conduits in which organizational leaders dominate change narratives (Bisel & Barge, 2011).
PROBLEM AND PURPOSE

The escalating level of competition has caused organizational change to become an increasingly salient issue. However, organizational leaders often do not communicate in an effective manner the need for organizational change (Nelissen & van Sale, 2008). As such, a need exists to study how organizational leaders can communicate change effectively to increase the percentage of successful change initiatives (Arif, Jan, Marwat, & Ullah, 2009; Boga & Ensari, 2009). The lack of clear communication causes approximately 70% of change initiatives to fail to achieve desired results (Burnes & Jackson, 2011). The purpose of this qualitative study with case study design was to explore how organizational leaders can communicate change to improve change outcomes.

METHOD AND DESIGN

Because the study required fieldwork, the qualitative method was appropriate. The study required conducting research in a real-world setting, rather than testing an experimental hypothesis as in the quantitative method (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). As Johnson, Buehring, Cassell, and Symon (2007) noted, the application of qualitative method in management research presents the complexities of the cultural and symbolic attributes of organizational functioning and culture during change circumstances. The qualitative method was appropriate for the focus of this study on the continual reactions of employees concerning organizational change communications.

This study used a case study design. As indicated by Yin (2009), the central benefit of the case study is the design allows researchers to explore how individuals construct meaning concerning events, programs, or processes, in a time-bound manner in a specific social context. A case study design was appropriate because the focus of this study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of participants regarding change communications occurring in an organizational setting.

DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUE

An interview data collection instrument permitted the exploration of the in-depth experiences of participants concerning organizational change communication. As Marshall and Rossman (2011) noted, the interview data collection technique allows the researcher to use open-ended questions to elicit the experiences, views, and opinions of participants. Interview-based research can provide an understanding of how participants develop meaning to actions, events, and processes related to organizational change communication (Brod et al., 2009).

The semistructured interview allowed participants to express their experiences to organizational change; data collected garnered a rich understanding of the research site’s unique complexities (Yin, 2009). The interview collection technique afforded the ability to explore in-depth multiple perspectives within the organization (Parent & Levitt, 2009). The semistructured nature of the interviews permitted a holistic understanding of participants’ perception to emerge in an organic process. Using a semistructured interview allowed the participants an opportunity to express themselves regarding actions, events, and processes (Clark, 2010).

PRESENTATION OF THE FINDINGS

This section includes the major themes derived from the data analysis preformed using NVivo10™ software. The themes that emerged from the analysis were communication modality, continuing and frequent communication, and communicating mission and values. Each theme subsection includes findings from the semistructured interviews conducted.

Theme 1: Communication Modality

Participants indicated the communication modality by which they receive information had an effect concerning their perception and interpretation of the communication. Communication received in the correct modality has the potential to help organizational change integration, while communication received through incorrect modalities can harm change integration (Jain, 2011). Organizational leaders typically communicate with
employees through either face-to-face contact or through e-mail, with differing usage patterns depending on leader preference (Kupritz & Cowell, 2011). Although each modality can be an effective mode to communicate change, the importance of the information and the content of the information necessitate differing delivery modalities based on research findings of this study.

Theme 2: Continuing and Frequent Communication

The majority of the study participants found continuing and frequent communication was important regarding organizational change. Continuing communication referred to communication that concerned long-term issues and was ongoing (Peus, Frey, Gerhardt, & Traut-Mattausch, 2009). McCabe (2010) indicated continuing communication could be valuable in lessening employee mistrust and uncertainty about organizational change. Frequent communication related to daily contact employees have with organizational leaders (Jain, 2010). Frequent communication can be crucial toward developing intraorganizational reciprocity and creating an environment conducive for change (Jabri, Adrian, & Boje, 2008). Continuing and frequent communications were both critical components to establishing positive conditions for organizational change.

Theme 3: Communicating Mission and Values

The communication of organizational mission and values was the third significant theme that emerged during the data analysis process. A majority of participants indicated understanding the mission and values of the organization was critical in their perception of change related information. Organizational change often brings uncertainty, providing clarity of direction, and purpose behind the changes can help to alleviate employee resistance (Kira, van Eijnatten, & Balkin, 2011). The clear delineation of mission and values can help employees understand the nuances of the organization and interpret change in an accurate context.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore strategies organizational leaders could use to communicate the need for organizational change in an effective manner. The complexity of many modern organizations and the different factions within organizations has made communication a salient issue. Organizational change is constant, and the need to communicate organizational change strategies exists (Bisel & Barge, 2011). Fluctuations in the marketplace have increased the need for organizational leaders to communicate change in an effective manner (Jain, 2011). Despite the acknowledgement of the need for effective change communication strategies, communicating change remains a crucial barrier to implementing organizational change (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011). Lack of understanding, trust, knowledge sharing, and rapport can be consequences of ineffective communication within the organization.

The goal for this study was to develop strategies organizational leaders could use to communicate organizational change effectively. Given that organizational change can often meet resistance from employees as change threatens the status quo, deciphering how to communicate change in a manner that lessens resistance and increases support seems applicable to business operations. Focusing on the three themes developed in the data analysis, communication modality, continuing and frequent communication, and communicating mission and values, can increase the ability of organizational leaders to communicate change in an effective manner.

The modality in which employees receive communication about organizational change can have a salient effective toward their perception of the communication. The findings from this study indicate employees preferred to receive important information face-to-face and receive less important information via e-mail. Major changes can threaten an employee’s sense of security, the personal touch added through one-on-one personal communication might help to alleviate resistance and fear regarding change. Face-to-face communication can help build rapport between managers and employees, which can be critical toward lessening employee resistance to change (Chaudhry et al., 2011). Efficiency is a crucial component toward organizational change success (Raukko, 2009). The results from this study indicated e-mail communication was an efficient modality for leaders to communicate less important information. The e-mail modality allowed participants to read communications on their schedule, which helped them to manage their schedules in an effective manner. Some employees may differ in how they want to receive
communication about change as the findings indicated, but the majority of participants found face-to-face effective for communicating important information. The disadvantage for organizational leaders is face-to-face communication can be time consuming. Participants, in general, preferred e-mail communication for less important information, and this modality affords organizational leaders with a means for increasing the efficiency of their communications.

Continuing and frequent communications are crucial actions for engraining positive perceptions about organizational change. Continuing communication can help organizational leaders communicating the long-term goals for the department and organization (Russ, 2008). This finding indicated participants found continuing communication useful to develop a clear idea of the goals of the department, their role in the future of the organization, and a familiarity with organizational processes. Frequent communication can be useful for communicating short-term goals, projects, and strategies (Qian & Daniels, 2008). Organizational leaders can use frequent communication to establish and build rapport with employees. The findings of the study indicated the employees were positive concerning frequent interaction with their managers.

Communicating the mission and values of the organization can help communicate organizational change. Leaders can help employees to develop a holistic understanding of the organization by communicating the mission and values of the organization. This can be salient when integrating organizational change because change often requires employees to modify their routines (Bernerth et al., 2011). The findings from the study indicated communicating the mission and values of the organization allowed employees to find ethical congruency between themselves and the organization. Leaders who communicate the mission and values of an organization can often decrease resistance to organizational change and increase support (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2011). The findings from the study indicated understanding the mission and values of the organization allowed participants to overcome differences, and focus on organizational-wide goals. However, actions or policies that contradict the stated mission and values were likely to decrease support for organizational change and increase negative perceptions of the organization.

SUMMARY AND STUDY CONCLUSIONS

The data analysis yielded three central themes: communication modality, continuing and frequent communication, and communicating mission and values. Organizational communication occurs through either face-to-face interaction or via e-mail. The participants indicated face-to-face communication was preferred for information perceived as important. Participants enjoyed the face-to-face interaction with organizational leaders and indicated the personal touch added by face-to-face communication could lessen fear and resistance to organizational change. Participants in this study additionally indicated e-mail communication was preferred for information perceived as less important. E-mail communication was beneficial as the modality allowed participants to view information on their schedule and believed having a time-stamped record was important. Continuing and frequent communication were both essential to communicate organizational change as indicated by participants. Continuing communication can be useful for communicating long-term organizational goals and providing a holistic perspective of organizational operations. Frequent communication was important for communicating short-term initiatives and daily processes, and for building familiarity between organizational leaders and participants. Participants indicated the effective communication of organizational mission and values was important toward perceptions of organizational change communication. Communicating the mission and values of the organization can allow employees to find ethical congruency with the organization, which can be important toward improving change outcomes. The communication of mission and values can help employees overcome personal differences and view change in an organizational-wide context. The benefits derived from the effective communication of mission and values must align with the policies and operations of the organization to produce desirable outcomes.

The strategies that emerged in this study can help organizational leaders communicate organizational change in a more effective manner. An important aspect of the communication process is communicational strategies need to account for perceptions of employees to organizational change. As employees are essential to implementing change, increasing support, and lessening resistance are cornerstones of effective change communication.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

1. How effective were organizational leaders in explaining the reasons behind the creation of the position of full-time online faculty?
2. Was the amount of information you received concerning your position as a full-time online faculty adequate, please explain?
3. Has the requirements and responsibilities of the position been communicated in a clear manner, please explain?
4. What has been the most effective communication modality (e-mail, newsletter, face-to-face) concerning your position and your positional responsibilities?
5. How important is continuing communication, regarding possible changes to your positional requirements and responsibilities?
6. Have you thought that you have been able to provide feedback regarding your position as a full-time online faculty to organizational leaders (managers, directors, et cetera.)?
7. Do you believe your feedback has been included based on communication you received or through job function change related to your position, please explain?
8. How has the communication you have received from organizational leaders shaped your perception of the organizational culture and values?
9. How could you communicate to new full-time online faculty the nuances about their position? What is the interchange like between coworkers?
10. To what extent have you been able to implement communication regarding your position received from organizational leaders into your day-to-day function?
11. How has the communication you received regarding your positional responsibilities, requirements, and changes differed from communication you received while employed in previous positions?