

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION DRIVES CHANGE

Strategic Communication and Organizational Change

Upsets happen in **all** organizations. They are an unavoidable aspect of the evolution of any enterprise. One could even argue that **if upsets are not happening, then the enterprise is either defunct or in a death spiral.** The performance of an organization in the face of such continual and sometimes wrenching change is the result of multiple variables in a complex equation. However, leadership is often the most powerful variable in the formula.

Strong, action-oriented leadership and strategic communication, coupled with alignment of key people across the enterprise, is critical in successfully managing through the period of high stress and expectations that should be expected during transitions. Strategic communication is the key ingredient that helps turn lemons into lemonade – and sometimes selling it at a good margin!

All change, all new ideas, all innovation, and even all progress in human endeavors starts with communication. **Organizational communication, when handled strategically, drives organizational change and is the conduit for moving forward together.** Taku Group thinks of organizational communication not only as a means of imparting information but also as one of the most effective tools that leaders have and use to create alignment and to gain support for change.

The Value of Communicating

What is the value of organizational communication in creating alignment or gaining support for a strategy or vision? **Companies that survive or prosper in the face of organizational change create strong alignment and involvement of employees at all levels of the organization.** The leaders in those organizations ensure that people understand the strategy and their role in executing that strategy. They seem to appreciate that if key stakeholders don't understand how the company is supposed to be different, how it creates value, and what it stands for, then they cannot effectively make the myriad choices posed on a daily basis, much less during periods of intense change.

If people at all levels of an organization understand and support the vision and understand the business case behind the strategy, they will be able to assess the wisdom and desirability of specific decisions, actions, and outcomes simply by asking one question: “How does this decision and its consequent action and outcome align with the company’s vision?”

When everyone understands and supports the vision, they are more likely to feel a part of the organization and therefore to perform to their maximum capacity and support organizational change. Truly successful organizations enjoy the full enthusiastic participation of every individual. Effective organizational communication is a way to engage every employee and get the buy-in needed to ensure they truly adopt the necessary change.

Strategic communication about vision and strategy is intended to create alignment and commitment among employees at all levels by positively impacting the context in which they view the organization, i.e., their perceptions. One way in which to think of the intended outcome of strategic communication is that it is not about changing people; **it is about giving them a new lens through which to see the world.**

Methods for Effective Communication

How big does the buy-in need to be? Significant change can occur in an organization with 5% of the population committed to the change. If you achieve 20% fully committed support, change is unstoppable.



To create buy-in, a communication strategy should be designed to create a critical mass of employees that:

- Share the organizational vision
- Are able to explain how their work supports the vision
- Contribute to creating the required changes in personal behavior and work practices to achieve the vision

Whom should you target? Any significant change will produce what we call the “Rule of Thirds”: One-third of the population will be excited about the change; one-third will take a wait-and-see attitude; and one-third will oppose the change. Most often, managers target their communication and time at the people actively resisting the change. Strategic communication, however, is most successful when it is targeted to the two-thirds that, over time, will support the vision for change and provide what they need to know in order to ensure that support.

The communication channels, methods, and tools used to gain support for change will vary depending on the stakeholder, the type of communication, and the quality of the communication channel, method, or tool. The following list represents the channels that are most effective for communicating change¹.

- One-on-one, face-to-face communication with a manager or supervisor
- Hallway, cafeteria, or water-cooler communication
- Open group question-and-answer meetings
- MBWA (managing by walking around)
- Telephone conversations with “friends”
- Staff meetings
- Small group or team meetings
- Video conferencing
- Voice mail
- Email
- Inter-office memo
- Video reports to employees
- Bulletin boards
- Fax-news bulletins
- Formal speeches by leaders
- Letters
- Newsletters (internal)
- Written reports

For the greatest buy-in, it is always a good idea to use a combination of methods to ensure that each and every employee understands what is going on and why it is necessary, and feels as though s/he is a part of the process and has a stake in the outcome and continued success of the organization.

¹ Listed from most effective to least effective (Michael Leifer, President, GuerillaPR.com)

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