



5 Pitfalls of Change Communication to be Careful of and One HUGE Opportunity!

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When you've worked in change long enough, you start to see some re-occurring tragedies of change communication. To help those starting out, here's five common pitfalls to beware of. It's not all that dark though, there's a great shiny opportunity if you hang around to the end.

1. Authenticity

We ask a lot from leadership and managers in communicating change – we want them to be skilled communicators, able to engage multiple audiences in the same presentation or speech. We want them to be open and vulnerable and retain an ability to be seen as the leader.

This challenge is enough to make most managers and leaders shrink away from the task... and just send an email. But here's the thing: when you bring your whole self to your change communication and let your audience see you in all your facets, it creates multiple points of reference and all people can identify with you. Make sure your leaders know this.

2. Overly emotional

The next pitfall is the urge to create intense

emotional messaging. If this messaging is focused on fear 'if we don't change, you lose your jobs', we risk the audience rejecting the messages (it's too awful to think of). A friend recently shared a horrific photo of animal cruelty on Facebook in an attempt to change people's behaviours with regards to buying leather. The photo was so horrific that within 18 hours I had resolved that it must be photoshopped and was angry at the animal cruelty activists who had generated it. That one backfired. The same thing happens in organizational change – you want to be thoughtful about tempering the mix of emotion and logic in your change communication.

3. Identity

On the topic of rejection of message, another way is to base your argument around a value that the people do not identify with it. You may want to share change communication on the importance of the standardization of your practices – but perhaps your employees don't think of themselves as one-way, same-way kind of people. Instead, they perceive themselves as entrepreneurial and innovative folk. Your challenge is to find a higher order principle or value – one that unites all your people, and nobody can disagree with.

4. To brand or not to brand

One of the most vexing decisions to make is, do you give your change project a 'name', or brand the change project? I lean on the side of 'no',

just call it what it is. This is mainly because our audience or the employees get so exhausted by all the cute / twee / inspirational branded projects and trying to remember 'Ulysses, right – what's that one about again?', or they end up being very clever and coming up with alternative and cynical interpretations of change initiative names.

It can be more informative and educational to simply call it what it is in as few words as possible. Make sure you think very clearly about the implications of acronyms as well.

Project Information Standardization and Simplification doesn't bode so well when the employees get hold of it.

This also goes for the use of images – I swear, if I see one more image of the caterpillar becoming a butterfly for a transformation project (think about it, butterflies only live for one day) or the goldfish jumping to the other bowl (goldfish are not known for their brain size), I will lose it!

If you're going to use images to communicate a representation of your change, proceed with thoughtful caution, rather than relying on a commercial image provider's option under 'change or transformation'.

5. Over-communicating

There's ample warning in the change management literature of the potential disaster that's 'under-communication'. Best-selling authors Rosabeth Moss Kanter and John Kotter both note the criticality of communication to the success of organizational change. Poor communication of change is repeatedly cited as a core driver of change cynicism, apathy, anxiety and uncertainty-based stress.

When a change communication vacuum occurs, it's inevitably filled with rumour, gossip and misinformation. It's human nature to 'fill the gaps'. But we hear little of the perils of 'over-communicating'. While many say, you can't overcommunicate during change, I argue that you can. Over-communicating can also create anxiety, frustration, and cynicism.

The negative effects of over-communication result when:

- > Management pushes a line that does not resonate with the employees (spin)
- > The project team has neglected the awareness and understanding phase of change and have jumped straight to trying to sell messages to gain commitment (delivering the message 'here's why you must love this change', without introducing the change first)
- > The timing of the communication is misaligned with the tempo of the change (bi- weekly huddles with nothing to say)
- > The channels used aren't the preferred channels of the employees (ten daily emails could be replaced by one serious conversation)
- > The source of the change communication is not well respected (blah, blah, he's talking again...)
- > There are so many competing messages about various change projects they all blur into one big transformational white noise!

"Huge Opportunity" on deck. Watch for the rest of Jennifer's brilliant insight next week. Be sure to sign up for our mailing list so you don't miss a thing!



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Jen Frahm is a high-impact change management practitioner, communications professional and executive coach. She churns out a lot of content on the future of work and organizational change and communication. She has a podcast series (Conversations of Change), two very popular e-books (The Transformation Treasure Trove), and a blog (The Water Cooler). Her change projects have included culture change, process change, digital transformation, legislative change, mergers and acquisitions and technology / systems change.