

12 Questions for Change Communicators

By Carol Kinsey Goman, Ph.D

Carol Kinsey Goman, Ph.D, President of Kinsey Consulting Services, Carol specializes in the human side of organizational transformation - offering lectures and seminars to business organizations, government agencies and trade associations around the world. She consults with communicators to identify and optimize the social network and informal leadership in their organizations. Carol can be reached through her website: www.CKG.com or by phone: 510-526-1727 or email: CGoman@CKG.com. This article is condensed from her chapter, "Change Communication" for an upcoming book entitled, "Inside Organizational Communications, Fourth Edition" - a project sponsored by the International Association of Business Communicators.

Copyright © 2005-2008 Linkage. All rights reserved.

Linkage
Unleash your full potential.

In a recent survey by the Conference Board, 539 global CEOs were asked to list their top concerns. In Europe and Asia as well as in North America, organizational flexibility and adaptability to change consistently ranked at the top of the list. Only revenue growth was of higher concern.

This offers tremendous opportunities for communicators to add real value. It also requires an expanded definition of "change communication" from speech writing, intranet content development, e-mail messages, roll-out/cascade programs - and the rest of the current traditional approaches - to a more inclusive overview encompassing leadership behavior, reward systems, organizational goal-setting, recognition programs, work processes, workplace design, and strategic conversations within formal and informal networks.

Most importantly, it means letting go of any preconceived notion of finding "the one right way" to communicate change. No "transformation formula" lasts forever. In fact, the best change-communication techniques aren't found in any single source or strategy. The most effective guidelines *evolve* in response to a series of questions:

Question #1 - What is the employees' perspective?

Front-line employees deal regularly with customers and observe first-hand the issues, challenges, and successes of those they serve. The IT department sees advances in technology before the rest of the organization has adapted to the last update. Professionals throughout the company attend association meetings and have access to experts in their field. Your organization has hired the best and the brightest - and your task is to tap their expertise, points of view, and concerns. The first question to ask is: "What do employees think?"

Question #2 - Did you "set the stage" for change?

The best time to discuss the forces of change is well in advance of an organization's response to them. Everyone in the organization needs a realistic appreciation of the precursors of change and transformation - the impact of globalization, market fluctuations, technological innovations, societal and demographic changes in the customer base, new products/services of competitors, new government and regulatory decisions. And here technology can be a great asset. Although it certainly shouldn't be the only medium, the intranet can be a timely vehicle for competitive and industry information.

Question #3 - How will you track employee perceptions?

Employee interaction and feedback loops help communicators track the level of workforce comprehension. Whether you supply an email box or a phone number for individuals to ask questions about the change, use online surveys to query a sampling of the workforce, or create Communication Advisory Teams to represent their fellow workers, the greatest advantages come when organizational feedback is gathered immediately after the delivery of an important message.

Question #4 - Do you have honest answers to tough questions?

Not only can employees tolerate honest disclosure, they are increasingly demanding it. And when it comes to change, employees want straight answers to these tough questions:

- ◆ Will I keep my job?
- ◆ How will pay and benefits be affected?
- ◆ How will this affect my opportunities for advancement?
- ◆ Will I have a new boss?
- ◆ What new skills will I need?
- ◆ What will be expected of me?
- ◆ How will I be trained/supported for the new challenges?
- ◆ How will I be measured?
- ◆ What are the rewards or consequences?

Question #5 - Can you answer the most important question: What's in it for them?

There are personal advantages to be found in almost every change, but people may need help discovering what the advantages are. Sometimes employees just need to be guided through a few questions: What are your career goals? What are the skills you would like to learn? What job-related experiences would you like have? In what ways might this change help you to fulfill some of your personal objectives?

Question #6 - Have you narrowed the "say-do" gap?

Organizations send two concurrent sets of messages about change. Formal communication is what companies "say" to employees about the organization and its goals. Informal communication is what the company "does" in terms of rewards, compensation, training, leadership behavior, organizational structure, etc. to demonstrate and support what it says. For today's skeptical employee audiences, rhetoric without action quickly disintegrates into empty slogans and company propaganda.

Question #7- Who's vision is it?

Effective communicators understand the power of vision to imbue people with a sense of purpose, direction and energy. But if the vision belongs only to top management, it will never be an effective force for transformation. In the end, people have to feel that the vision belongs to them. The power of a vision comes truly into play only when the employees themselves have had some part in its creation. So the communicator's role moves from crafting executive speeches to facilitating interactive events.

Question #8 - Can you paint the big-little picture?

Vision is the big picture, and it is crucial to the success of the enterprise. But along with the big picture, people also need the little picture so they know where their contribution fits into the corporate strategy. And here's where first-line supervisors can be the most effective communicators. In face-to-face discussions with their team members, supervisors become a vital link in turning the organizational vision into practical and meaningful actions.

Question #9 - Are you emotionally literate?

People have to understand the rationale for change - the business case, the marketplace reality. But change is more than just the logic behind it. Large-scale organizational change almost invariably triggers the same sequence of emotional reactions -- denial, negativity, a choice point, acceptance, and commitment. Communicators who track this emotional process design strategies that help people accept and move through the various stages.

Question #10 - Are you telling stories?

Good stories are more powerful than plain facts. This is not to reject the value in facts, of course, but simply to recognize their limits in influencing people. People make decisions based on what facts mean to them, not on the facts themselves. Stories give facts meaning. Stories resonate with adults in ways that can bring them back to a childlike open-mindedness - and make them less resistant to experimentation and change.

Question #11 - Do you know how change really gets communicated?

Town hall meetings in which senior leaders speak openly about change, great stories that embody the spirit of change, well-designed intranets filled with pertinent information about the forces and progress of change, interactive "transformation sessions" in which a cross-section of the organization co-creates a vision and develops the strategy, online employee surveys that query and monitor a work force as it deals with the nuances of change, icons and symbols and signage that visually reinforce change, and (especially) first-line supervisors who are trained and prepared to engage their direct reports in a dialogue about what change means to them - these are (and will remain) vital tools for communicators. But, as powerful as they are, these are formal communication channels operating within the organizational hierarchy. And a single informal channel, the company grapevine, can undermine them all.

In the hallways, around the water cooler or coffee pot, over the telephone, as part of a blog, in rouge web sites, and through e-mail messages, news is exchanged and candid opinions are offered. It is during these "off-line" exchanges and daily conversations that people decide whether or not to support change. Want to dramatically improve the effectiveness of your change communication? Then find ways to identify, involve, and enlist your organization's social networks and informal opinion leaders.

Question #12 - Are you positioning change as an event or a corporate mindset?

If adaptable, change-adept organizations are what CEOs want, then the only communication strategy that's going to produce the desired result is one that includes instability as a positive element - and ongoing change as "business as usual." So, a final question: Are you still referring to change as "the event" or are you positioning it as a constant corporate mindset and vital component of organizational success?

Linkage

Linkage is a global organizational development company that specializes in leadership development. We provide clients around the globe with integrated solutions that include strategic consulting services, customized leadership development and training experiences, tailored assessment services, and benchmark research. Linkage's mission is to connect high-performing leaders and organizations to the futures they want to create.

With a relentless commitment to learning, Linkage also offers conferences, institutes, summits, open-enrollment workshops, and distance learning programs on leading-edge topics in leadership, management, human resources, and organizational development. More than 200,000 leaders and managers have attended Linkage programs since 1988.

Linkage
Burlington, MA
781.402.5555
info@linkageinc.com