

Defining the change message

By John Baldoni

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The news hit and hit hard. ABC News 20/20 aired a piece highly critical of the way anesthesiologists practiced their specialty. Malpractice premiums for anesthesiologists hit the accelerator. Fear set in and many anesthesiologists wondered what to do next. Rather than fight the media or press for government protection, they did one step better: they looked at themselves and set about altering the course of their profession. That was in 1982.

As a result, anesthesiologists made their profession safer. Today, as reported in the *Wall Street Journal*, the death rate due to anesthesia has dropped to one in 200,000 to 300,000, a fraction of the one in 5,000 it was in the early Eighties. As a result insurance premiums have bottomed out. Not only have these physicians reduced the risk of anesthesia, they have developed a lesson plan for any organization faced with the need to change. And it is this: face up to the problem and move forward. Don't run, don't hide, and don't scream foul. Be responsible and own up to the issue.

Pain of change

It's been said that people only change when it hurts too much not to change. For anesthesiologists, things were hurting big time, but what they did and how they did it shows the important role that communications plays in the change process. The anesthesiologists developed the Anesthesia Patient Safety Foundation solely devoted to improve practices and procedures to make anesthesia safer and more reliable. They funded research and many anesthesiologists devoted their own time to studying results. Over the past two decades the APSF has developed new guidelines and new technologies that have reduced errors, mistakes, and fatalities. Communication of those new practices furthered their adoption throughout the anesthesiology community.²

What those of us not involved with putting people to sleep (at least not intentionally) is to emulate some of what anesthesiologists did in order to develop clear and concise messages of change that are embraced and most importantly put into practices. Here are some suggestions:

Tell it like it is.

No one likes a person who avoids the truth; after all it's one reason why politicians are so despised. People feel they sugarcoat reality. It is a practice, however, that many corporate titans follow. After all, wasn't Ken Lay telling an all employee meeting how well Enron was doing all the while he was unloading stock after he had received some very disturbing news about the financial prospects for his company? So when things are bleak, be honest. If the sky is falling, tell them to look up for their own safety. People will not enjoy the news but they will listen, and maybe even respect you for your honesty.

You gotta believe.

At the same time, you are proclaiming reality (or even disaster), talk about the prospects for the future. All of us need hope; if not you might as well close up shop right then and there. Herb Brooks, coach of the U.S. Olympic hockey team in 1980, pulled together college players and minor league castoffs; in warm up games they were shellacked by NHL teams as well as national teams, including the USSR. Come game time at Lake Placid, Brooks had his team prepared and believing they could win against the mightiest teams in the world. And they did, beating the Soviets and later Finns for the gold. People want to believe that the enterprise is

worth their toil and tears. You have to talk about what the organization believes, what it has accomplished, and what it can accomplish when the crisis passes.

Discuss action steps.

Crises, like tsunamis, do not pass quietly in the night. They often exact terrible tolls in the form of failed product launches, botch service operations, closed facilities, and yes, lots of lost jobs. Managers must give specifics about what is happening, what will happen, and what people in the organization can and must do. There must be a planned response, an action plan for recovery as well as for moving forward. It need not be as detailed as a strategic plan, but it should be well thought out. Very important, it should allow for further development as circumstances dictate.

Invite everyone to participate.

Planning the response is a collaborative effort. Strategic intent emanates from the top; filling in the action steps is up to managers and their people department by department, team by team, employee by employee. Make certain that all people are included. Hold employee and staff meetings to ensure that people are informed, consulted, and solicited for their ideas. Some ideas will pop up at the meeting table; others will come after a night's sleep, or often after months slogging forward. Always keep the door open to new ideas.

Proclaim results.

Nothing defeats change like silence. In reality there is no such thing as organizational silence. Grapevine gossip and innuendo will fill the communications vacuum. Therefore, create a communications team to let people know what is going on at all times. Even when the news is not good, tell it anyway. [People always assume the worse anyway.] And when things are going well, proclaim it louder. Celebrate the wins. Be creative in how you do it, too. Maybe it's a congratulatory email; or maybe it's a staff outing. The measure of success will dictate the measure of celebration.

Remember that nothing written in stone.

The very nature of change means that change is cyclical; what changes now will change again down the road. So make certain people understand that what you do today is good for today, but may not always be good for tomorrow. This is especially good to remember if you are asking people, as they are in the legacy airlines, for concessions in compensation. You want to suggest that there will be a good return on the sacrifice. Likewise the methods for improvement to processes now may not stand the test of time; you will have to take new steps with new technologies. Again, stone is good for holding up buildings, not organizations.

Define your way to success

The more sharply defined the message the greater impact it can have. Sometimes this may take time, time which you may not have in a crisis. The anesthesiologists did not have years to sit around and plot the next medical revolution; they had to think and do quickly. But their response, which was honed and refined over decades, is fine example of leveraging communications to sustain change not just overnight but overtime, even decades.

Defining your messages of change is essential to the change process. If communications are soft and vague, your outcomes will be even more so. People crave direction so give it to them, but also keep them in the loop as to what it is happening. Most important, be inclusive. The more you ask others for their ideas and their participation the greater chance of success you have. Why? Because when you ask, you begin to confer ownership. And when people feel like they own something - be it an idea, a process, or even part of the company - they want to do their best. Change then becomes part of how they improve the status quo for themselves and everyone else. Not a bad change in itself.

1 Joseph T. Hallinan "Once Seen as Risky, One Group of Doctors Changes Its Way" Wall Street Journal 6/21/05

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