

Communication of Change Management: Variation Based on Recipients' Position in the Organization: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT Change management and communication are important in an organization that is undergoing a change. Other factors may influence the communication of change. In this study the authors investigate how the position of employees influences the successful communication of change at the workplace. The case used in the study recently went through a merger and many post-merger changes. The communication of change to employees in different positions in the organization is addressed in this paper. An empirical study was conducted on employees at different levels of position in the organization. The findings show that the communication of the organizational change did not provide for differentiation between employees in different positions in the organization. It became evident that the organization has no change communication strategy to address the employees in different positions in the workplace. This paper contributes to the existing knowledge in the communication of change management. Considerations for further studies are presented.

INTRODUCTION

Communication is vital in the process of change, as it often helps balance the mixed feelings staff may have (Nelissen and van Selin 2008). Through communication, the management of organizations can gain support from staff to participate in the process of change (Grobler and Puth 2002). The organization used in this paper has recently undergone a merger and is still in the process of change and working through post-merger changes. The merger between the two companies resulted in the one company's head office being changed to be in another province and staff members having to relocate, others were retrenched and other staff members simply resigned because of their fears for change. Staff members felt anxious about their future prospects at the organization and wanted some reassurance from management. A merger in the corporate world has many business advantages for the organiza-

tion's economic growth and development, but it can have a negative effect on employees. In this study, the researcher investigates how employee diversity in terms of position in the organization has an influence on the successful communication of change in the workplace. The research was conducted in a corporate organization in the financial services sector.

Change is often communicated the same to all employees, without considering that employees of different positions in the organization may have varied perceptions. The problem of this study is how the management of MIM Ltd communicates change to their diverse group of employees. The position of employees' influences how the message of change is perceived and it is important for organizational management to consider when communicating change. The objective of the study is to describe how employees from different age groups, perceive change and the different ways in which change is communicated to them.

The rest of the paper is divided into literature review, research methodology, discussion of research results, conclusion and recommendations, and ideas for further studies.

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Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The theory of organizational communication seeks to understand the communication process in organizations to solve practical and efficiency problems in the companies (Berros 2012). This theory emphasizes that organizations must communicate and inform with reference to public opinion and define concepts as they apply to organizations. Van Ruler and de Lange (2003) are of the opinion that the communication executive of an organization, with a communications background, is best suitable to manage communication of strategic organizational change. In the researcher's opinion, organizations will be successful in communicating to employees if the employees understand the terms used and be able to relate to the terms or concepts used. It is important that the people responsible for communicating the change plans to employees clearly understand the terms and principles of the anticipated changes. Employing communication specialists will be beneficial to organizations to communicate changes to both the employees of the organization and the outside audience.

Change, Communication and Change Management

Johansson and Heide (2008) argue that change is often triggered by the needs within organizations. Previous studies (Burke 2008; Coghlan and Rashford 2006; Invernizzi et al. 2012) on the perspective of communication, helps organizations understand the needs for successful implementation of change. Communication is a tool organizations should use to declare and explain the planned change projects to staff. Paton and MacCalman (2008: 4) define change management as "a complex, dynamic and challenging process rather than a set of recipes." They continue to argue that before you can decide on the strategy to manage change, the nature and impact of the change must be determined.

Invernizzi et al. (2012) argue that communication plays a strategic role in change processes within organizations. They continue to argue that careful planning of different steps and initiatives are necessary to build a culture of change in organizations. Fassauer and Schirmer (2008) are of the opinion that both the power models and micro-political theories of change explain resistance to change as a defense mechanism for the interests, benefits and power status of professionals in organizations. Erwin and Gar-

man (2010: 39) reckon, "Resistance to change is often cited as a reason for difficulties in implementing and failure of change initiatives." Professionals are often perceived as a barrier to implementing change, even though they often behave in a reserved manner, they may oppose change (Fassauer and Schirmer 2008). Bearing this in mind, it is evident that professionals resist change as a defense mechanism to protect their own interests and secure themselves. However, the resistance can be reduced and even eliminated by communicating to employees.

Sweers and Desouza (2010) reckon that early detection will give managers time to identify the sources of resistance and make some adjustments before implementation of the change process is completed. Hence, it is important for managers to be involved with the employees and not operate in isolation. Employees feel excluded when management operates in isolation and these feelings give rise to resistance and non-cooperation from employees. Proctor and Doukakis (2003) are of the opinion that the involvement of people early in the change process is the key to effecting change. This means consulting with people and persuading them to take ownership of the new ideas that are being introduced. Management should provide staff with information and power to those who will be subject to change, as this will help overcome ambiguity and uncertainty (Proctor and Doukakis 2003). This is a way of empowerment to employees by management and by doing so organizational management is able to convert resistance into a perceived need for change and cooperation.

The use of storytelling and making sense thereof has become increasingly popular in the field of management and organizational studies (Dawson and McLean 2013). The stories give meaning and a sense of togetherness to employees, in cases where the organizational life is uncertain. The employees use the stories to describe their situations by using examples that they know in the everyday life and that way they make sense of what is currently happening in their organization. It is also through these stories that they decide whether they are going to buy into the change or whether they will oppose the change initiatives, which means stories may have the power to eliminate resistance (Dawson and McLean 2013; Hope 2010). It may, however, still be important to stratify employees based on their positions when communicating change.

Communication of Change to Employees in Different Positions

Jabri et al. (2008) warn that people communicating change must think about whether people in the organization are objects of communication or subjects in communication. The communication of change is thus a very important element in an organization's existence, which with the communication strategies are referred to by Hayes (2007), as important contributors to the success of change projects in an organization. Cornelissen (2014) argues the different stakeholders in organizations are interested in the information that has an impact on them. Therefore, only relevant information should be shared to the staff in different positions in the organization. The form of communication used to communicate change must be of good quality, without spelling and grammatical errors, and understandable to the audience. The communication strategies used by the organization involves how they approach employees, the manner in which communication takes place and the relationships between the communicator and the audience. Hence, communication of change can take place whilst having conversations with people or staff within an organization.

Perception of Change Communication by Employees in Different Positions

Johansson and Heide (2008: 294) suggest because employees of "an organization have different backgrounds, interests, experiences, education, positions," and they interpret the same situation differently. It is emphasized by Ford (1999) that change is driven by communication and by means of conversations. Communication can be seen as the instrument of change that is it happens all the time, but in order for change to take place there must be communication, which can be in the form of conversations. Such conversations contribute to increased participation from employees within the organization and help people reach consensus when there may be different viewpoints, and so agree to the way forward. It is thus very important that people speak and understand the language in which the conversations take place, in order for the communication to serve its purpose and have meaning, as stated by Alvesson and Kärreman (2000). It is important for the managers to be

trained if they do not have the necessary skills to manage and implement change (Salem 2008; Cornelissen 2014). According to Bevan (2011), leaders should be guided, trained and equipped at every level in order for them to display consistent commitment to change. They should facilitate an effective two-way flow of information, be aware of issues and questions and provide timely responses. Cornelissen (2014) suggests the use of communication guidelines to integrate the work processes of communication practitioners. He further indicates that providing professional training may increase communication practitioners' commitment to the organization. Skills in the area of communication, writing, speaking, listening, meeting and negotiating are essential to obtain effective results and can be cost-efficient to organizations (Palmer et al. 2009). Ben et al. (2014) caution that a more differentiated change strategy, in terms of incremental and transformative change can be very costly to the organization.

In summary, it is paramount that the message of change should be relayed to all the parties concerned and involved in the process of change. It emerges that not only should the message be relayed but also people should be involved and their input should be asked for before implementing the proposed changes. It is important for the successful implementation of the change process to be clear in the communication and make it very clear to employees that their inputs and ideas are valued. The communication strategy of the organization must be well defined according to its needs and executed by trained staff in a manner that is comfortable to all employees of the organization.

METHODOLOGY

A case study method was used in this paper. The authors used the mixed method research design for this purpose, and hence, both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used. Rule and John (2011) advise case study researchers to use more than one data collection method, quantitative and qualitative, for triangulation purposes. Bergman (2008: 1) describes mixed method research as the "combination of at least one qualitative and at least one quantitative component in a single research project or program..."

For the quantitative research to be performed in this study, simple random sampling was done amongst employees of MIM Ltd. of different age groups, that is, probability sampling methods were used. For the qualitative research, the researchers made use of the non-probability sampling technique and did purposive sampling. Data was collected through qualitative and quantitative research methods, using a questionnaire, as quantitative and interviews as qualitative data collection tools. A questionnaire with twenty-one questions was developed and distributed to employees of MIM Ltd. for data collection. The researchers conducted interviews with executive managers within MIM Ltd. to gather information around their perceptions of change and also what their experiences are around the communication of change in a diverse workplace. The collected research data, for the questionnaire, was analyzed by use of the statistical package for social science (SPSS) to generate descriptive results. The researchers captured the results of the questionnaires in a Microsoft Excel file in order to transform answers to being numbers. After the questionnaire answers were transformed into numbers, a SPSS file was compiled to assist the researchers in analyzing the research data. The Chi-square test was used to determine significant statistical differences. From this point the data was combined in crosstabs to determine the correlation. The interview schedule consisted of five questions, which were asked to the interviewees. The questions asked in the interview were structured to provide answers to the research objectives and questions of this study. The interviews with eight executive managers of the ITS division were semi-structured and conducted face-to-face with interviewees. The researchers used a Dictaphone to record the content of the interviews, with the permission of the interviewees, during the interviews. Data collected during the interviews was analyzed qualitatively.

RESULTS

The relevant research question was, *do the positions of employees influence their perception of change and how change is communicated to them?*

Position of Participants in the Organization

The relevant research question was, *do the positions of employees influence their percep-*

tion of change and how change is communicated to them? Table 1 shows the responses with regards to the respondents' positions in the organization. Seventy-eight of the 80 respondents responded to question three of the questionnaire and two people did not answer this question. Of the 78 respondents, six percent have a position in the unskilled labor category, fifty-one percent in the skilled labor category, twenty-five percent are from junior management and fifteen percent from middle management. The respondents to the questionnaire hold different positions within the organization, which means that this is a diverse group of people.

Employees in Different Positions' Perception of Change Communication

Table 1 shows how employees in different positions in the organization perceive change to be communicated verbally. The table shows that sixty percent of the respondents agree that change is communicated verbally in their organization. The unskilled labor group has twenty percent that does not agree to change being communicated verbally, whilst eighty percent answered yes to the question. Of the skilled labor group, forty-one percent indicated change is not communicated verbally, but fifty-nine percent indicated the opposite. Contrary to the skilled labor group, forty-five percent of the junior management group said change is not communicated verbally, but fifty-five percent of the same group responded that change is indeed communicated verbally to employees. The last group of respondents came from the middle management group, of which thirty-three percent answered 'no' and sixty-seven percent answered 'yes' to the question on whether change is communicated verbally in the organization.

Table 6 shows the contrast in responses with only thirty-two percent of the respondents indicating change is not communicated by means of auditorium sessions, whilst sixty-eight percent indicated that auditorium sessions are indeed used to communicate change. A significant difference in responses can be seen in the junior management group of respondents where only ten percent answered 'no' to the question compared to the ninety percent who indicated change is communicated by means of auditori-

Table 1: Position in the organisation

		<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Valid percent</i>	<i>Cumulative percent</i>
<i>Valid</i>	Unskilled labour	5	6.3	6.4	6.4
	Skilled labour	41	51.3	52.6	59.0
	Junior management	20	25.0	25.6	84.6
	Middle management	12	15.0	15.4	100.0
	Total	78	97.5	100.0	
<i>Missing</i>	System	2	2.5		
	Total	80	100.0		

Source: Field work

Table 2: Change communicated by means of auditorium sessions

		<i>Position in company</i>				<i>Total</i>
		<i>Unskilled labour</i>	<i>Skilled labour</i>	<i>Junior management</i>	<i>Middle management</i>	
<i>Change is communicated by means of: Auditorium Sessions</i>	Yes	2	24	18	9	53
	No	3	17	2	3	25
	Total	5	41	20	12	78

Source: Field work

Table 3: Summary of research findings

<i>Research objectives</i>	<i>Summary from questionnaire</i>	<i>Summary from interviews</i>
Describe how employees in different positions perceive change and the different ways in which change is communicated to them.	• Change communication perceived to take place verbally, e-mail and auditorium sessions. • Respondents in all positions prefer verbal communication and to attend sessions. • Change is not really communicated by use of newsletters. • Individual discussions or small workshops are required on a more regular basis.	• There is definitely a difference in how change communication is done to people in different positions in the organisation. • Communication to employees in higher positions is normally at a strategic level. • Communication on change to employees in lower positions is more on an operational level.

Table 4: Position in the organisation

	<i>Position in company</i>				<i>Total</i>
	<i>Unskilled labour</i>	<i>Skilled labour</i>	<i>Junior management</i>	<i>Middle management</i>	
Total Percentage	5	41	20	12	78

Source: Field work

um sessions in the organization. The skilled labor group was divided with forty-one percent answering 'no' and fifty-nine percent answering 'yes' to the question of change being communicated in auditorium sessions. Twenty-five

percent of the middle management group said change is not communicated by means of auditorium sessions, whilst seventy-five percent of the same group said change is communicated by means of auditorium sessions. Of the un-

Table 5: Verbal communication of change

		<i>Position in company</i>				<i>Total</i>
		<i>Unskilled labour</i>	<i>Skilled labour</i>	<i>Junior management</i>	<i>Middle management</i>	
<i>Change is Communicated Verbally</i>	Yes	4	24	12	8	48
	No	1	17	8	4	30
	Total	5	41	20	12	78

Source: Field work

Table 6: Verbal communication of change

		<i>Change is communicated by means of: Auditorium Sessions</i>			
		<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Valid percent</i>	<i>Cumulative percent</i>
<i>Valid</i>	Yes	55	68.8	68.8	68.8
	No	25	31.3	31.3	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field work

skilled labor group, forty percent indicated change is communicated by auditorium sessions and sixty percent indicated change is not communicated by means of auditorium sessions. The researcher concludes that people in higher positions in the organization are more inclined to attending auditorium sessions, hence knowing that change is communicated during these sessions. It seems that employees in the unskilled labor group do not attend auditorium sessions or may not understand what is being communicated if they do attend (Tables 2, 3 4 and 5).

DISCUSSION

Respondents in different positions in the organization have different perceptions about how change is communicated in MIM Ltd. They also have diverse preferences of how change should be communicated in the organization. From the results it is evident that respondents in all positions prefer verbal communication and to attend sessions, where there is personal contact with the change communicator and they can discuss matters. As argued by Dawson and McLean (2013), the personal contact and storytelling holds the power to get the buy-in of employees and helps eliminate possible resistance. The same respondents, in all positions, do not prefer to read about change in newsletters. Generally, the respondents to the questionnaire feel

they receive regular feedback on change in the organization and they understand change communication, but they also ask questions to clarify unclear matters to themselves. The overall results shows respondents are in favor of changes and feel that change can be to the advantage of the organization and the employees of MIM Ltd. The conclusion of the researchers are that there must be feedback given in the organization, as there are respondents who agreed with the statement, and hence the respondents who did not agree must have missed the feedback sessions or did not read the emails or newsletters on change. This can be seen as non-participation in the change processes, which is a form of resistance to change (Erwin and Garman 2009). The organization must be alert to train or provide the necessary change communication training to managers or change communication practitioners, to ensure that change is communicated successfully. Cornelissen (2014) highlights professional training as an important contributor to the success of change projects and increased loyalty of staff of the organization.

CONCLUSION

The respondents in different positions, unskilled labor to middle management, prefer to receive change communication verbally and by attending auditorium sessions, and do not pre-

fer the use of newsletters and emails. The results from respondents in different age groups show that they prefer verbal communication of change and the use of emails, rather than auditorium sessions and newsletters. The results of the questionnaire showed that employees from all positions in the organization prefer verbal and email communication, to auditorium sessions and the use of newsletters. This result can be further broken down and shows that eighty percent of the respondents in unskilled labor positions prefer verbal change communication, sixty-one percent of the respondents in skilled labor positions indicated they prefer change to be communicated verbally, sixty percent of the respondents in junior management positions showed prefer verbal change communication and eighty-three percent of the respondents in middle management positions prefer verbal communication of change. The researcher concludes that change is generally communicated in the same format to all employees. It is up to the individual managers to ensure that the change message is understood by all employees in all positions in the organization.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on deductions made from the results of the study and personal observations in the organization, the researcher makes the following recommendations to improve the communication of change in the workplace:

- Involving employees, management and shareholders from the start of the change process helps in not having feelings of exclusion. Involving all stakeholders, assist the organizational management to have a view of all the perspectives existing and align these multiple perspectives.
- The information on change should also be readily available to employees to refer back to and not be in a state of “not knowing”.
- The organization must ensure that proper support structures or services are in place when communicating big changes, such as a merger. Employees are faced with extreme emotions influenced by fear, insecurity, stress and anxiety and should therefore know the organization have support available for them.
- The change communication strategy of the organization must include providing em-

ployees with explanations or definitions of complex change terms and concepts used during change communication sessions or documentation, for example a shortened glossary.

Implications and Suggestions for Further Research

The results of the study will assist managers within organizations to realize the extent to which communication contributes to the successful implementation of change in the workplace and specifically their organization. The management of organizations has an opportunity to learn from the results of this study. This study contributes to the body of knowledge and further studies on change management and communication. This research will contribute to the academic knowledge and research in the change management and change communication fields.

Further studies on this phenomenon will be required as the organizational environments are ever changing and new research is always welcomed in the academia. Further studies in the field of change management and communication can include factors such as age. The subject of change communication is broad and can be expanded on in further detail.

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