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In a dynamic marketplace, change is inevitable for long-term organizational sustainability. When approached proactively, successful organizational change can serve as an asset, producing creative industry leaders and distinct competitive advantages. However, for managers and change champions, it is disheartening to discover that more than 70% of change programs fail.1 With such a daunting statistic in mind, change management is commonly viewed as a difficult endeavor that often mitigates the positive value of organizational change.

To contribute to a growing body of change management and communication understanding, our team conducted research with a specific focus on employees’ attitudinal and behavioral reactions to change endeavors. We effectively identified two key factors that merit managerial attention in the context of change management: communication climate and organizational identification.

Defining Communication Climate and Organizational Identification

A sound communication climate and robust organizational identification among employees can increase the probability that your organization succeeds in its change initiatives, allowing you to remain among the 30% of successful change programs. Communication climate is formally defined as “the perception of employees with regard to the quality of the mutual relations and the communication in an organization.”2,3 These perceptions are influenced by the quality and amount of workplace communication employees perceive.4,5,6 Second, organizational identification references the degree to which employees define themselves by the characteristics they attribute to their organizations.7,8 When employees’ organizational identification is high, they are likely to engage in positive behaviors that support the interests of their organization, which also serves to “maintain their positive self-concept derived from their organizational membership.”9
Our Research and Findings

Our research team attained survey-based research responses from over 1,000 employees of firms of varying industries, all of which are currently undergoing a significant organizational change endeavor (or have in the past two years). Utilizing this data, our team tested seven hypotheses and produced seven statistically significant results in support of our hypotheses.

First, past research demonstrates a clear connection between an employee’s affective (or emotional) commitment to their organization and ability to cope with organizational change. Grounded in this research, our first hypothesis sought to establish a connection between employees’ affective commitment to change and their tangible behavioral support for change. This behavioral support included actions such as working additional hours to help champion change and advocating the change’s merit to their friends and colleagues. Analysis verified this relationship, affirming that employees who are committed to the value and beneficial outcomes of organizational change were also more likely to support the change initiative with their behavioral actions.

Next, we assessed the effect of a sound communication climate on employees’ affective commitment to and behavioral support for change. Particularly, our second and third hypotheses proposed that employees would offer their commitment and support in exchange for an open, honest, reciprocal, and engaging communication climate. Empirical evidence suggests a communication climate defined by openness in communication and employee engagement in the change decision-making process will foster both affective commitment to and behavioral support for the organizational change. Ultimately, this open climate assures legitimacy and encourages positivity, which work together to increase the likelihood that change endeavors are successful.

Further, existing research indicates open, trusting candor facilitates information flow, and engaging employees in the change management process creates a sense of belonging and ownership during the change process. Thus, our fourth hypothesis proposed communication climate positively influences employee organizational identification. As we hypothesized, evidence strongly suggests that a strong communication climate in an organization creates employee sense of belonging and strong ties to the organization.

Our fifth and sixth hypotheses proposed that organizational identification positively influences employee affective commitment to and behavioral support for change. Our research offers strong support for this claim—specifically, that when employees feel identification with and belonging to the organization, they are likely to believe in the value of organizational change and offer support for change endeavors.

Finally, our team recognized the positive feedback relationship between communication climate and organizational identification. We discovered that, when faced with an open and empowering environment, employees are more likely to strongly identify with their organization, which elicits
further commitment and cooperation. This finding suggests that organizational identification acts as a partial mediator in explaining how communication climate impacts employees to drive their support for change.

**Fostering an Open Communication Climate and Improving Organizational Identification**

Our study results support an open and participative communication climate that builds organizational identification, which positively influences employee affective commitment to and behavioral support for change. But how do managers foster such an environment? The most important consideration is recognizing that employees are active participants in the change process—they are more than passive recipients. Thus, managers should proactively consider emotional and process disruptions employees might experience when faced with change. Suggestions are to communicate change carefully and attempt to reduce any anxiety or uncertainty brought on by change. Moreover, workplace communication must be open and transparent; employees must feel like their voices are being heard; and employees need ample opportunity to freely voice potential concerns without fear of facing repercussions. Further, managers must offer candor in all interactions, which will promote sincere, credible, and consistent communication across vertical and horizontal organizational silos. Specifically, this open environment can be fostered with town hall meetings, skip-level meetings, employee ambassador programs, open-door policies, and culture committees. Finally, although organizational identification will be strengthened with these positive investments in communication climate, employee identification can be further enhanced by using we/us language, commonality, community, and togetherness.

**Real Estate Implications**

It is no surprise that the success of a real estate brokerage and its agents are vulnerable to fluctuations in the macroeconomy and current geopolitical climate at large. Organizational success amidst unprecedented, trying times is dependent upon change and adaptation. Our research indicates that proactively fostering an open communication climate and robust organizational identification will enhance employees’ affective and behavioral responses to change. Then, when change lies before your organization, employees will trust management and support the endeavor, both affectively and behaviorally.
To cultivate a sound communication climate and strong organizational identification, our research recommends action steps that advocate for a stakeholder approach. Nurturing relationships with employee stakeholders is essential for developing long-term, engaged, and dedicated relationships and success. Second, a sound communication climate creates an open, trusting, collaborative, and participative atmosphere. This environment promotes creativity, critical thinking, and teamwork—characteristics that are all vital to a real estate agent’s success. Finally, an open and empowering environment allows workplace relationships to flourish, enhancing overall employee optimism, which is outwardly reflected in interactions with potential clients. Therefore, the answer is clear—communication climate and organizational identification serve as universal keys to successful organizational change, keys that open doors throughout any change endeavor, regardless of the form in which change presents itself.

**Recommended Reading**


**References**


About the Authors

**Marlene Neill, PhD, APR, Fellow PRSA**
**Assistant Professor and Graduate Program Director, Baylor University**

Dr. Marlene Neill’s (PhD – The University of Texas at Austin) research interests include ethics in public relations, public relations management, integrated communication, ethics in advertising, and internal/employee communication. Her research has appeared in leading academic journals including *Corporate Communications: An Internal Journal, Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising, Public Relations Journal, Journal of Media Ethics, and Public Relations Review*, among others. Dr. Neill has also co-authored *PR Women with Influence: Breaking through the Ethical and Leadership Challenges and Public Relations Ethics: Senior PR Pros Tell Us How to Speak Up and Keep Your Job*. Dr. Neill is significantly involved in the prestigious Public Relations Society of America, previously serving as the chair for the Southwest District, on the PRSA Nominating Committee, and as the faculty adviser for the Baylor University PRSSA chapter. Prior to her academic career, Dr. Neill worked in nonprofit and government public relations.

**Linjuan Rita Men, PhD, APR**
**Associate Professor, Department of Public Relations, University of Florida**

Dr. Men’s (PhD – University of Miami) research interests include internal communication, leadership communication, measurement and evaluation, relationship/reputation management, emerging technologies, and entrepreneurial communications. Her research has appeared in leading academic journals including *Communication Research, New Media and Society, Journal*
of Public Relations Research, Public Relations Review, Corporate Communications: An Internal Journal, and Management Communication Quarterly, among others. Further, Dr. Men is the lead author of Strategic Communications for Startups and Entrepreneurs in China. Dr. Men received the 2010 Ketchum Excellence in Public Relations Research Award, is a three-time Arthur W. Page Legacy Scholar, and has received over 20 national and international top paper and research awards, among many other academic accolades. Prior to her academic career, Dr. Men worked as the Marketing Communications Specialist at Alibaba Group in China and as a Research Analyst at Ketchum.

Cen April Yue, PhD Candidate
Graduate Instructor and Student Researcher, University of Florida
Ms. Yue’s (PhD Candidate – University of Florida) research interests include internal public relations, leadership communication, organizational change management, and relationship management. Her research has appeared in leading academic journals including Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, Internal Journal of Business Communication, Public Relations Review, Public Relations Journal, and Corporate Communications: An Internal Journal, among others. Ms. Yue has received several student awards for her research reports, including the Betsy Plank Graduate Research Paper Award, the Brigham Young University Top Ethics Paper Award, and the University of Miami School of Communication Top Student Paper Award.