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Why Saying “Thank You” Is Better than “Sorry”

Yanfen You, PhD, Xiaojing Yang, PhD, Lili Wang, PhD, and Xiaoyan Deng, PhD

Aligning Motivation for a Value-Based Sales Strategy

Ryan Mullins, PhD, Bulent Menguc, PhD, and Nikolaos G. Panagopoulos, PhD

How to Communicate During Organizational Change

Linjuan Rita Men, PhD, APR, Marlene Neill, PhD, APR, and Cen April Yue, PhD

Consumer-to-Brand Sharing: Will Your Clients Share the Bad News?

Chris Hydock, PhD, Zoey Chen, PhD, and Kurt Carlson, PhD

Advertising in 360 Degrees

Yang Feng, PhD, Quan Xie, PhD, and Chen Lou, PhD

INSIDER: Virtual Selling: A Quick-Start Guide

Kayla Wilson, MBA

INSIDER: The Catalyst: How to Change Anyone’s Mind

Kristen Koehler, MBA Candidate



Baylor University

HANKAMER SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

How to Communicate During Organizational Change

Linjuan Rita Men, PhD, APR, Marlene Neill, PhD, APR, and Cen April Yue, PhD

Researchers often attribute unsuccessful organizational change initiatives to poor internal communication.¹ Our research focuses on analyzing the importance of symmetrical internal communication during the organization change process. Specifically, we examine how two-way, open, and responsive communication between managers and their employees can have an impact on employee engagement, their commitment to change, and their behavioral support for

proposed change. In real estate, it is important to integrate employee-centered, symmetrical communication into change management in order to yield employees who are engaged in the change process. Brokers and team leaders should initiate dialogue and listen to their employees to reach mutual agreements and build relationships² that can, in turn, facilitate the change process.



Leveraging Symmetrical Communication

As stated previously, poor internal communication is a leading factor causing organizational change to fail.¹ Defining effective internal communication, especially in the context of organizational change, is vitally important for the success of an organization. Our research explores the strategic importance of symmetrical communication throughout the change process.

Effective symmetrical communication is a strategy that organizations can leverage to implement successful change management. Symmetrical communication occurs when managers and employees engage in meaningful two-way communication. Managers and employees interact and listen to one another in a manner that builds understanding and relationships.² In order for symmetrical communication to be successful there must be trust, openness, reciprocity, feedback, and negotiation delivered in an employee-centered style by managers.³ Organizations that utilize symmetrical communication in their day-to-day interactions create channels of effective communication, which can, in turn, greatly benefit change implementation.

During the change management process, organizations should foster two-way, open, and responsive communication that makes employees feel as if their interests and concerns are being addressed. Examples of such communication between managers and employees include using both formal channels, such as committee meetings and town halls, as well as informal channels, such as breakfasts, coffee, and lunch meetings.⁴ When utilized effectively, these channels can

mutually benefit employees and managers. Employees can ask questions to reduce uncertainty regarding the change process, and managers can address concerns in a timely manner to reach a mutual understanding.⁴ Overall, symmetrical internal communication between managers and employees leads to employees who facilitate and champion successful organizational change implementation.

Employee Engagement

Numerous studies have found that employee engagement has a substantial impact on organizational success.⁵ Our research digs deeper into the relationship between employee engagement and organizational success to include the impact employee engagement has on organizational change implementation.

Engaged employees have been characterized as people who have high levels of energy, are willing to invest effort into their work, and are persistent in overcoming difficult situations.⁶ Engaged employees are attentive and immersed in their work environment. Our research showed that when employees are engaged with their organization physically, cognitively, and emotionally, they tend to not only commit to change but display behaviors that support the change throughout the change management process. Employees who are engaged are more likely to appreciate and see the additional value the change can add than less engaged employees. Particularly, engaged employees are more willing to champion the change both inside and outside of the organization.

Increasing employee engagement can occur during the change management process via symmetrical communication between managers and employees. Specifically, during the change management process, employee concerns should be legitimized, and employees should be encouraged to participate in organizational processes. Engaged employees have a greater willingness to become facilitators for change implementation and overall move an organization toward its change goals.

Real Estate Implications

The impact of symmetrical communication on employee engagement and organizational change outcomes can be applied to real estate professionals. Firms often have to go through change in order to stay current. Therefore, real estate brokers and team leaders can use two-way communication, such as agent meetings over coffee, lunch with employees, or initiating a town hall meeting with agents and support staff, to increase the success of the organization's change management process. The change management process is one that often requires vast amounts of effort; yet symmetrical internal communication between managers and employees that emphasizes openness, responsiveness, participation and relationships can provide practical ways to increase employee engagement regarding the change process. The majority of organizational

change fails;¹ however, actively pursuing two-way communication with employees can prove to be a powerful tool a firm can use to improve organizational change outcomes.

Recommended Reading

Men, Linjuan Rita, Marlene Neill, and Cen April Yue (2020), “Examining the Effects of Symmetrical Internal Communication and Employee Engagement on Organizational Change Outcomes,” *Public Relations Journal*, 13(4).

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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*, and *Management Communication Quarterly*, among others. Further, Dr. Men is the lead author of *Excellence in Internal Communication Management*, and *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

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