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Communicating Change: A Review and Critical Analysis of Programmatic and Participatory Implementation Approaches

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ABSTRACT *This work advances a stronger conceptual understanding of two broad, conceptual communicative treatments for implementing change: programmatic and participatory. These theoretical approaches are elucidated respectively through established communication models, activities, and strategies advanced by previous scholarship within the business and communication disciplines. Additionally, conclusions are drawn about the presupposed limitations and benefits of using these change implementation approaches in applied organizational settings. This article concludes with potential strategies for advancing research in this area.*

KEY WORDS: Change, communication, programmatic, participatory, implementation

Implementation is perhaps the most critical phase of change (Armenakis *et al.*, 1993; Armenakis and Harris, 2002; By, 2005, 2007; Allen *et al.*, 2007; Lines, 2007; By *et al.*, 2008). As Real and Poole (2005) advise: ‘Without implementation, the most brilliant and potentially far-reaching innovation remains just that – potential. It is in the implementation that organizations perfect the promise of innovation. In implementation, organizations put ideas, designs, and visions to work’ (p. 64). Communication plays a critical role during the throes of the implementation phase; for, at its root, organizational change is a communicative challenge (Allen *et al.*, 2007). Organizations do not change through

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automation. Rather, change is implemented and sustained through human communication.

An extant body of research has sought to conceptualize the various approaches for communicating organizational change (for a full review, see Lewis and Seibold, 1998). Although insightful, such conceptualizations are often disparate, fraught with disagreement. To add simplification and clarification, this article synthesizes the general conceptual treatments of organizational change communication into two broad theoretical categories: programmatic and participatory. The programmatic approach emphasizes the transmission of monologic communication about organizational change in a top-down manner to generate stakeholder compliance and/or stimulate desired positive attitudes and beliefs about the planned change. Alternatively, the participatory approach leverages dialogic communication so as to involve most or all stakeholders through solicitation of their ideas and input about the change and the implementation process. However, while the following discusses the two implementation approaches of programmatic and participatory change independently, this is not to suggest that they are mutually exclusive. Indeed, a fusion of these approaches by implementers is possible. Still, they are set apart by their distinct and unique theoretical foundations. Therefore, autonomous examinations of these approaches are presented, allowing for individual critiques of their respective strengths and limitations as change implementation tools. Specifically this work will clarify the unique natures of these two implementation approaches by: (a) defining each communicative approach; (b) categorizing established communication models, activities, and strategies under each rubric; and (c) leveraging previous scholarship to draw some conclusions about the anticipated limitations and benefits associated with each implementation approach.

Programmatic Change Communication

The primary trait of programmatic approaches is that they are focused on 'telling and selling'. Such approaches emphasize the top-down dissemination of information to tell employees about the change and are delivered in such a way so as to sell them on why they should be committed to implementing it (Armenakis and Harris, 2002). A key component of programmatic approaches is the downward cascade of information about the change, such as the transmission of new policies/procedures, knowledge or facts about the change process, and directives for how the change should be implemented on the organization's frontlines. From this perspective, a high degree of fidelity is sought where the message sent is identical to the one received.

Implicit in these approaches is that implementers (who are the formal decision-makers or at least have an alliance with them) hold the power and that gaining stakeholders' compliance is of utmost importance. Programmed implementation 'assumes that implementation problems can be made tolerable, if not eliminated, by careful and explicit preprogramming of implementation procedures' (Bermann, 1980). The logic behind this perspective is that the 'right' message communicated using the 'right' approach may diminish or circumvent implementation challenges. To minimize employees' resistance, compliance is often sought

from organizational stakeholders who have a stake in the operational execution of the implementation of the planned change. From the implementers' perspective, compliance is perceived as essential to preventing obstacles and achieving the desired vision of successful change implementation (Armenakis and Harris, 2002).

Fairhurst (1993) describes programmatic-based change campaigns as 'planned, organized efforts to mold corporate images, manage issues, and articulate values' (p. 334). In this sense, programmatic approaches emphasize the cognitive aspects of change implementation efforts. That is, do employees comprehend and understand the essence of the organization leaders' vision? Further, these approaches emphasize the importance of employees perceiving the vision as being relevant, practical, and urgent to their job and immediate responsibilities. Information and knowledge are perceived as primary catalysts for diffusing innovation throughout organizations.

Communication Models

A number of communication models identified in the landscape of literature on organizational change fall under the programmatic rubric. Such models are often tagged with disparate names such as 'commander' (Bourgeois and Brodwin, 1984), 'edict' (Nutt, 1986, 1987), 'persuasion' (Nutt, 1986, 1987), and 'rule bound' (Marcus, 1988). However, these models share common characteristics. For instance, they utilize highly centralized, controlled, and prescribed communication approaches towards change implementation. Because these models presume change is most effective as a top-down approach, there is little to no organizational participation. Most, if not all, control is held by few decision-makers, usually at the top of the hierarchy. Further, little to no power or influence is held by frontline employees, even those who may have some expertise in the areas impacted by the change (e.g. subject-matter experts). When using these implementation models, organizational leaders explicitly essentially delegate what is to change and how that change process should occur.

Communication Activities

Communication activities classified under the programmatic umbrella include presentations; general information meetings; memos; newsletters; pamphlets/brochures; posted information (e.g. posters, signs, bulletin boards, charts, dashboards, scorecards, and so on); one-way media (e.g. websites, listservs, videos, and podcasts); and informal small group information meetings as well as word of mouth (interpersonal communication about change that informally trickles downward in the organization). A recent survey of 76 implementers found that two programmatic channels – small informal discussions and general information meetings – were the most frequently used vehicles for disseminating information during organizational change (Lewis, 1999).

These types of programmatic communication activities are typically used to disseminate information in a one-way fashion – a linear transmission from source to receiver. This linear transmission creates a sense of monologic organizational

communication where messages are sent downward to lower echelons, but rarely, if ever, upward. The objective of using programmatic activities is not to solicit input, but, rather, to convince the target population to comply with the planned change and to communicate what 'right' looks like; that is, the implementers' (leaders') desired vision for the change.

Although programmatic activities are likely to have a significant impact on planned change efforts, a scant amount of research has examined their influence over the implementation process. Curiously, while programmatic approaches are the most frequently used activities in change implementation efforts (when compared with participatory approaches), they make up the smallest category of extant literature on implementation communication strategies.

Communication Strategies

Because the success of programmatic implementation approaches rests on what change messages are communicated, the strategy of 'framing' (Fairhurst, 1993; Fairhurst *et al.*, 1997) demonstrates particular relevance. This technique emphasizes the use of linguistics and the management of meaning to successfully diffuse change downward in organizations where managers sell and spread the word of change by providing information to help their employees make sense of the organizational leaders' vision for the change.

Another strategy relevant to the success of programmatic implementation approaches involves targeting the right audience to receive the carefully crafted messages about the planned change. To this end, implementers may choose to use an 'equal dissemination' (Lewis *et al.*, 2001) strategy by canvassing all levels of an organization, exhibiting a type of blanket-style strategy to disseminate updated and detailed information on all matters about the planned change throughout the entire process. Previous research has found that implementers use this strategy to minimize complaints from employees who decry, post-implementation, that they did not receive enough information about the change. Conversely, implementers may choose to use the 'need to know' strategy, which reflects a selective communication philosophy and audience analysis technique whereby messages are carefully chosen, edited, and adapted to appeal to the unique backgrounds and interests of diverse stakeholders. Since different stakeholders are likely to have different needs, implementers can highlight certain elements of change that are most salient and persuasive for each group. In other words, implementers can 'frame' how stakeholders perceive planned change. This strategy may be used to forestall some critics' objections and/or to avoid overburdening employees with unnecessary information about the change process.

Discussion of Anticipated Limitations

While implementers most commonly use programmatic approaches to bring about planned organizational change (Nutt, 1986; Lewis, 1999), they are deemed less effective by implementers (Nutt, 1987) and stakeholders (Lewis, 2006) than participatory approaches. There are two core limitations associated with using programmatic implementation approaches. First, organizational change is not a

one-way communication process; yet, programmatic approaches often perpetuate the obsolete model of conduit-like communication, suggesting that a message sent is identical to the one received (Shannon and Weaver, 1949). This one-way model has long been refuted by communication scholars who have underscored its neglect of negotiated meaning construction (Berger and Luckman, 1966). Further, downward dispersals of change information can foster monologic communication, limiting interaction and participation between organizational levels (e.g. between executives and frontline employees). Additionally, programmatic communication messages can emphasize conformance over performance (By, 2007).

Second, programmatic approaches may cause an avalanche or abundance of unnecessary communication, thus overwhelming participants. Also, because traditional programmatic approaches typically disseminate information about change in a downward didactic manner they may disengage stakeholders and cause negative effects for the change, the implementation attempt, and potentially the organization itself. In this vein, traditional programmatic approaches do not likely build consensus or foster organizational engagement, since employees' experiences with and reactions to the planned change are often overlooked. Depending on the type of planned change and the way the information is disseminated (i.e. the source and channel), monologic efforts may backfire by fostering disengagement among employees who may resist the planned change and even become resentful of the change and the organization's leaders. As a result, employees may distance themselves from the organization by expressing dissent or exiting the organization altogether (i.e. disidentification). Because of these factors, it is questionable whether programmatic approaches actually help employees learn how to implement long-term organizational change or whether they simply elicit short-term compliance. Also, excessive downward communication may cause stakeholders to become flooded with information which may potentially lead to greater anxiety, confusion, uncertainty, and resistance about the organizational change effort.

Discussion of Anticipated Benefits

Several benefits are often attributed to programmatic implementation approaches. First, previous research has found that disseminating formal, quality information from organizational leadership is an important variable during planned change efforts. Fidler and Johnson (1984) maintain that employees' ultimate acceptance of an innovation 'often rests on the extent to which communication can act to reduce uncertainty by ameliorating such factors as risk and complexity' (p. 704). Communication about change from organizational leaders can decrease uncertainty and increase understanding about the change (Armenakis *et al.*, 1993; Lewis and Seibold, 1996; Washington and Hacker, 2005; Allen *et al.*, 2007), help reduce anxiety about change (Miller and Monge, 1986; Smeltzer, 1991; Washington and Hacker, 2005), decrease negative feelings about the change effort, including cynical expectations that the initiative will fail (Washington and Hacker, 2005), and lower resistance while increasing participants' willingness to implement the planned change (Miller *et al.*, 1994; Washington and Hacker, 2005; Lewis,

2006). In a related vein, Covin and Kilmann (1990) amassed 900 major issues that employees perceived impacted the success or failure of large-scale transformation efforts. These scholars found that the 'failure to share information or to inform people adequately of what changes are necessary and why they are necessary were viewed as having a highly negative impact' (p. 239).

A second benefit of programmatic implementation approaches is that they can be used to provide the perception of fair dissemination of information; that is, they can be used to create the perception that quality information was disseminated on all organizational echelons and that information was not withheld because of an employee's role or status. This is likely to foster perceptions of organizational justice and fairness as well as candour and openness from the vantage point of leaders and, possibly, employees.

Third, programmatic approaches have the appeal of high communication efficiency. That is, they can be relatively quick and inexpensive to produce and disseminate throughout an organization.

Participatory Change Communication

Curiously, participatory approaches make up the largest category of extant research, even though they are used less frequently than programmatic approaches (Lewis, 2006). In contrast to programmatic efforts, participatory approaches invite input, using involving and empowering methods to gain the insights of various stakeholders to shape the change programme and not merely to 'receive it'. Participatory approaches involve stakeholders in the change process by soliciting their input (e.g. perceptions, suggestions, proposals, and appraisals) about the change (Lines, 2007). Implementers may opt to solicit input from stakeholders during the development, decision-making processes, and/or implementation of organizational change using communication-based strategies. Participatory approaches are grounded in the basic assumption that employees should be active participants in the change process. This approach is not necessarily about the basic act of participation, but is about whether employees, in the end, have a voice during planned organizational change. The logic driving this approach is employees' participation being perceived as the catalyst for implementing sustained organizational change (Lines, 2004).

The participatory approach necessitates more dialogic communication tactics whereby input is gathered and used to shape the change, the organization, and the constituents (users/stakeholders). The objective is to build consensus and galvanize support for the change as well as to allow affected stakeholders to make improvements they feel are needed to ensure the successful implementation of the change. Thus, instead of simply hearing about change from the top, stakeholders are brought into the folds of change and invited to actively participate in the shaping, construction, and implementation of organizational change.

Participatory change processes are often grounded in the theoretical traditions of democratic workspaces. In these cultures there is a delayering of formal organizational structures – that is, erosions of traditional top-down hierarchies and attritions of job-status. In such environments, employees, despite their organizational title or role, come 'to expect involvement in decisions about organizational

change' (Piderit, 2000). More specifically, in a democratic workplace, change 'becomes a sweeping imperative that the whole organization is talking about and presumably doing . . . all employees are being asked to see themselves as entrepreneurs at the level of their jobs' (Zorn *et al.*, 1999).

Communication Models

Several models advanced by previous organizational change scholarship are categorized under the participatory umbrella. These participatory models use divergent labels, including: 'participation' (Nutt, 1986, 1987, 1989, 2002), 'intervention' (Nutt, 1986, 1987), 'autonomous' (Marcus, 1988), 'adaptive' (Bermann, 1980), and 'crescive' (Bourgeois and Brodwin, 1984). Still, these models exhibit several core similarities. Most notably, they are characterized by varying levels of involvement and input from stakeholders from myriad organizational levels – participation is not reserved for individuals in the company's upper echelons. Further, these models do not treat change as a static event. Rather, change is perceived as a dynamic process which is deemed most effective when employees flex and adapt to events and decisions as they unfold. As such, decisions are often made autonomously by an organization's lower echelons on how (and sometimes if) to implement the change. In other cases, the bottom, middle, and/or top layers of an organization collaborate on how to best implement change.

Communication Activities

Examples of participatory communication activities include: open forums (large formal meetings or smaller informal ones where feedback is given and ideas are exchanged); working groups (problem-solving teams, ad hoc groups, committees, councils, and task forces); informal conversations (checking in with line supervisors or lower level employees for on-the-spot feedback regarding change efforts and/or implementation processes); focus groups and brainstorming sessions (live or electronic); morale, attitude, and opinion surveys; formal assessments and evaluations; and unsolicited complaints or praise (verbal or written feedback; suggestion boxes).

The core objective of participatory communication activities is to build consensus among relevant stakeholders by fostering their involvement and soliciting their ideas and input. As evidenced by the preceding list of activities, implementers can use multiple channels with which to achieve this objective. The nature of these channels ranges from the very formal to the very informal. Input and feedback can be obtained via multiple communication channels, and verbal (large or small groups, interpersonal communication) and nonverbal (written) feedback. The multidirectional nature of participatory approaches offers the potential to create a sense of dialogic communication in organizations where change messages flow up, down, and sideways. Although seemingly versatile in nature, current research suggests that implementers typically do not use participatory communication activities to solicit input from staff. Those that are used are informal in nature, including casual discussions with employees, informally checking in

with staff supervisors, as well as receiving unsolicited complaints and praise about the change (Lewis, 1999).

Communication Strategies

As stakeholder involvement is at the heart of participatory approaches, previous research has pinpointed how audiences are selected to participate in the change process. First, an 'equal participation' strategy advocates the integration of two-way communication to disseminate information to all relevant stakeholders about the planned change, while simultaneously soliciting input from them (Lewis *et al.*, 2001). From this perspective, all stakeholders are perceived as having an important and equitable voice during the change implementation.

In the second communication strategy, 'quid pro quo', 'something of value is exchanged for the communicative access granted by implementers' (Lewis *et al.*, 2001). To put it a little differently, implementers extend a great deal of involvement and participation in the decision-making process to stakeholders who they perceive as having valuable commodities (e.g. money, expertise, veto/approval power, and resources). Implementers who leverage this communication strategy often see a direct proportional relationship between the value and vital nature of stakeholders' contributions and their allotted participation in the change process. Often, a perceived positive correlation exists between stakeholders' contributions and the amount of involvement and participation they are allotted. Such stakeholder participation may manifest itself in directing the nature, the scope, the direction, and, in some cases, the very existence of organizational change.

Discussion of Anticipated Limitations

Some limitations are inherent in participatory approaches. First, while traditional programmatic approaches can suffer from rigidity, lack of holistic engagement, and excessive top-down control, traditional participatory approaches can lead to significant ambiguity where the original intent of the change gets lost in the rush to involve too many actors. In a similar vein, some organizational stakeholders may prefer more explicit, parametered direction from the formal leadership team. Such direction-oriented individuals may grow weary of, and possibly frustrated with, the lack of focus and clear course of action and may, subsequently, evaluate the implementation process as inefficient and unsuccessful. To this end, it is possible that participatory approaches may incite some unintended consequences such as disengagement and other adverse feelings that at best stall, and at worst reverse progress towards the full implementation of organizational change.

Second, some participatory efforts may be perceived as insincere. Thinly veiled attempts at creating participation, such as solicitations that are executed for solely symbolic purposes (i.e. no sincere interest in employees' opinions or no follow-up on suggestions) can be quickly dubbed disingenuous and spawn distrust and resentment throughout the organization, potentially jeopardizing current as well as future change efforts. Employees take a personal risk and invest a great deal

when sharing their views on organizational change. Only genuine calls for participation that actually value stakeholders' input have the possibility of bringing about successful organizational change (Cotton, 1993). As Cheney *et al.* (2004) note, 'Attention to specific communicative practices (or lack thereof) will reveal whether claims by an organization to be democratic or to have meaningful employee participation are valid' (p. 224). Lewis (2006) established this link, finding a positive correlation between employees' perceptions that their input was valued and their evaluations that the implementation was 'successful'.

Third, participatory approaches often exhibit low communication efficiency; that is, they typically require a great deal of organizational resources. For instance, participatory approaches usually require employees to spend time away from work reviewing planned changes and providing feedback, often in meetings. A great deal of investment is also made by implementers who must listen to, compile, and sort through input, making agreed-upon alterations to the change implementation process, follow up with revisions to the involved parties, and repeat this intensive process until the desired level of consensus has been reached. In addition to being time consuming, soliciting participation and input from stakeholders can be a tedious task, complicated further by organizational politics.

Fourth, participatory approaches assume that most employees want to be involved and are intrinsically motivated to fully implement planned changes in the day-to-day operations of organizations. Some employees may dislike participating in the change process. This negative affect may hinder their involvement in change efforts and their evaluations of the change's successful implementation. This limitation may seem counter-intuitive to those implementers who feel obligated to solicit input and please everyone. Perhaps it is because of these limitations that participatory approaches are often viewed as 'nice to have' by implementers, while programmatic approaches tend to be the strategy of choice in bringing about planned change in organizations. This assumption is supported by empirical research. For example, Young and Post (1993) reported that organizations (even those identified as 'exemplary' by peer institutions) inconsistently solicit input from stakeholder groups. They noted, 'In some cases, top managers could enumerate the types of upward communication available, but lower level employees could not' (p. 36).

Discussion of Anticipated Benefits

Previous research has indicated that participatory approaches are likely to be perceived as more effective in implementing planned changes than programmatic approaches (Lines, 2004). This type of approach is often linked to several anticipated benefits.

First, participatory approaches can help stakeholders achieve several desired 'stakes', including giving them a seat at the table during conversations about change, greater accessibility to information, and a voice in decision-making discussions. In the context of planned change, the facilitation of employee participation and input has been predicted to be an important variable during planned transformation efforts (Cotton, 1993). Studies on this topic have typically found that facilitating participation among stakeholders is beneficial in minimizing resistance while enhancing motivation to implement planned change efforts

(Argote *et al.*, 1983; Nutt, 1987; Sagie *et al.*, 1990; Sagie and Koslowsky, 1994; Edmondson *et al.*, 2001; Lines, 2004), increasing accuracy in stakeholders' perceptions about the rationale behind change initiatives and related goals (Brown, 1991), enhancing overall satisfaction with the change initiative (Sagie and Koslowsky, 1994; Coyle-Shapiro, 1999), and reducing uncertainty while increasing a sense of control (Bordia *et al.*, 2004).

Second, on a more theoretical note, participatory change can enable leaders and their constituencies to socially construct the change together. Through participation, leaders and constituencies have the opportunity to collectively discuss their shared visions of the planned organizational change. This shared collusion or collaborative framing process can allow leaders to tap into the perceptions of the receivers of their change-based messages. In turn, employees have the opportunity to provide feedback on the direction of the organization as well as to discuss specific opportunities and challenges related to the change implementation (Lines, 2004; Ruben *et al.*, 2007). Such interactions may have the potential to create metaphoric organizational 'dinner tables' where ideas are exchanged across levels and realities are co-constructed, fostering employee commitment versus compliance. This dialectical process may help frame the context and rationale for organizational change, the negotiation of change-related behaviours, as well as shared-meanings of successful and unsuccessful change implementation.

Conclusion

Typically, organizational change is fraught with problems (Armenakis *et al.*, 1993; By, 2005, 2007). At their root, many of these problems are communicative in nature (Allen *et al.*, 2007). To overcome such problems, organizational practitioners are constantly in need of and rely on scholarship to aid them in selecting a communication approach for successful change implementation. This article serves as a preliminary step in addressing this need by synthesizing theoretical and research-based information about two core approaches for communicating change: programmatic and participatory. Although communication is crucial in the success or failure of an organization's change effort, little is known about these two implementation approaches. Therefore, this work sought to advance a stronger conceptual understanding of the two core treatments of change communication.

As evident from this work, a great deal still needs to be learned about these two communication approaches. For instance, we have a great deal more to learn about the efficacy of these communication approaches. Case studies, empirical research, and experimental studies are essential for providing normalized baseline data about the strengths and limitations of each framework. Further, it seems intuitive that different communication approaches would elicit different responses from different employees and in different change contexts. For example, do some employees respond more favourably to programmatic approaches than participatory ones – and vice versa? Are participatory approaches more effective than programmatic approaches with some types of changes and organizations, but not others? Are hybrid approaches more effective in some situations than homogenized approaches? Considering the prevalence of change in contemporary

organizational environments, these are extremely pressing questions worthy of further exploration. The need for such research is especially urgent given the high rate of failure of most change initiatives. Further, most organizations must frequently make vital changes to compete and survive in the global marketplace. Research-based information on effective change communication approaches will aid organizations in successfully implementing critically needed innovations.

In the final analysis, this article has prompted a theoretical discussion about the existence and efficacy of two core approaches for communicating change. Additional research, especially applied scholarship, can provide more complete pictures of the effectiveness of these communication approaches as practical tools for implementing successful organizational change.

Note

1. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2007 annual convention of the Association for Business Communication.

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