Communication Strategies for
Implementing Organizational Change

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Abstract

This work advances a stronger conceptual and empirical 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 communication and business disciplines. In addition, conclusions are drawn about the supposed limitations and benefits of using these change implementation approaches in applied settings. This article concludes with potential strategies for advancing for research in this arena.

Introduction

The implementation phase is perhaps the most critical stage of change. 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 throes of the implementation phase; for, at its root, organizational change is a communication problem. Organizations do not change through automation. Rather, change is implemented and sustained through human communication.

An extant body of research has attempted to conceptualize the various approaches for implementing organizational change (for a full review see, Lewis & Seibold, 1998). Yet, much of this literature is problematic. Although insightful, such conceptualizations are disparate and fraught with disagreement about the base approaches for implementing organizational change. This dissertation synthesizes the general conceptual and empirical treatments of organizational change implementation 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.

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 aims to advance a stronger conceptual and empirical understanding of these two treatments of change communication. While the following discusses the two implementation approaches of programmatic and participatory change independently, this is not to suggest that they are automatically mutually exclusive. A fusion of these approaches by implementers is indeed possible. Still, they are set apart by their internal logic or coherence (Lewis, Hamel, & Richardson, 2001). Therefore, autonomous examinations of these approaches will be presented. Separate examinations of these approaches will allow for theoretical critical analyses of each of their unique strengths and limitations on both theoretical and practical levels. Specifically this work seeks to 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 characteristic 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 delivered in such a way so as to "sell" them on why they should be committed to implementing it. As Lewis (1999) notes, a key component of programmatic approaches is "the dissemination of information, which concerns the downward dispersal of knowledge, ideas, training, facts, and requests or directives for action concerning the change" (p. 48). 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 the compliance of stakeholders 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, p. 205). The logic behind this perspective is that the "right" message communicated using the "right" approach can diminish or circumvent implementation challenges including employees' resistance. To this end, 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 achieving their vision of successful change implementation.

Fairhurst (1993) describes programmatic internal 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 & Brodwin, 1984),*"edict"* (Nutt, 1986, 1987), *"persuasion,"* (Nutt, 1986, 1987), and *"rule bound"* (Marcus, 1988). However, such models share some basic core characteristics. For instance, such models utilize highly centralized, controlled, and prescribed communication approaches toward change implementation. That is, because these models presume change is most effective as a top-down approach, there is little to no organizational participation. Most or all control is held by a few decision-markers, usually at the top of an organization's hierarchy. Further, little to no power or influence is held by the employees or those who may have some expertise in the areas being changed (e.g., subject matter experts). When using these implementation models, organizational leaders explicitly articulate central direction for what is to be changed and how it will be changed vis-à-vis the delegation of highly programmed tasks.

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 the two most commonly used channels to disseminate information during organizational change were small informal discussions and general information meetings (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 to participatory approaches), they make up the smallest category of the literature that exists on implementation communication strategies (Lewis, 1999).

Communication Strategies

Because the "success" of programmatic implementation approaches rests on what change messages are communicated, the communication strategy of *"framing"* (Fairhurst, 1993; Fairhurst, Jordan, & Neuwirth, 1997) demonstrates particular relevance. This strategy 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 in which to "receive" the carefully crafted messages about the planned change. To this end, implementers may choose to use the *"equal dissemination"* (Lewis, Hamel, & Richardson, 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 (Lewis, Hamel, & Richardson, 2001, p. 23).

Anticipated Limitations

While implementers most commonly use programmatic approaches to bring about planned organizational change (Lewis, 1999, 2006; Nutt, 1986, 1987), they are

deemed less effective by implementers (Nutt, 1987) and stakeholders (Lewis, 2006) than participatory approaches.

Two core limitations are 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 & Weaver, 1949). This one-way model has long been refuted by communication scholars who have underscored its neglect of negotiated meaning construction (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Further, the downward dispersal of information can also create monologic communication about change, thus limiting the level of interaction and participation between levels of an organization (e.g., between organizational leaders and employees, as well as among employees themselves).

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 are not likely to build consensus nor foster organizational engagement from employees since their 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 simply elicit short-term compliance. Also, excessive dissemination may cause stakeholders to become flooded with information which may potentially lead to greater anxiety, confusion, uncertainty, and resistance about the organizational change effort.

Anticipated Benefits

Several benefits are associated with programmatic implementation approaches. First, previous research has found that the dissemination of formal, quality information from organizational leadership is an important variable during planned change efforts. To this end, 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). Specifically, communication about change from organizational leaders can decrease uncertainty and increase understanding about

the change (Lewis & Seibold, 1996; Washington & Hacker, 2005), aid in the reduction of anxiety about change (K. I. Miller & Monge, 1986; Smeltzer, 1991; Washington & Hacker, 2005), decrease negative feelings about the change effort as well as expectations that the initiative will fail (Washington & Hacker, 2005), and lower resistance while increasing willingness to participate in planned change (Lewis, 2006; V. D. Miller, Johnson, & Grau, 1994; Washington & Hacker, 2005). In a related vein, Covin and Kilmann (1990) amassed a list of 900 major issues that participants of organizational change believed to influence the success or failure of large-scale transformation efforts. They found that "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 candor 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 infrequently than programmatic approaches (Lewis, 2006; Lewis, Hamel, & Richardson, 2001). 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 program and not merely to "receive it." Participatory approaches involve stakeholders in the change process through the solicitation of their input. According to Lewis (1999), "Soliciting input concerns downward requests for and active gathering of ideas, opinions, suggestions, evaluations, and reactions related to a change" (p. 50). Implementers may opt to solicit input from stakeholders during the development, decision-making processes, and/or implementation of organizational change efforts 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 whether employees, in the end, have a voice during planned organizational change. The logic driving this approach is employees' participation is perceived as the catalyst for implementing sustained organizational change.

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, p. 783). 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, Christensen, & Cheney, 1999, p. 12).

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 & Brodwin, 1984). Still, these models exhibit several core similarities. Most notably, these models 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 range from the very formal to the very informal. Input and feedback can be obtained via multiple communication channels, 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 (Lewis, 1999). If participatory communication activities are used, they are typically informal such as 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 involvement is at the heart of participatory approaches, previous research has identified core communication strategies for identifying who to involve during the implementation process as well as when to involve them. First, the *"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, Hamel, & Richardson, 2001, p. 20). 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, Hamel, & Richardson, 2001, p. 21). 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, scope, direction, and, in some cases, the very existence of organizational change (Lewis, Hamel, & Richardson, 2001).

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 toward 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 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. Perhaps for this reason, previous research has found that some employees perceive negative relationships between their

involvement in change efforts and their evaluations of change success (Lewis, 2006). This limitation may seem counter-intuitive to those implementers who may feel obligated to solicit input and please everyone.

Perhaps it is because of the aforementioned limitations that participatory approaches are often viewed as a "nice to have" by implementers while programmatic approaches tend to be the "strategy-of-choice" in bringing about planned change in organizations (Lewis, 1999, 2006). As previously established, evidence suggests that participatory change is used infrequently since most implementers emphasize downward dissemination about change programs versus soliciting stakeholders' input (Lewis, 1999, 2006; Lewis, Richardson, & Hamel, 2003). This research finding corresponds with reports of real-world organizational practice. Young and Post (1993) reported that the formal solicitation of input was inconsistent, even in exemplary companies (as identified by peer organizations). They noted, "In some cases, top managers should enumerate the types of upward communication available, but lower level employees could not. In other cases the commitment varied among managers with the same company" (p. 36).

Anticipated Benefits

Previous research has indicated that participatory approaches are likely to be perceived as more effective in implementing planned organizational than programmatic approaches (Lewis, 2006; Nutt, 1986, 1987, 1989, 2002). As such, participatory approaches are linked to several anticipated benefits.

First, participatory approaches can help stakeholders achieve several desired "stakes" including "access to information, opportunities to participate in conversations about critical operations, involvement in decision making, and access to channels for influence" (Lewis, Richardson, & Hamel, 2003, p. 401). 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, Goodman, & Schkade, 1983; Edmondson, Bohmer, & Pisano, 2001; Lewis, 2006; Nutt, 1987; Sagie, Elizur, & Koslowsky, 2001; Sagie & Koslowsky, 1994), increasing accuracy in stakeholders' perceptions about the rationale behind change initiatives and related goals (Brown, 1991), enhancing overall satisfaction with the change initiative (Coyle-Shapiro, 1999; Sagie & Koslowsky, 1994), reducing uncertainty while increasing a sense of control (Bordia, Hunt, Paulsen, Tourish, & DiFonzo, 2004; Mainiero & DeMichiell, 1986) and enhancing employees' perceptions of implementation success (Lewis, 2006).

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 can have the opportunity to provide feedback on the direction of the organization as well as discuss specific opportunities and challenges related to the change implementation (Ruben, Russ, Smulowitz, & Connaughton, 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 behaviors, as well as shared-meanings of successful and unsuccessful change implementation.

Conclusion

Because the implementation process is often fraught with problems that are communicative in nature a great urgency exists to identify approaches for effectively bringing about planned change in organizational settings. As such, this article has sought to advance a stronger conceptual and empirical understanding of two communicative treatments for communicating change: *programmatic* and *participatory*. The articulation of these two communicative frameworks lays the groundwork for future scholarship to measure the efficacy of these implementation approaches in applied organizational settings; a promising and fertile field of future academic research.

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Biography

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