

Knoll Workplace Research

Communicating Workplace Change

Starting with the Basics

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Starting with the Basics

Comprehensive Communication Plans Accelerate Acceptance of Change

Many workplace transformation teams struggle with how to begin the development of communication regarding imminent changes in the organization’s work environment. A common fear is that because all of the decisions have not yet been made, it’s too early to begin sharing any details of changes being planned. Hesitation to begin the communication process may stem from a concern that the messages will be met with resistance, and that the team is not equipped to appropriately manage that push-back. There may also be apprehension that once the first message is broadcast, that ongoing communication will be expected by the workforce, requiring additional internal resources that are not available to support the project. Figure 1 shows examples of the differences between successful and failed attempts at workplace change communication.

Developing a comprehensive communication plan involves looking beyond that first announcement and plotting out the required sequence of messaging for the transformation process. Consider the plan a living document

that can be modified on an ongoing basis if there is a delay in the renovation schedule, if you need to address new areas of resistance that surface, or if unforeseen situations impact the project.

A solid communication plan will articulate how the shifts in the work environment align with other organizational changes. For example, the new workplace strategy may support the company’s real estate goal to consolidate dispersed locations across town into one building. That same strategy, in conjunction with the plan for an open, shared-space environment that encourages mentoring and knowledge exchange, could support human resource’s objective of improving collaboration amongst the four generations in the workplace. Exemplary messaging “connects the dots” for the audience and accelerates acceptance of change. Educating the workforce on the business case for change makes it more difficult for resistance to persist.

Where Do We Begin?

Where do we begin in creating the communications plan? The best starting point is to begin with the basics, asking yourself “Who, Why, What, When, and How?” Let’s focus on how each of these aspects



Key Take-Aways

Developing an exemplary communication plan does not have to be a daunting endeavor.

- ▶ *Your initial task is to create a messaging framework for the workplace change process.* By keeping in mind the basics—who, why, what, when, and how—you’ll be sure to address these essential elements of communication.
- ▶ *Don’t assume that the audience will automatically “connect the dots.”* Ensure that message content clearly explains how shifts in the work environment align with other organizational changes or goals.
- ▶ *Think of the communication plan as a living document.* As changes occur in the workplace transformation process, adaptations can be made to reflect important updates, articulate delays, or shift responsibilities as necessary. Because many aspects of resistance to change are unpredictable, this living document provides a flexible template to modify the messaging on an ongoing basis.

The differences between failed and successful change initiatives are subtle, yet powerful

Failed Attempts	Successful Attempts
Employees perceive that change is “done to them”	Employees perceive they are given a voice to influence change
Communication occurs too late and is in response to damage already done	Communication is planned strategically and begins early in the change process
Communication focuses on justification of what employees are giving up	Communication focuses on what employees will gain and how it will be achieved
Eventually, employees will be told what changes they will have to make	Employees are educated on the business reasons for changes being made

Figure 1. Successful attempts at communicating change are proactive in nature and focus on positive benefits to employees. From the book: *Innovations in Office Design: The Critical Influence Approach to Effective Work Environments*

A comprehensive communications plan includes “Who, Why, What, When and How”

		Actions	Other Considerations
Who?	<i>Set up change management team</i>	Identify external resources for communication content development, executive steering committee, and change management team	For best results, have change management project sponsorship come from the most senior executive possible
Why?	<i>Agree on purpose of the change management process</i>	Create and agree on a limited number of specific goals and outcomes for the workplace change management process	Create specific, measurable goals related to employee satisfaction with the move experience and the workspace
What?	<i>Know your audience</i>	Identify internal groups and employees affected by the change	Be aware that over the course of the change management process, individuals or groups may be added or deleted from your communication due to shifts in project scope
	<i>Take “pulse of the organization” and create key messages</i>	Conduct a survey to understand current workspace needs, employee change readiness and communication preferences Message should include introduction to workplace strategy, business rationale and benefits to employees	The survey should include all affected employees. Keep the message short—create 3 to 5 bullet points for the business rationale, and for benefits to employees Use the bullet points as the foundation for all future messaging
When?	<i>Identify the time frame for communication process</i>	Create a communication process timeline with estimated start and end dates	With a large change involving thousands of employees, the change management process can start 18 months before the move For most projects, you should get started 12 months prior to planned move date
How?	<i>Select communication methods</i>	Offer a mix of experiential and written or online communications	Communication methods can include: · Regular email blasts with project updates · Visits to the new space as it’s built-out · Lunch and learns · Town hall meetings

Figure 2. Including these basic elements of communication will help employees “connect the dots” between the business rationale for the change and the new workplace strategy

fits into the structure of a comprehensive communications plan (Figure 2).



Who?

The “who” of the communications plan refers to the audience for whom the message is intended. Various groups

with which you may need to share information may include a steering committee, business unit leaders, employees who have been identified to participate in a pilot program or functional department heads.

In a comprehensive communications plan, “who” also refers to the individual or team responsible for the task. If your internal corporate communications staff is spread thin, an external consultant may be responsible for developing the content of workplace change communications. Who, internally, is that message coming from?

In general, the higher in the organizational hierarchy the “author” is, the more credibility the message will have and the greater the sense of urgency it can create.



Why?

Have you clearly identified the purpose of this message? What is your objective? What is it that you’re trying

to accomplish—selling executives on the investment in the new work environment? Educating managers on the new flex work policies that will support the alternative workplace strategy? Inviting employees to visit the furniture mock ups and fill out a feedback form?

Honesty is the best policy. The tone of message should not sound like an apology, articulating that “unfortunately, managers will be losing their private offices.” Instead,



Create an online survey to assess current employee workplace needs and communication preferences

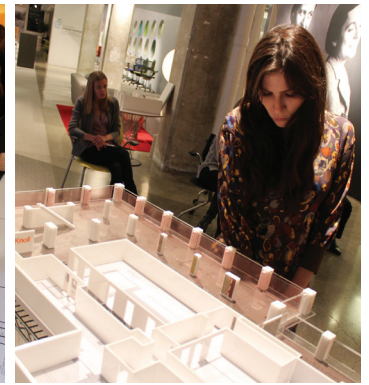
begin the communication piece by focusing on the benefits the new work environment will bring and how those advantages will be achieved. Helping readers understand the business drivers of change can draw their attention to organizational requirements,



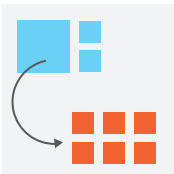
Offer guided tours of workspace mockups as part of a process to encourage a dialogue with employees



Display floorplans and architectural models that visually illustrate new planning approaches to employees



rather than focusing on personal desires. Details you know will be resisted don't have to be withheld. However, starting the message by focusing on the positive will ensure that the negative is not the first thing the reader will see.



What?

The specific message you are sharing is the “what” of the communication plan. Are you inviting managers to a round table

discussion about supervising employees who will begin working remotely? Are you trying to encourage 100% participation in the assessments that will identify the candidates suitable for the flexible work program? Is your goal to solicit volunteers to serve on the Employee Engagement Committee? These examples fall in the category of “what” that message must articulate.

Be consistent with the language used in messaging. There are dozens of terms to describe the evolving work environment and new ways of working—agile work environments, telework, flexwork, hoteling, connected workforce, distributed workplace, free address, reverse hoteling, hot desking, etc. Now is not the time to show off just how many different ways you can describe the workplace strategy and how people will have to adapt their work styles. Pick a term and stick with it.

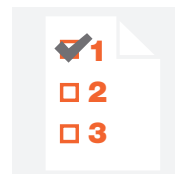


When?

Proactively educating the workforce allows you to shape and share the appropriate message

before the workforce develops its own messaging in the form of rumors that will fuel greater resistance and damage employee trust in the organization.

Timing is everything. Identifying a “trigger” for a particular communication piece can make the development of a communications timeline much easier. For example, you may not want to send an email blast to individual contributors with newly-developed FAQs until after the CEO briefs directors at the monthly executive meeting. The review becomes the trigger in this particular case. Include mention of key triggers in your plan to establish milestones in the communication process.



How?

In your plan, this refers to the events or activities through which the message will be shared, or the method of

communication. If your organization's culture is “high touch,” then an important message might best be communicated at a “town hall” meeting. For critical communication for which speed is a necessity, then an enterprise-wide email may make the most sense. Think of your organization's culture and how people have responded to different modes of communication. This may provide a guideline for the appropriate way to plan the delivery of the message. But don't be afraid to challenge the way the organization has typically delivered communiqués—sometimes the unconventional can really get people's attention!

Communication is a two-way process. If your organization simply shares details of the forthcoming changes with the workforce, but

does not provide a mechanism for people to share feedback, then employees may perceive change as being pushed on them, rather than feel that they are being given a voice to influence change. Employees need to feel that their opinions count and that they are being heard.

Characteristics of Successful Workplace Change Communications

In summary, organizations that have gained enterprise-wide acceptance of workplace transformation have a number of common characteristics. Five “must include” communication elements can contribute to the success of your evolving workplace:

- ▶ A proactive approach to communication
- ▶ Honest tone in messaging
- ▶ Consistent language and terms
- ▶ Message content that “connects the dots” for employees
- ▶ Ongoing communications

Navigating the waters of a workplace transformation can be an intimidating endeavor, but by having a vision of an overarching message you want to communicate, tailoring that message to the proper stakeholders, and following a proven communication process, you can reduce resistance to the changes your organization is implementing. ■

About the Author

Diane Stegmeier is Founder and CEO of Stegmeier Consulting Group, a globally-recognized leader in workplace change management.

Stegmeier is best known for her extensive research on resistance to workplace change and her discovery of the 15 Critical Influences™ impacting behavior in the workplace. She is author of *Innovations in Office Design: The Critical Influence Approach to Effective Work Environments*, which was ranked the top workplace strategy book by Amazon readers. Stegmeier is the recipient of the International Facility Management Association's (IFMA) Award of Excellence, Distinguished Author for a Book.

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