

Listening: the foundation of enabling agile change

27 March 2018

By Tanya Brees with Jonathan Champ

Communication teams have a significant role to manage change in rapidly changing and complex environments by facilitating 'agile listening'. Agile listening is the ability to connect leaders, change collaborators and initiators, and employees or change recipients to ensure change implementation is based on real experience. The communication function has a role in creating the connection, providing tools and processes to capture and share these perspectives, adding value by interpreting and distilling insight and being a 'listening advocate' across the organisation.

Change is changing, rapidly.

Talk to anyone involved in driving change across an organisation and you'll no doubt hear about the importance of leadership buy in and sponsorship, articulated business benefits identified up front, a training plan, and integrated communication plan - all written and submitted before the change process has even begun.

But the nature of change itself is changing. And so is the way employees respond to change. People are working differently. Organisations are expected to be more agile and responsive.

So how do you *drive* change in this new agile world? Especially when the kinds of changes many companies are looking to drive are not black and white. Although there is a growing range of tools and methodologies in the contemporary change communication toolkit, there remains no 'one size fits all' mandate or policy to tell people what they *must* do. Change is both essential and discretionary at the same time.

Whether it's adopting digital tools to reduce paper, embracing enterprise social, adopting new ways of working, change is no longer linear and neat. Neither are the methods we use to foster and enact change.

This 'discretionary' change is often at the heart of transformation. Shifting employee – and leadership - behaviours that underpin adoption, or create incremental benefits is where change programs create genuine value. It's also where much of the risk of change lies.

Design theory shows that creating opportunities for people to sample the 'future state' in a way that is meaningful to them generates deeper engagement than traditional forms of communication. This can be through role-playing, prototyping, walk-throughs, product testing, simulations, or even through technologies such as virtual or augmented reality. This kind of prototyping does carry overheads for change programs, leaders and communicators.

Creating experiences that demonstrate the future state inverts the traditional adoption curve – people's attitude and knowledge is shaped by their actions and immersion in new tools, processes or environments.

Is Exec sponsorship *really* the key?

Naturally your Executive team can't be opposed to change, but do they really need to *sponsor* it as we once thought? Isn't it more important that the people who are most impacted and stand to benefit the most, sponsor and drive the change? Imagine if your employees felt as if they were part of the driver for the change. Not passively waiting for change to be foisted upon them, but actively influencing, shaping and driving the change they want, because they understood what it meant for them, because they saw the potential benefit.

Great sponsorship means establishing context

Change sponsorship in this environment becomes independent of the change itself. It becomes about providing sufficient context *for the range of change* occurring within an organisation, creating clear signs of *the type of change* that is important, and *getting out of the way*.

The model is simple really. It's all about listening. Listen to the people at the point end of delivering strategy, or delivering customer experience. Seek to understand their pain points, their needs. Work collaboratively with them to design solutions around them, and that actually meet their needs. Then involve them in driving the change forward. Tell their stories, and use them to influence others.

And take the same approach with leaders. Listen to their challenges, their needs. Make it easy for them to support the change and to demonstrate this through their own behaviour. Defining and creating the leader's version of the future state can bring their sponsorship to life. Help them own the change and shape what it means for their teams.

This means adopting some new change principles.

- There's no 'one size fits all'
- Support needs to be bespoke and just-in-time
- The type of support provided needs to evolve as your stakeholders needs do

- Rules and mandates rarely work in the long run
- Embrace common sense and leverage your company's values to influence behaviour
- Empower your people to help shape how the change impacts them
- Your target audience needs to be the one that stands to benefit or lose the most from a specific change.
- Leaders play a key supporting role as always but change is driven by the operational roles - the doers, not the leaders

Letting go of 'what implementation should look like'

This type of deep transformation requires a shift in thinking. Linear implementation models do not apply. We live in the time of iterations. You need to be fluid, agile and responsive. You can't plan change before it begins. You need to evolve your strategy as the change plays out. No two changes will ever play out the same. Different people, different companies or even just different points in time all play a role. Creating the right environment for this to happen while already being in a state of change is a challenge for organisations.

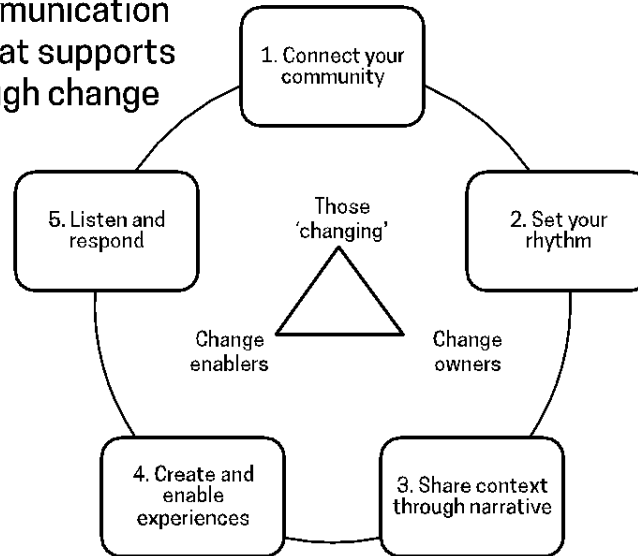
You can't work towards some preconceived business benefit promised in some long ago business case. Sometimes you don't know what the real benefit will be until it's here. Change *never* happens in a straight line. If you are too structured, too linear, too pre-planned you might just miss the biggest value of all. Your tactics needs to be tailored, just in time, in response to what people need.

You can't predict exactly what your people will need when. You need to work this out as you go, and organisational listening becomes central to this process.

Start conversations, let people role-play scenarios, listen, listen and respond then listen again....

Creating a communication environment that supports listening through change

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There are five elements to creating a communication environment that fosters listening through transformation.

1. Connect your community.

Ensure people can **connect**. This includes having formal and informal opportunities and platforms for to enable those impacted by change, those designing change and those sponsoring change to spend time with each other.

2. Set your rhythm.

Different industries work at different speeds. Work with the operating cycles of the organisation - or disrupt them - to create the opportunities for connection. Find a **rhythm** that works.

3. Share context through narrative.

While not every change needs hands-on executive support, leaders can work toward providing ongoing **context** for *all* change through a consistent narrative that presents the forces driving change in a way that makes sense to employees.

Easy access to **content** allows people to satisfy their need to understand and absorb the details. Whether it is through digital tools and repositories, effective intranets, collaborative platforms, having an 'open source' approach to the detail - as much as is commercially possible - also empowers people to keep themselves informed.

4. Create and enable experiences.

Testing and learning are the heart of establishing agility in your organisation. What is the complete **experience** for people involved? What are the other things happening at the same time? How can people test and learn, **experimenting** with the change in ways that will improve the result?

5. Listen and respond.

It's time we shift from the idea of people resisting change. We'd still be living in caves if that were the case. People love (some kinds of change), but changing invokes some predictable responses. Ensure the communication environment provides for people's emotional **reaction** - in the moment - and their subsequent **response**. Think of social media - the emoji is the reaction, the comments are the response.

Silence during change is a bad thing. Ongoing **dialogue** - between everyone involved - is how people put the pieces together. Finding ways to listen deeply to all three groups during the change process provides the opportunity for change to match the reality.

Key points for communication leaders

- Organisational agility means re-examining traditional models of change communication and recognising their limitations, including a shift from top down sponsorship to unlocking the experience of people facing the change.
- Creating prototypes and experiences that bring the change to life and listening deeply to the responses to this on an ongoing basis is essential to creating deep change outcomes.
- Communication functions have a key role in facilitating this listening environment.

About the authors

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1550 words