Principles for effective communication

Leaders and managers are the ultimate change communicators

Staff typically prefer their direct line manager or senior leaders to tell them face-to-face about changes that will affect them. This reassures them that your organisation values them and cares about how they will be impacted. It is important that managers are well supported in delivering these messages, in both the right way and at the right time.

For larger change programs, the communications team should provide leaders and managers with regular briefings and information packs so they can engage their staff with confidence and answer the questions. You must, to the greatest extent possible, remove any communications blockages between managers and staff at the beginning of the change journey.

Describe a range of benefits to influence and motivate a diverse audience

Individuals within a business are motivated in different ways. What motivates an executive leader to change may not motivate the staff. People are primarily motivated by a desire to:

- help the community
- help and support their colleagues
- see the organisation achieve
- see how they might benefit through recognition, professional development, career progression, better work/life balance, etc.

Your communication needs to canvass change benefits covering these four major motivational categories. On a broad level, ensure that the messages and rationale for change resonate with a larger proportion of the workforce.

Build cohesion

Staff need help understanding how all the disparate changes fit together to deliver the overall vision. You need to make sure the vision is clear, expressed in simple terms and supported by concrete examples of how things will be different in the future. Use the vision frequently to anchor and frame communications about the change.

Keep it simple and memorable

Develop a graphical representation of the change project that people can understand and hold in their heads. This might consist of a flow chart or an image of what the changed enterprise will look like. It needs to be clear, simple and memorable. For large programs, a brand and visual identity helps staff understand how the different change activities are connected. A well-crafted brand name, logo and tag lines frequently remind staff of what the change journey is really about. This helps maintain a sense of connection to the benefits the organisation is striving to achieve.

Be honest

Fear and uncertainty can paralyse people and entire companies. Short circuit this by providing the facts and helping people predict any negative aspects. Help them anticipate the negatives – be honest and let them know you have every confidence the organisation can handle the challenges.

Listen

Make communication a two-way proposition. Spend as much time listening to what people are saying about the initiative as you do telling them. Feedback should be used to fine-tune implementation.

Use evidence to sell the change and report on progress

Frequently draw on evidence generated in the case for change and explain the criteria for success and how it will be measured. Define success clearly and devise metrics for progress. Evidence will help sell the case of why the changes are necessary. It will also remind staff that these changes are a response to concerns they may have raised earlier in the program.

Use a range of communication channels

Use a diverse set of communication styles and channels appropriate for your audience. This will increase the likelihood that the message has been heard and will suit the different preferences of your audiences. Some traditional approaches include dedicated newsletters, posters, events, intranet, emails, individual briefings and stand-up presentations or road shows.

Social media and other digital technologies should be considered when:

- you want participants to communicate with each other anytime and anywhere and get up-to-date information quickly
- you want staff to feel like they have a voice in the process and can directly contribute in their own words
- change is large scale and occurring across different sites and regions across the state
- you have the resources to monitor and remove any damaging staff commentary
- you want to 'flatten' the discussion away from natural hierarchies
- leaders are willing to use it first – their involvement with the technology will encourage others.

Think twice about using social media and digital technologies when:

- the change is highly controversial and likely to illicit anger
- your workforce is not computer savvy
- the change is small and in an isolated part of the business where people can easily communicate through traditional channels.