

ANGELA SINICKAS: How to handle change communication effectively

The change curve is dependent upon which approach to communication makes the most sense, believes Angela Sinickas, president of consultancy Sinickas Communications.

“It’s important to consider carefully *how much* you tell your employees and *how* you tell them,” she advises. “For example, if you’re making employees redundant and they’re still at the denial stage, don’t provide them with all the details of their termination packages, as they aren’t ready for this level of information.” Waiting until employees have adjusted to news of their redundancy, and then providing them with details such as how you will assist them in their job hunt and how long their benefits will continue for is more advisable.

Sinickas believes that the change curve is useful as an overview for how employees will respond, but as each change project is unique, there is no template for the development of the message and its communication. “You do need to be sensitive however to how people will respond at various points throughout the change cycle,” Sinickas says, “but the change curve doesn’t necessarily help you decide *what* to communicate – that depends on the nature of the change.”

Timing of change programs

“When to announce the change program depends on the change and the type of company,” says Sinickas. She comments on the two major types of companies: public and private:

1. Public companies

Publicly-listed companies are governed by rules on the information they can give employees compared to shareholders, and this varies by country. Information generally needs to be announced publicly first because it may affect the share price. “However, as there isn’t a prescribed time limit between the two announcements,” Sinickas says, “you could send out an electronic news release announcing the change and the next minute send out an employee announcement. However, many companies don’t think about the communication in this way as they are fixated on the external announcement.”

Although e-mail is not always the most suitable way to communicate change, there’s the danger of employees hearing about the change from the media, and then discussing it among themselves. Sinickas believes it’s better to receive the company’s communication first, and meet face-to-face with managers later. “If it’s communicated face-to-face after several days in the public domain, there will be days of utter chaos, with gossip growing out of control and a lack of productivity,” she says. “If employees receive written internal communication it can address issues employees find important but which are irrelevant to shareholders, and have an entirely different focus.”

2. Private companies

Change communication in private companies needs to be face-to-face and orchestrated like a military campaign. Fifteen years ago, Sinickas was involved in a major reorganization of a US company based in three different time zones and involving 10 percent of a 1,500-strong company being made redundant.

In order to ensure the smooth running of the communications, Sinickas and her team organized the plan carefully. “The day was scheduled based on the fact that they made the announcements made on a timed basis, very tightly, so there was no time for rumors. Managers and employees were informed of their job losses at specified times, there was a set time to check in with managers to see what unexpected events had occurred, and employees who were facing job losses were also assigned to different managers following their redundancy meetings,” Sinickas recalls. “Executives who were being let go were handled one-on-one, and employees were handled in small groups. We followed this with written material which described the reorganization, the business need, and that it was unrelated to their performance. As it wasn’t the company’s policy to give references, this acted as a reference for future jobs.

Remaining employees were informed by paper memos (as this was pre-e-mail) and it was also in the weekly employee newspaper. Remaining employees were told what benefits their departing employees were receiving and the help they were receiving with job searches. "It's important that other employees know they would be treated with respect and dignity in the future and provided with help if they were ever affected."

Culture of change

"People are more accustomed today to multiple layoffs at multiple companies," Sinickas explains. "When we began having major layoffs twenty years ago – when many jobs were often seen as life-long – it was far more shocking for employees. People today are used to a culture of change. If companies help their redundant employees find jobs more quickly, it will increase their productivity as their remaining employees will feel happier knowing their previous colleagues have work."

Communicating change to the outside world

What should employees say to customers? "Customers will have questions so employees need to be regarded as a key part of the process, and be told what they should say, as your competition will also be talking to your customers," warns Sinickas. She suggests that the corporate communicator should work with the sales function to devise a plan.

Key audience needs during periods of change

1. Behavior

What do you need employees to do? If they aren't told anything, they will continue doing as they always have done until told otherwise. To resolve this, when making a change you need to examine employees' work processes and how they will be affected, and be ready to map out new processes and involve your employees in this, Sinickas suggests. "This is because you will have fewer people trying to accomplish the same amount of work. Issues to consider are: All these steps necessary? What can be eliminated? How else can this be done? Ensure that everyone is clear on what needs to be achieved and each employee's role in the process." This also makes employees feel more engaged in the change as their concerns are being heard.

2. Change in executive's personality

People always notice when executives' personalities change. Sinickas recently worked with an organization which was either going to be acquired by another company or spun off. Either would mean major change with significant impact upon the business, and during this uncertain period, focus groups kept repeating that executives never left their offices, smiled or said hello to employees anymore. "Their lack of visibility and lack of communication and their negativity made people talk about it and made them think that things must be really bad. They really should be congenial and smiling and put a good face on the change."

3. Research

- (a) **Ongoing listening:** Whether regular focus groups, townhall meetings or a hotline where employees can submit questions and answers, listening to employees is vital so executives can hear about potential problems as early as possible. These channels must always be open, and need to be established as soon as possible after the announcement of the change so change leaders can discover employees' thoughts and know what they're doing in going forward.
- (b) **Formal research:** This is important so executives can discover the hard numbers as a baseline on issues in order to measure the progress of change. This quantitative method of research can be repeated as often as once a week, depending on the nature of the question. In her experience, Sinickas has found that the findings from the formal research can totally change the communications focus.

Use research to individualize change

She cites the example of asking questions in a survey for one company which included: "To what extent do you

feel we need to go through the change?”and “To what extent do you feel we are ready to go through the change,” and “Do you think we are providing enough resources to make this change work?”

“Change management literature always tells you to explain why you’re taking the company through the change to your employees,” Sinickas says. “In this case, we received feedback from employees that they were glad the executives finally realized what they had known for a long time – that change was long overdue. The employees didn’t believe that management had enough resources to carry out change, and the communicators needed to focus on changing their minds by showing the number of managers devoted to the change, the training and the resources put in place.”

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