

CONTRADICTING COMMON SENSE

If you have attended a number of communication seminars and read enough articles and books about communicating change, you may have collected a list of best practice guidelines for ideal messages and channels to use in communicating change. Unfortunately, what might be true for most companies, might be completely wrong for yours.

One of the key message points change management gurus recommend communicating is the need for change, often referred to as the “burning platform.” They also maintain that supervisors are always employees’ preferred information source during change. Think for a moment – is that true for your company?

Research with your audience can help you develop your own communication plan with surgical precision, making sure you’re hitting the right messages for your group and using your audience’s preferred channels as effectively as possible, which might be quite different from the “common wisdom” approaches just mentioned above.

Zoom in on the right messages

Here’s what a global semiconductor company found out from some research we conducted for them one month after they launched a new company strategy and structure.

- 90% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the company needed to change. In fact, write-in comments said: “We [employees] have known for a long time we’ve needed to change. It’s about time management realized it.” There was little need to keep communicating the “burning platform” to this group.



Angela Sinickas, ABC, is president of Sinickas Communications, Inc. (www.sinicom.com), an international communication consultancy specializing in helping corporations achieve business results through targeted diagnostics and practical solutions.

- However, only 48% believed the company was prepared to change, and only 33% believed they had the resources necessary to make the required changes.

The ideal key messages needed to support this change effort would have to include specific details of the company’s implementation plans, how they would be supported with additional resources and examples of successful changes to convince employees the company could succeed at the proposed changes.

The best mix of channels

The research identified some surprising information about the ideal channels for communicating this change in company strategy. We asked respondents to identify their top current information sources about the change. “My supervisor” was at or near the top of current and preferred sources (selected by 40% of respondents as a current source and 42% as a preferred source). However, “local senior management” was the most preferred source (selected by 45%), though only 29% chose them as a current source.

The preferred sources of information also varied considerably in different parts of this company’s geography, as illustrated below in Figure One. For example, respondents in Europe/Middle East/Africa were

far more likely to prefer local senior management (59%), while those in Asia Pacific were far more likely to prefer e-mail (48%). However, preference for the company publication and corporate senior management as sources were about the same world-wide at approximately 30% and 26% respectively.

If the research had stopped here, the communicators might have decided to boost the number of employee meetings being held by local management right away. However, another piece of data led to a refinement of this strategy.

As expected, employees’ perceived understanding of the change just one month after it was announced was fairly low. Less than one-third thought they understood it well or very well. Moreover, demographic analysis showed that local senior executives felt only slightly better informed, at about 50%. Before these executives were asked to conduct any employee meetings, they first needed an opportunity to better understand the changes themselves! Otherwise, they would be ineffective sponsors of the change when talking about it with employees.

There’s no substitute for research to make sure your recommended communication strategies are on target in helping your organization succeed. We rarely have the time or the money to re-communicate if we find out later our initial approach missed the mark. 

Figure One: Geographical breakdown of preferred communication sources

