Public Services and Procurement Canada | Services publics et Approvisionnement Canada

CHANGE COMMUNICATIONS PRINCIPLES

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COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY is one of the key ways to build trust, positively influence behaviour and lead change within an organization. With issues that could affect job status and pay, it's important that we build this trust by providing the information people need, when they need it and how they need it.

Building trust and positively influencing behaviour is a change process itself. During transitions like this, there are often misconceptions and uncertainties about what the future will look like and how the various parties will be affected, including ways of working and the behaviour that is expected of everybody. We can lead change more effectively when we shift our focus from securing temporary compliance to generating lasting participation and support. This way, we aim to change not only behaviours, but also the mindsets that guide them.

AIM: This document highlights key change and communications principles that, when applied together, help us increase the effectiveness of our change communications.

We included both change principles and communications principles as they are complementary perspectives for the purposes of leading change. We may be working on our own within our change initiative or with a large, centralized communications team. Either way, these two sets of principles provide us with a starting point for leading change and conducting an effective communications campaign.

CHANGE COMMUNICATIONS PRINCIPLES

1. Fostering a dialogue
2. Communicating by giving meaning
3. Building trust through authenticity and modelling our actions
4. Choosing messengers wisely
5. Being intentional about the type of conversation that's happening

COMMUNICATIONS PRINCIPLES

1. Crafting our message for maximum impact
2. Choosing the best time to communicate
3. Knowing and understanding our audiences
4. Selecting the best combination of channels
5. Collaborating to amplify our communications

CHANGE COMMUNICATIONS PRINCIPLES

1

FOSTERING A DIALOGUE

When communicating about a change, it's important to go well beyond informing. Engaging staff and leaders in a dialogue greatly increases the chances of a successful outcome for a change initiative. This is because triggering an exchange allows people to better understand and internalize the implications that the change will have for them. The goal is to create space for this dialogue and to support the development of new mindsets and behaviours.

To get the best results we can focus on maximizing opportunities for positive conversations to occur, both structured and spontaneous. We should be trying to give people as many opportunities as possible to have conversations about the change. Let's face it: they will talk about it anyway – we might as well provide some guidance and context!

As a result, it is important that we set up a process for people to share feedback, raise concerns and ask questions throughout the process. This will make it easier to get them to "own" the change. Another benefit is that we can then follow what emerges from these exchanges to see if there is new information that could inform the direction of the change, and adjust our approach accordingly.

2

COMMUNICATING BY GIVING MEANING

Research tells us that employees are most engaged and productive when they attach meaning to their work. Two important ways we give meaning to our jobs are through an emotional connection to the work we do and understanding how this work is linked to something bigger than ourselves.

While communicating the details and benefits of a change effort is important, it is only one part of a good communications campaign for change. When drafting our communications plan in support of the change and developing our messaging, it is important that we be intentional about including components that address both the emotional connection to our work and how our work impacts colleagues, clients, other partners, Canadian citizens, and whomever is part of the bigger picture.

When communicating, we can make the message more powerful by expanding our thinking beyond just words. We can use symbols (and symbolic gestures) as a way of conveying meaning. For example, if we want to have a transparent, open dialogue, choosing a forum that allows for that will help reinforce that message. If we want to articulate a vision for a new, different future, it's helpful to use images and symbols that are bold and offer a break from the past.

CHANGE COMMUNICATIONS PRINCIPLES

3

BUILDING TRUST THROUGH AUTHENTICITY AND MODELLING ACTIONS

People pay attention to behaviour more than words. Modelling new types of behaviour helps to build trust in the leadership team, across the organization, in the change process, and in the vision for the future. Trust is an incredibly important part of change and should be a major consideration when rolling out a communications strategy. Messages that are authentic, honest and transparent resonate better with staff. People pick up on this type of positive behaviour, just as they do with negative behaviours such as secrets, surprises, hype and empty promises.

Change processes are inherently uncertain. We can focus on what we know and be transparent about what we don't. When we don't have an answer we should follow-up as soon as possible once we do.

It's important that we are honest if there are setbacks. If there is a milestone we are not going to reach on time or an aspect of the new state previously discussed that will not be possible, we should communicate that and explain why. Being transparent about this will reduce surprises, frustration and resistance.

We also need to celebrate successes. Leadership gains by sharing examples of people who are actively engaged and are supporting the change. This, ideally, is an explicit part of our communications plan.

4

CHOOSING MESSENGERS WISELY

When communicating to change behaviour, it's important we carefully consider who is sending out the message. This depends on several factors, including:

- the type of conversation we're having;
- whether the information might be perceived as positive or negative; and,
- the expectations of staff, or other involved parties, based on the organizational culture and operational context.

With this in mind, we need to take into consideration both the role and level of the messengers and whether they are perceived as trustworthy, credible and authentic. For one thing, it's important to identify a sponsor at the executive level and to have them launch the change with initial messaging. It is then crucial that our sponsor remains visible and active throughout the change process. This goes a long way in ensuring momentum for the change and in getting people on board. When leaders are only there at the beginning (e.g., for a launch event for the change initiative), it can send the signal to staff that this initiative is not a major priority. This, in turn, can lead to disengagement at all levels.

It's also a best practice to ensure that representatives at various levels across the organization understand and are willing and able to convey the message when it makes the most sense to come from someone other than the main sponsor.

Research shows that most employees actually prefer to receive their information from their immediate supervisor as they are often the most trusted source. Trust can also be high when it comes from colleagues or members of a particular community of practice. The point here is to determine who is best-positioned to share communications based on the best judgement of how a message will be received by a particular group or individual.

Ultimately, a variety of messengers can help reinforce the message. This is especially true if we have fostered an ongoing dialogue. This allows us to make adjustments as we learn how our messages are perceived and can help us to refine our communication throughout the change process.

5

BEING INTENTIONAL ABOUT THE TYPE OF CONVERSATION THAT'S HAPPENING

Not communicating is still communicating. It can signal that the initiative is not important, that the work is not going according to plan, that there is something to hide, or that there is not a clear vision or end-point. So, it's important that we be intentional, not just in our messaging but in the types of conversations we are having. The less we say, the more people will fill in the blanks, and that may not be in a way that is supportive of the change.

We will want to adapt the style of messaging and how we approach conversations around the change depending on the phase of the change initiative we are in.

Early in the change process

In the beginning of the change process, we want our communications to be more informative and directive, and include a call-to-action. This helps to frame the change and give people a sense of where we are going. People don't need to agree in the early stages of a change, but they need to understand. We should make that an early change communications objective.

When informing people and meeting with partners, we gain by starting with why the change is happening and selling the problem more than the solution. Often, there is a limited understanding of what the actual problem is and, therefore, why the change is happening or needed. If this is the case, people won't buy in to the solution. When we sell the problem, we want to make sure we address what's in it for our partners, both the positives associated with the change and the negatives associated with not changing. When it's not a perfect picture, it can be helpful to honestly acknowledge this, to ensure we remain authentic in our communications and to help avoid generating cynicism.

Early middle of the change process

As we move past the beginning stage, we need to lay the foundation for the change by having early conversations that help shape the common language and make sense of the direction we are heading in. This will create transparency and openness, and help to generate a positive dialogue by involving participants in shaping the change.

Late middle of the change process

After significant dialogue has happened, and it is clear that there is at least some understanding of the change, it's important that we have conversations that follow-up on the initial call-to-action. These can take into account any changes in mindset or direction that may have occurred based on the dialogues that have happened. In this type of communication, we will be more concrete and outline specific actions that partners need to take in order for the change to be successful.

At the end and after the change process

During the final phase as well as after the end of the change process, we need to remember to continue the dialogue with participants about their experiences, including what is working and what is not. This will give us the opportunity to reinforce the change and to make adjustments where aspects of the project are not living up to expectations. By doing so, we also help reinforce a learning and continuous improvement mindset. This is also the time to celebrate successes.

Understanding the phases of the change process allows us to recognize the type of conversation that would be beneficial in a particular context. Ultimately, it helps us communicate more effectively. That being said, these phases are not hard-and-fast and we can and should adjust our style of conversation as needed.

COMMUNICATIONS PRINCIPLES

1

CRAFTING OUR MESSAGE FOR MAXIMUM IMPACT

Before we start communicating about our change initiative, it can be most helpful to consult with the communications team. They have the training, tools and expertise to make sure our message is efficient, reaches the targeted audience and offers the users a good experience.

We always want to write using plain language so content is easier to understand and digest, specific information is easier to find, and users don't get frustrated and give up. Writing in plain language removes barriers between the message and the audience, simplifies ideas, ensures ideas flow logically and keeps our audience focused on the key points.

When determining how to present our content, we want to start with a structure that puts the most important and useful information first. We also want to apply a consistent and coherent call to action. What do we want the target audience to do or cease to do/change/understand/pass along?

It is important that our message takes into account organizational culture and operational context. We don't want to create requirements or expectations that are untenable in our organization. In order to avoid a negative situation we need to ensure we empathize with our audience and signal that we understand the reality on the ground (e.g., the pressures managers and employees are under).

2

CHOOSING THE BEST TIME TO COMMUNICATE

We know that there are cyclical peaks in HR and pay (e.g., hiring students for the summer, an increase in actings in summer and around holidays). So, when deciding when to communicate our message, it's important that we consider these cyclical peaks.

We also need to consider other major initiatives and communications campaigns occurring at the same time. We want to make sure that we don't work at cross-purposes, or that there are two or more major communications initiatives happening at the same time. A great approach is to identify related projects and establish a connection with the people in charge to better coordinate together.

When considering the timing of our communications campaign, we need to plan for the sustainability of the message over the long term. This means planning our ongoing communications, including sharing success stories and providing clarity on when/how we will be following up with our audience (and how they can contact us for more information). Ideally this should be done throughout the course of the change as part of establishing a dialogue.

Timing also means consciously choosing between being proactive versus reactive. An example of proactive communications is informing staff ahead of important changes or milestones, rather than focusing just on responding to staff inquiries after a change has happened. In some cases we will have little choice and will need to be reactive (e.g., when an unexpected problem arises). The idea here is that we're intentional in our planning so that we can ensure that all stakeholders are informed in a timely manner, by the right messenger, and in an authentic way.

3

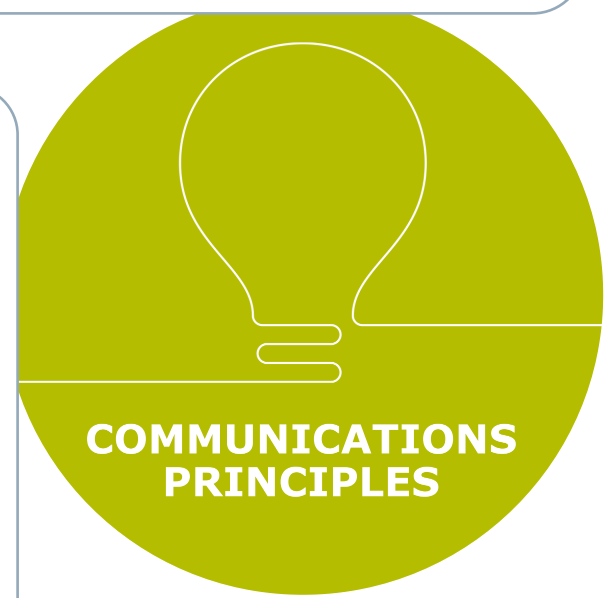
KNOWING AND UNDERSTANDING OUR AUDIENCES

We want to make sure we target the right audience and write our message tailored to their expectations and needs. A solid stakeholder analysis will help with that.

When determining who to send our messages to, what to include in the message, and what type of language to use to call them to action, we can ask ourself the following questions:

- Who would benefit from being informed?
- What do they need to do and how can they do it?
- How can we best support them?
- Who can support by acting as an ambassador for our message?

Answering those questions will help identify all the players who need to be kept informed and/or involved in a change, as well as determine the best approach to take with each group for a more personalized (or customised) approach.



4

SELECTING THE BEST COMBINATION OF CHANNELS

Research shows that people process information in a variety of ways, and that the optimal way of communicating is to use a combination of channels for our message (e.g., face-to-face, digital/graphic media, written). So, to improve the chances of success for our change outcome, it's important to vary which channels of communication we use throughout the process.

When deciding which channel of communication to use, it is helpful to take into consideration the type of message we are trying to communicate (e.g., new information or an expansion on previous messaging, urgent action required or just for information), the audience (e.g., department-wide or to a particular team or role), and the timing (e.g., during a time of high or low communications volume).

What's important for us here is not how often we communicate. In fact, overcommunicating can make our message seem like noise, and cause what some researchers call Information Fatigue Syndrome. This is produced by a bombardment of information and leads those receiving the information to tune it out, forget the key points, or make decisions contrary to the intention of the message.

Rather, the idea is that, similar to choosing the right messenger, we use our best judgement of which channel to use, and how often, based on our understanding of our organizational culture, the type of message we are sending, and our audience.

5

COLLABORATING TO AMPLIFY OUR COMMUNICATIONS

Collaborating with as many stakeholders as possible will allow us to avoid surprises and give them an opportunity to support our messaging effectively. It will also allow us to communicate with a coherent voice and offer tailored, consistent guidance for everyone.

Before we start our communications campaign, we need to ask ourself about the quality of the relationships we've built with our partners and stakeholders. Investing in building and maintaining relationships is a key success factor for a change initiative.

We are now circling back to our first principle, which involves fostering an ongoing dialogue early in the change process. This is a great way to build relationships with partners. It also helps us identify key participants in the change process and any concerns or questions they might have. If we have a wide range of partners (both in number and types of role) it may not be possible to work directly with all of those implicated. If this is the case, we want to try to make sure we engage a representative sample and even consider inviting them to share the messages more broadly. This is an excellent time again to leverage our stakeholder analysis to help us determine our level of effort for each stakeholder group.

WHERE DO WE GO NEXT?

By applying these principles in an integrated fashion, we can strengthen our efforts to change behaviours and the mindsets that drive them. In this way, we can improve our chances of success, generate synergy between partners, and increase the overall impact of our change work.

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