

## THREE WAYS TO TALK THE WALK OF CHANGE

Switching to a new, integrated computer platform made perfect business sense to senior management. They just forgot to tell anyone in the company why.

Employees started digging in their heels the moment the five-pound IT manuals were dropped on their desks. How were they supposed to keep up with workflow and learn the new system at the same time? How could this new platform possibly be good for business? Where did those IT manual writers learn English, anyway?

Change is hard for most people, and it always goes smoother if senior leadership communicates. An effective communication plan is a three-legged stool that includes impacting thoughts by providing relevant information about the proposed change, addressing feelings to acknowledge the emotional impacts of change, and supporting new behaviors that help people to be successful in the new environment (see figure below).

### THOUGHTS- The Right Information at the Right Time

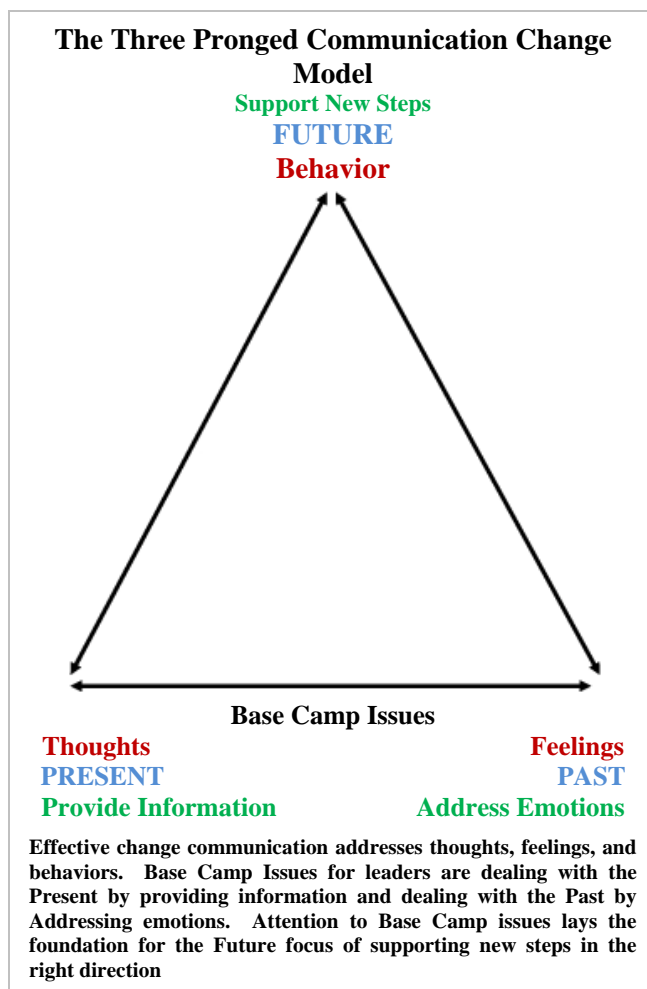
Leaders must provide employees with relevant information if they want change to move forward. Employees want to know why new systems or procedures are being deployed. What was wrong with the old way? How will the change make the company more successful? Why does a merger make sense?

Most of all, employees need information about how they will be personally affected by the change. What new skills will they need to master? What's the timeframe? How will their work experience be improved or made more difficult?

Since people have different learning styles, use a variety of methods to communicate the change. For initial communications, consider memos, email, town hall forums, team meetings, newsletters and one-to-one meetings. Repetition is helpful to understanding, so say the same thing multiple times in multiple ways.

For training some will love the five-pound manuals. Others will need a live person to walk them through. Some will thrive on videos they can watch or podcasts they can tune into during the day. Still others will need the 24 hour toll free hotline with a live person to walk them through middle of the night crises.

Whatever the medium of communication, make sure the information is laid out in an atmosphere of dialogue. Employees who feel they are engaged in a two-way conversation are employees who embrace change more boldly. Just because you transmit a message doesn't mean that others



receive it. The two-way dialogue increases mutual understanding - true communication.

Two-way conversations also signal a mutual learning environment. The most effective senior leaders learn from employees. Mutual learning results in leaders who address pertinent information and improve information sharing vehicles. The process is dynamic and not static. Mutual learning also increases trust, an important feeling for moving forward.

### **FEELINGS- The Fuel that Propels Us Forward or Keeps Us Stuck**

No matter how rationally the information is presented, people will have to deal with feelings. Change often signals loss – the loss of familiar patterns, confidence, a comfortable culture.

For some, change will mean relocating to another part of the country or losing significant coworkers. Employees need to face the past, with all the loss, fear and anger, if they are to tackle the future.

Addressing emotions means letting people express themselves and vent their grief, fears, anger or apprehension in an environment of safety. Ordering associates to simply “get on with it” will actually make it tougher for them to do so.

Organizations are usually comfortable talking about the benefits or the upside of change. They want everyone to be joyous and ecstatic about the new direction. For fear of sparking a spiral of emotions into the abyss of negativity, leaders usually avoid addressing grief and losses. Avoidance is what causes the negative spiral. The un-discussable is a clandestine background operator wreaking havoc on the organization.

Schedule small group meetings where employees can reflect on the legacy of the organization under the old system. What benefits and successes were achieved in the past? What is the solid foundation upon which the new system will rest? What part of the old legacy will remain and what will now be shed? What will we miss? How will we say goodbye or make the transition?

Listen to see where people are both succeeding and struggling. The honest conversation will highlight additional areas where leadership support is needed. Clearing the air from the past opens space for embracing the new. Addressing feelings is not encouraging whining and complaining as leaders fear but it is creating a forum for forward movement. Since people are both mind and emotions they embrace behavior change more readily when both the mind and emotions are engaged.

### **BEHAVIOR- The Walk that Goes with the Talk**

After thinking and feeling, some people are raring to adopt change. These trailblazers dive into the underbrush with machetes flying.

On the other end of the spectrum are total resisters, people who feel they are crossing a rope bridge swinging wildly over a deep chasm. Everyone in between is taking varying degrees of baby steps.

Instead of rushing everybody in the company or waiting for the slowest adopter to finally step off the bridge, leaders adopt adjustable movement. You meet people where they are and reinforce the small steps they are taking. Let the early adopters create pathways for those who come after them.

Welcome mistakes as learning opportunities or employees will be afraid to move. The company will undoubtedly experience a temporary slowdown as workers climb the learning curve. Leaders both signal and support the normalcy of the speed change.

Some employees will conclude that they no longer fit in with the company's future – they don't have the skills or don't feel comfortable in the new environment. Reassure these employees that it is OK to leave. People need to be where their passions and talents are the best fit.

### **FINAL THOUGHTS- An Eye to the Future**

Ongoing dialogue will facilitate change, as will continuous learning and improvement. If leaders build honest feedback mechanisms into their change plans, they will be able to assess their progress and make mid-course corrections. Remember to leave enough time to achieve each phase of the change communication process. Senior leaders often underestimate the time it takes to implement significant change.

When timelines and productivity goals are unrealistic, people become demoralized and feel the task is impossible. Even when progress is being made, people feel like failures because the bar is too high for the conditions. Effective change will probably take two or three times longer than you initially imagine so build this in from the beginning and adjust as you get additional feedback and information.

Change is an important learning opportunity not just a forced road march. What you learn together can strengthen the company and relationships between people in the organization. If you learn to learn well together, you can do it over and over. Change is inevitable so create an interactive change template that you can revisit again and again.

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