

Communication is crucial to managing change

Middle-level managers need to disseminate information to the workforce skillfully to ensure change is accepted and implemented effectively, writes **Deepti Ganapathy**



WORK FRONT

When organisations want to bring about change, it is often a merger/acquisition, a technological change, leadership change, reorganisation, response to regulatory change, or when facing new competitors – real or virtual. Though there are several aspects of change management, and a good amount of advice comes from external consultants on how to bring about this change, the major cause of failure in change is when employees learn of it through external sources.

Innumerable organisations encounter this failure when bringing about change. Upward communication in organisations was discussed in the 1950s. The upward communication of strategic ideas from middle managers is closely related to a novel perspective on the strategic process – not only top management but middle managers too can play an important role in the process of strategy formation.

A study of 21 Japanese firms found that ideas and opinions tend to be voluntarily sent up by middle level managers. However, top management communication (TMC) assumes that when information is conveyed, it covers all employees. Employees would rather receive communication from their immediate supervisors than from TMC. This is where it becomes imperative for middle-level managers to step in and take a proactive lead in their career.

Michael K Morrison, former Executive Director - Corporate Communication, Chrysler, said, "When Chrysler implemented its changes, the importance of simple principles such as 'tell your people first' were learnt." At Chrysler, senior executives including the chairman and president held regular town hall meetings (approximately two hours) with 200 or so employees at a time. The first 10 minutes of the meeting time was reserved for management remarks, the remaining time devoted to questions and answers. Morrison emphasized that nothing is off-limits. These meetings began at Chrysler in 1989 because of the massive cost cutting that required employee cooperation and collaboration. In the beginning, they were formally scheduled and coordinated through their corporate communications and human resources departments.

Today, management at Chrysler holds many such meetings, but they are less coordinated and less formal. Morrison sums it up by saying they happen all the time and are simply a part of the new culture.

In an increasingly complex world, communicating to employees within the organization and to stakeholders externally calls for a versatile and dynamic communication approach. This is a challenging task for middle-level managers especially when there a big change introduced from top management.

Communicating this change needs an approach that calls for both formal and informal ways. Communication needs to be designed, developed, delivered and managed efficiently.

Here is what middle-level managers can do to make sense of the change occurring around them and stay relevant at their position in the organisational structure:

Ask the right questions and listen to TMC

It is critical to communicate information, as the very objective of change is not achieved if this change is not reflected through actions. Failure to share information has a negative impact. When employees receive formal communication during uncertainty, they formulate their own ideas about what the change means and its purpose. These messages are decoded, circulated and recirculated in the organization. What does this mean? Often, employees at the frontline check again with the middle-level managers if the change being implemented is right on course.

It is a good practice for the middle-level managers to accept that they may not know everything and check back with TMC and follow through. This feedback loop makes the change effective.



- Employees should not learn about the change planned from external sources
- Without effective communication, reactions of employees can vary from anxiety to fear to curiosity and cynicism
- Middle-level managers should listen to and understand cues from non-verbal communication too
- The objectives of change are not achieved if the change is not reflected through actions

Read and articulate reports concerning the change

Employees should not be learning about the change from external source like the car radio or social media. A middle-level manager must be aware of what is being reported about this change in the external media sources.

This will equip the manager to further diffuse misinformation within the team.

Ability to manage difficult conversations within teams

The types of reactions from employees for different forms of change can vary from anxiety to fear to curiosity to cynicism. Listening to and understanding cues from non-verbal communication as well as being aware of cultural perspectives are necessary to communicate, while managing diversity and aligning this to the team's cultural context in the organization.

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