Reflections on Management
With Tom Galvin

Audio Transcript

If a Change Effort Fails, Was it Necessarily a Communication Failure?

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Please note: This transcript has been edited for clarity.

It is commonly assumed that ineffective communication can lead to unsuccessful change efforts, while good effective communications can bring about change success. But is that really a correlation? Are the success of change efforts and success of communication campaigns really correlated? One would certainly think so, given the way we talk about it. How readily one makes claims that the failed change meant that the leaders must have communicated it poorly. Well, I'm here to challenge that notion because I've seen it both ways where change failed despite a highly effective and well executed communication campaign and where change succeeded despite no one within the organization really knowing that change was happening. So really, to what extent is there a relationship between the success of the change effort and the success of its associated communication?

My name is Tom Galvin and these are my Reflections on Management.

There's absolutely no question popular change management literature and just about anything you would find on change is going to put a premium on communication. John Kotter in his book, Leading Change, says that change cannot be overcommunicated. In essence, the message has to be delivered a thousand times in order to try to keep hammering home the idea that the change effort is necessary.

There's nothing wrong with that. I mean, I agree to a certain extent. But in my experience, we're often too quick to blame the failure of a change effort on some aspect of poor communication, pointing to the change message and saying that it wasn't communicated adequately to everybody. Instead of saying the message a thousand times, you should have said it 1002 or 1003. [But] it's just not that simple, is it? Because sometimes -- I'm sure we've all experienced this -- sometimes you have a perfectly good, legitimate reason to execute a change, but the change effort is itself kind of dead on arrival because there are factors that just simply are beyond the leader's control, or the members control, or impacts from the environment that just make it impossible. [Or] Just make it improbable that the change effort was going to be successful.

You know, when that happens, it's going to fail. No matter how well the the change is communicated, we're sort of talking as if the burden is really on the communication. In truth, leaders, in my experience, actually do a fairly decent job across the board, communicating change. What do I mean by that? You know, if they have a vision, then there will be opportunities to explain the vision. It may be in person, it may be through remote means. It may be through the hierarchy. If you're in a hierarchical organization, the message is usually reasonably well constructed. It is distributed throughout the organization. There's a percentage of folks who will hear it and receive it,

and there's a percentage of folks who will just ignore it. But the effective campaign, at least in terms of performance, the message is in fact delivered to everybody, and that includes internal members and external stakeholders. In my experience, the message does get out.

So there's something else going on. When I hear 'communication failure,' my initial thought is, is that, well, it's got to be a catch all of some kind. It's got to be like a throw away explanation because something went wrong with the change effort. Change efforts are hard. They're complicated. So something went wrong and we don't know what to blame it on. We got to put the blame on somebody and we have the leader and the leader is the one in charge and the leader is culpable for everything that the organization does. Well, OK, then it's got to be the leaders fault in some way. That's fine.

But why then would you see change efforts succeed despite poor communication?

I've seen plenty of cases of that, actually, and some of it is just out of sheer will of the leader or sheer will of the guiding coalition. The cases that I've witnessed -- and I've been on a few guiding coalitions that did this -- is if you have something that is unpopular but needs to be done, you know, the best way to do it is to do it under the radar. You effectively do not communicate the change or you are very, very cautious about telling people what you're doing. [They do this,] "We're going to move these things around, play with the policies, play with the structures and poof, great things are going to happen and nobody's going to notice."

Oddly enough, that happens that that's successful more often than than not in an organization. If you're a little bit too public about what you're trying to do and you're somebody in the middle of the organization, then it's easy to get smacked down. But if you're doing it kind of behind the scenes, it can be done successfully. Now, I would not call that 'well communicated change.'

Another case that I see commonly, and that's where the external impetus is really driving the change. And it's almost like, you know, no matter what happens, failure to meet the mandate to meet a demand of an external stakeholders is just not an option. There's going to be successful. Change occurring may not necessarily be lasting, but by golly, it's going to happen and we're going to get the stakeholders off our back or we're going to just simply go ahead and do something across the organization that's needed just on sheer will of the leader and just say that the membership doesn't need to know why we're just going to do it.

That is not necessarily a bad thing. There are times where, you know, in crisis where an organization just absolutely has to do something. And I think everybody understands that tough times demand tough action and that, you know, the sheer will to get out of the crisis mode is impetus enough, even if the communication associated with it is messy.

There's certainly a lot of reason, you know, reasons to suggest that there's really somewhat of a level of independence between the change effort in the communication now and thinking about this and thinking about what happens, the camp. Pain is formed and the change effort is born. So when I've been thinking about the relationship between the change effort and its associated

communication effort and I'm talking about, you know, the the development of messages and the distribution of those messages, I can kind of explain them how these different outcome correlated, where the alignment and misalignment of outcomes between those two efforts can occur. And it's not because they're fully independent, but they are distinct. And I'm going to offer a sort of like a notional example of how this occurs.

So I just want to position you as in an organization, and it is at the point where the idea for change has come up. It has entered someone's mind. I think I've said in a earlier episode that to me, in my way of thinking, a change effort has begun once an idea has been floated from one individual to another. So if it's a change agent and it's floated an idea to the friend, well, you've incurred some sort of change because the expression of the idea causes a change in the recipient of that idea -- even if the idea is proven to be dumb [and] is not going to be pursued. You know, whatever the fact that the first person came up with the idea and communicated it means that the other person is going to know that that ideas out there, the change agent may very well follow up on a better version of that idea later with that as a premise.

Now, let's change this from the change agent to a leader, especially, say, at the executive level of the organization. Now, this is where it gets interesting because the leader is going to come up with the idea and the leader is going to communicate with home probably their inner circle of trusted advisers who are basically there to engage with the leader on their innermost thoughts, their the ideas shared. The leaders come up with an idea and shares the idea. Now, what's going on elsewhere in the organization? Well, it can get pretty chaotic because the presumption is the organization -- the ones who are not in that inner circle --- are always kind of a little bit nervous there. They are wondering what's going on in the boss's mind. And this is I mean, this is C.S. Lewis is the inner ring kind of stuff. I mean, his lectures on this is really, really brilliant because the entering the inner circle of the surrounding the leader, of course, is going to be protective of the leader's idea until it's mature enough to be shared. But everybody else wants to know what's going on. They want to know what the leader is thinking. And they're going to do everything they can to try to either get ahead of the leader or find out from the inner circle what's going on or whatever, because they don't want to be caught flatfooted. And this creates a certain amount of turmoil.

Once the idea is communicated outside of that inner circle, the the leader has already very much formulated their vision. They've already gone through what W. Warner Burke would call the pre-launch phase on the communication effort. Basically, everything's been done. The leader in the inner circle, you know, it's time to socialize this with the organization. "Let's get this idea out there and start letting people know what we're thinking and gathering information, whatever." At that point, the organization starts to hear about it. And now, they're saying,"Oh, so that's what the leader is thinking!" From the communication standpoint, the leader has just launched the communication. The staff, the membership thinks that the change effort is in pre-launch because we're in the information gathering phase. We're in the socialization phase. We're in the getting everybody in the organization on board phase. We're responding to the idea.

But the communication campaign has already launched because the vision has been formulated! It may change, but the purpose for socializing the change idea is less about whether or not we're

going to change. It's more about how when you're in pre-launch on the change side, you're thinking if if you're opposed to this change effort, you're wanting to find ways to squash it. But the decision has already been made!

When you really get down to it, it now takes a huge effort to try to unseat the idea that continues on socialization gets completed, and that socialization could be internal or external. Now we're thinking about all of the movement to the actual implementation. The staff has presented its courses of action, the plans in place. Now we're having the ribbon cutting ceremony or whatever it is for the change efforts launch. The communication campaign is already in post-launch. The communication campaign is about the effectiveness. I mean, we're out of the point of socializing and basically getting the message delivered. The leader is in post-launch wanting to see that it's carried through. Whether the communication has been effective in driving the change effort, so then the ribbon cutting happens, the change has been launched and moves on through the launch phase and into the post-launch phase. What's the leader doing? Quite possibly has already moved on to the next idea, because you think about the leader's time and energy at this point has been all devoted in this change effort in trying to get a change effort going.

And of course, in the leader's world, especially at the executive level, there are many, many demands which probably have been neglected to to a certain extent, it's time to get out and get back to that other business. It's time to come up with the next idea, because the leaders, always good leaders, have always got ideas. By the time that the change effort has been launched, the leader is already coming out of the post-launch on the communication side and is on to the next thing.

And I've seen this all the time. So there what you can see is that the change effort is in effect, one phase behind the associated communication campaign. The communication campaign is always ahead. What that would tell you is that there definitely are instances in which the if one side, one of them could succeed or fail and it may not have anything to do with the ultimate success or failure of the other. The more they're aligned, they could be reinforcing or they can be very detrimental to each other. Certainly [in the case of] a poor communication effort because it leads the change. If the communication is poor to begin with, then it's going to potentially contribute to chaos when the actual change effort is implemented. So that's understandable. But it's fascinating how different they are because of the demands of the leader and that we have to remember that the change effort is not in isolation with all the other change that could very well be going on in the organization. There are some very important implications.

The biggest one is one that is comical to watch, but its hell when you're in it. This is the notion of when you're the member of an organization and you think that the that the boss has come up with a bad idea, that you find yourself frustrated by the notion that the boss has made up their minds and they're just not willing to come off the effort. Again, it's because the communication is already moved much further ahead than the change effort itself. And the boss's perspective may very well be that whatever 'it' is that it's already overcome by events by the time the staff has come to the leader with all the problems.

Ok, this is not what the leader wants. The leader's mind has been made up. And so, as you know, certainly staffs who don't appreciate when was the actual decision made which might have been done in the inner circle. Well, ... If this becomes a pattern, if this becomes the way that the leader does things on a routine basis, you know, there's all sorts of issues -- trust related issues -- that can come up where the organization starts to build that resistance, where the possibility of change ideas coming into the leader's mind as opportunities, they begin to treat them as threats. That's a big implication. And the outcome of that is going to be a certain amount of defensiveness, a certain amount of change, fatigue or change cynicism.

The second implication is the importance of clarity of communication as opposed to quantity. Granted, again, you know, you can't overcommunicate change, but you can definitely leave a lot of messaging ambiguous, which can be dangerous. I think sometimes leaders can get unintentionally defensive when they're communicating change in an effort to try to avoid generating resistance or giving too much ammunition to organizational resistance. I think you really have to take the opposite because ambiguity, especially in large organizations, can can cause members at all levels to expend a lot of energy trying to understand what is really, really intended. How much input do they really have? To what extent does has the leader really made up his or her mind about every aspect of the change? Is it going to be mandated, how we're going to how we're going to do the change and or is it open to input so long as everybody understands that the decision to move forward has been made?

The guessing games is what's got to stop. And that's hard because the leaders are challenged to try to give messages that are clear both to external stakeholders and to internal members that are logically consistent. So this is this is really the big challenge. You know, as long as leaders understand that change in communications are a little bit out of sync with each other, they operate on different phases and different. Timelines, then it's a little bit easier, perhaps, to show better empathy towards members and be able to understand what their perspective is, what their expectations are, the clarity of communication will then make it easier for them to be able to build a change effort that really meets the leader's intent.

… And that's all for now. The views expressed are my own and do not necessary reflect the United States Army War College, the United States Army or the Department of Defense. Thank you for listening and have a great day.

All the Best!
Tom Galvin