Manager Guide for Communicating Change

Three steps to communicate change effectively

June 2021

Organizational Change Management Office
Product, Planning and Performance Division

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CHANGE IS THE NEW CONSTANT

The average organization has experienced five big changes in the past three years, and 75% expect even more across the next years.

Managers are key to change success because they communicate changes to employees, help them make the necessary changes to their tasks or behaviors, and help employees feel part of the larger change goals.

Organizations are overwhelmed by change

The typical organization has been through

5 changes
in the past three years

More than 75% of organizations expect

more changes
across the next three years.

Managers play a critical role in helping change succeed

Managers connect employees with the larger organization:

- They **communicate** change messages to employees.

- They help employees **implement** the required changes.

- They **engage** employees in feeling part of the change objectives and decisions.

Source: Gartner

Organizations believe that they must tell employees frequently about a change by emphasizing the positive implications for the individual.

Therefore, they build out detailed communication plans, and they give FAQs and talking points to managers.

However, with this approach, only one-fifth of employees have a strong understanding of the changes they are facing compared to nearly three times as many in organizations that build open, two-way conversations.

It also makes employees angry and anxious when they feel that managers don't listen to them and only follow the talking points they have been given.

TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION IS THE KEY

Frequently TELLING employees about change reduces understanding and increases anxiety or anger.

60%

50%

40%

30%

20%

10%

0%

20%

56%

Telling employees about change

Having a two-way converation about change
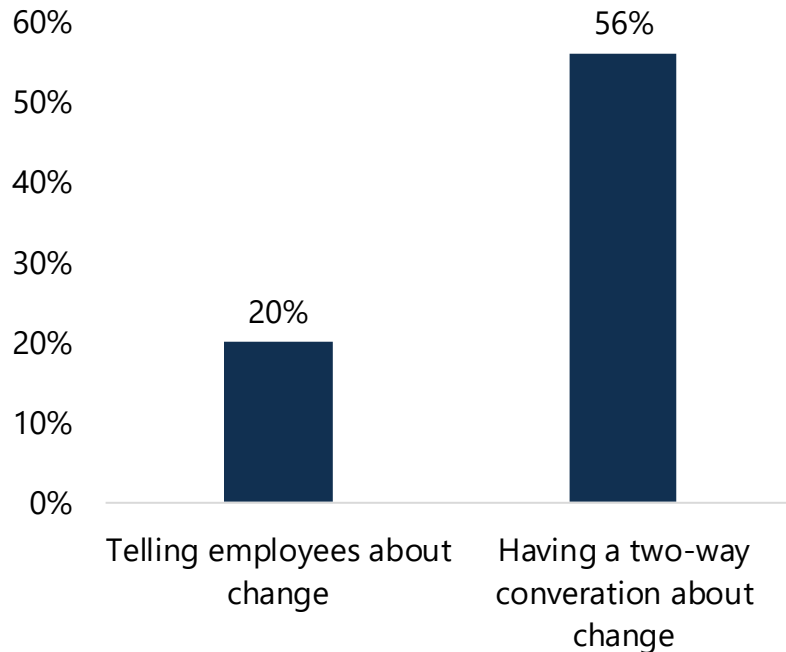
Employees are **5x** more likely to feel angry about a change than when involved in two-way conversations.

Source: Gartner/CEB Workforce Change Survey
Respondents were asked whether they understood how the change affected their team's work, their responsibilities, their role in the change, and who they needed to work with in order to be successful. Those who understood two or more of these aspects "understood the change."

Managers must understand how change will affect their team, have honest conversations to drive employee ownership, and support and approve how employees plan to implement change.

3 STEPS FOR MANAGERS TO BUILD SUCCESSFUL TWO-WAY CONVERSATIONS ABOUT CHANGE

01

Prepare the conversation

- Process your own emotional reaction to how you will be affected.

- Ensure you understand the implications of the change for your team.

02

Have the conversation

- Admit uncertainty and potential negative implications, where appropriate.

- Ask questions that stimulate employee reflection and action.

03

Continue the dialogue

- Advise and approve employees' plans for implementing the change.

- Have continuous conversations to identify obstacles and support implementation.

1. PREPARE FOR THE CONVERSATION

Managers should prepare for a change conversation by working through their own emotional reaction first and by ensuring that they understand the implications of the change for their direct reports.

Take the time to work through your own emotions so that you can support any struggling direct reports.

Your initial reaction can also be a helpful indicator of how employees will react.

If the change made you anxious or upset, you can assume that employees will have a similarly negative reaction, and you can prepare for it in advance.

Use these questions to ensure you understand your own emotional reaction to the change and how the change will affect the way your direct reports get their work done.

Process your own emotional reaction to how you will be affected.

❑ What was my initial reaction to the change? Did I feel anxious, frustrated, or excited?

❑ What was most the productive thing I did to work through these emotions?

❑ What can I learn from my reaction that might apply to how I communicate with my direct reports or how I approach the conversation? What tips would I give them?

❑ What should I do differently compared to how the change was communicated to me or how I have communicated changes in the past?

❑ Are there any peers or leaders whose approach to communicating change I admire? How can I imitate them?

Ensure you understand the implications of the change for your team.

❑ Why does the organization have to change and what will success look like?

❑ How does this affect my direct reports and their needs and tasks?

❑ Does it affect all of them in the same way?

❑ When will they be affected, and when do they need to make the changes?

❑ How do my direct reports' behaviors and decisions have to change because of this change? How dramatic will this change feel to them?

❑ What do I think are the obstacles and risks of implementing this change? What might they think?

❑ Is this change news to them, or are they likely to have heard about it already?

❑ Is there a perception of fatigue related to this or other changes? How relevant and how urgent is this information for them?

❑ Are there other priorities that I need my direct reports to focus on? How should they balance these with the new demands placed on them?

❑ Do I have enough information to help my direct reports think creatively about how to support the change? Can I address areas of uncertainty that lack sufficient information?

Managers should aim to build authentic conversations by involving employees in a two-way dialogue.

Don't be afraid to admit uncertainty; help employees find answers to their questions.

As a manager, you are expected to consistently communicate organizational messages.

You are in a good position to build an open and honest dialogue with employees that lets them know their concerns are taken seriously and they have a level of control over the change.

Employees' trust in leaders improves when they feel that leaders are honest and authentic instead of trying to "sell" them on the change.

Use the questions below to make sure your employees know how the change will affect them and to get them to take control of how they can make it a success.

Admit uncertainty and the potential negative implications, where appropriate.

❑ Am I acknowledging in clear language a reduction in the workforce, team transfers, impact on benefits, or job security?

❑ Am I acknowledging the personal stress of adjusting to new conditions? Am I acknowledging if my direct reports will need to build new capabilities?

❑ Do I articulate the outcome I expect from this change, and do I admit where I don't have the answers? Do I articulate what my direct reports should and shouldn't do and where they are free to experiment?

❑ Do I admit when I don't have answers to their questions, and do I know where to find them or can I help my direct reports find them?

Ask questions that stimulate employees to think strategically about how they will be affected and can contribute to the change.

❑ Why is this change important to the organization? Why is it important to our team?

❑ How does this change align with your own personal goals? How about with the goals of your teammates? How do you plan to contribute to making the change a success?

❑ What do you need to know to understand the goal? Who might have the answers? How can we measure if our goals were achieved in the short term? In the long term? What will be hard about executing this change?

❑ Which of our processes might need to be updated? Which other changes could result from this change? What needs to be adjusted in your work or the work of your peers and managers?

❑ Has the team or someone else experienced a similar change in the past that we can learn from? Who do you need to work with that you don't already?

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Use the checklist below to ensure you have an open, two-way conversation

Get employees involved in the conversation.

❑ Ask them to speak up: Indicate that you have some information to share but want to spend most of the time getting their reaction and ideas.

❑ Lead with their interests: Focus early discussion on the issue angles that directly impact employees. Ask open-ended questions: For example, "What could we be doing better?" or "What are we doing that works well?"

❑ Make it safe: Show genuine interest in different perspectives; avoid a critical or dismissive posture.

❑ Forge connections: Point out links or contrasts between employee opinions; aim to cultivate a "network effect" rather than a series of direct exchanges with you.

Be a Great Listener.

❑ Listen, then gather more facts and details: For example, "Tell me more about that," or "Keep going, I'm following you."

❑ Listen, then validate their challenges: For example, "It sounds like our current plan could make it hard for the team to stay ahead of deadlines."

❑ Listen, then clarify meanings: For example, "I hear you saying you are frustrated with the lack of transparency—is that right?"

❑ Listen, then encourage elaboration: For example, "Why do you think this problem is so hard to eliminate?"

❑ Listen, then invite discovery: For example, "What could we do to make things better?"

3. CONTINUE THE DIALOGUE

Change isn't done all at once and can change during implementation, so managers should frequently check in with their teams to align them with organizational goals and identify common obstacles.

Don't be tempted into thinking that your job as a messenger is done after the initial announcement; support employees throughout the implementation phase to uncover barriers and ensure sustained behavior changes.

Use the questions below to check in regularly with your direct reports on how they are making changes.

Advise and approve employees' plans for implementing the change.

❏ Review how your direct reports plan to implement the change using the questions below.

❏ Have my direct reports overlooked any activities or new behaviors they should be pursuing? Have they identified appropriate success measures that indicate adoption of the new behaviors? At the higher level, do team members share the same objectives and behaviors?

❏ Are different direct reports learning from each other regarding how they plan to implement the change? Have team members identified the same obstacles to change?

❏ What can I learn from managers in other parts of the organization as to how their teams are implementing the change?

❏ How can my team help other teams in making the change?

Have continuous conversations to identify obstacles and support implementation.

❏ It is hard to predict what change will look like in practice, so support your direct reports throughout implementation.

❏ Are new projects or initiatives I have assigned supporting or interfering with a direct report's change objectives or priorities?

❏ Are there any obstacles we did not foresee that I can help overcome, or that I should communicate up?

❏ Am I keeping my direct reports updated on changing organizational priorities?

Change Communication *Tips to live by*

Be thoughtful & clear

Too much information leads to confusion and irritation. Accurate and timely information is critical. Keep in mind that quantity is fine, but quality and consistency are crucial.

Be consistent

Centralized coordination of communication is key. Pay close attention to agency communications and adapt your messages accordingly.

Repeat messages

It is important to repeat key messages several times. Repeating key messages ensures that what you want to get across is heard by employees.

Involve not inform

Involving others in a change promotes ownership. Give people multiple opportunities to share concerns, ask questions, and offer ideas, and make following up with answers and updates a top priority.

Tailor to needs

Offer information pertinent to your team member's current frame of reference. Making a change is a personal choice so communications about change must resonate. To be effective, communications must get at what an employee cares about and values.

Face-to-face adds value

Face-to-face communication is the most effective form of communication. While it is more time intensive, do not underestimate the value face-to-face communication creates.

Manage expectations

Don't over-sell or wait too long to deliver bad news. Doing so jeopardizes credibility and sets your team up for disappointment.
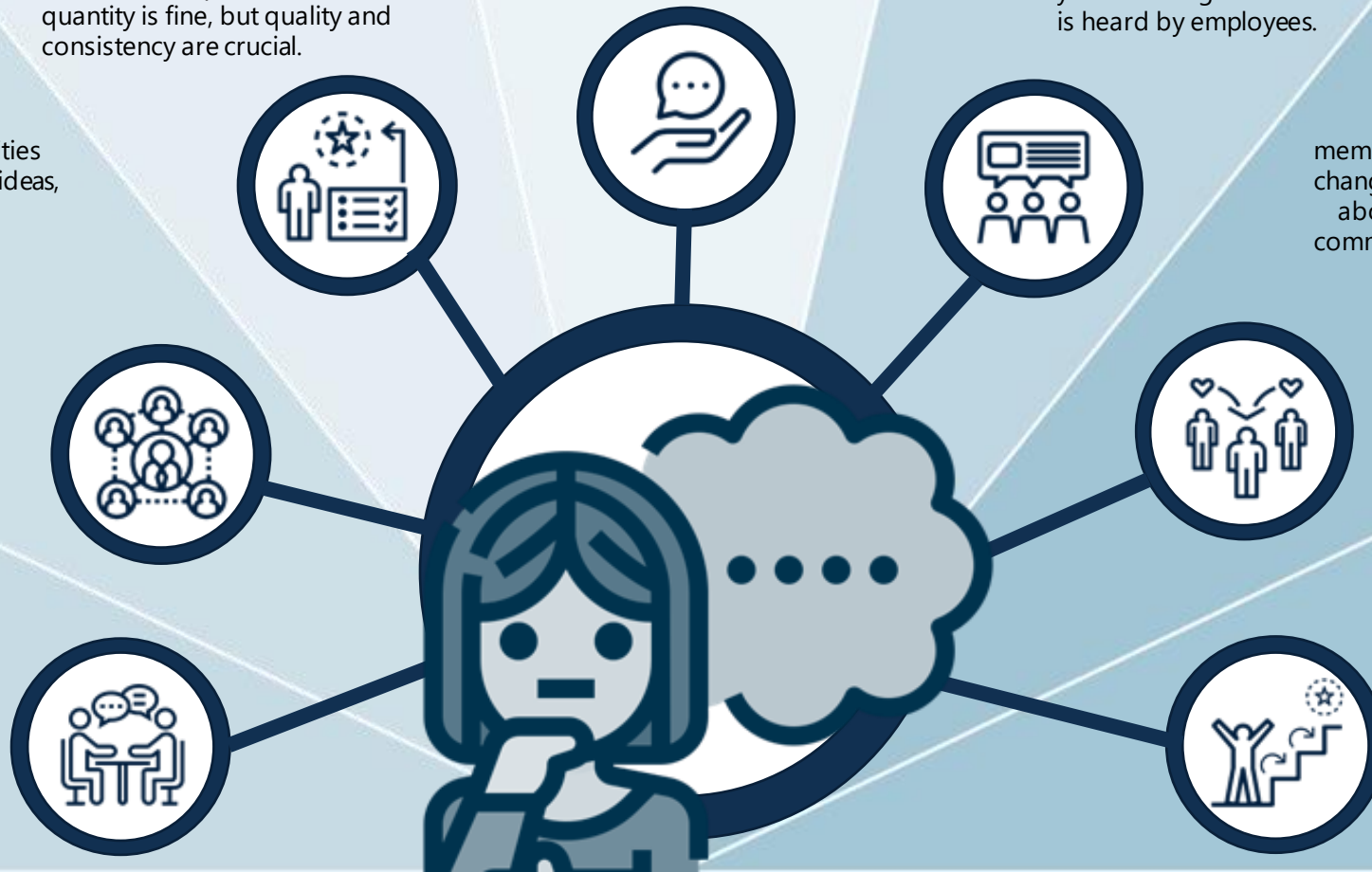
Questions or support?

Please reach out to ESD's Organizational Change Management team:

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Find us on InsideESD:
http://insideesd.wa.gov/resources/ocm