

Engagement and communication to manage change

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Communication and stakeholder engagement represent just one pillar of a robust change management programme, but without handling them effectively, change success is almost impossible to achieve. But what makes them effective?

There are a number of key elements, and in this expert series, we focus on one that is often missed or ignored - why you need to start early in the project.

Engage early for success!

One of my most memorable projects was a technology implementation where I was brought in eight weeks before go-live. The project used the waterfall method of development and had been two years in the making. Every department of the organization would be impacted when the system was rolled out. The business requirements had been gathered early on, but had not been revalidated after more than a year, and very little had been communicated to department leaders or users since then. And yet at go-live, everyone was going to be asked to do things differently.

Perhaps needless to say, I walked in to an environment where people were widely disgruntled, confused, uncertain, and sometimes, completely in the dark. That meant digging out of a deep hole just to get to even ground.

This situation could have been avoided if the engagement and change work started early in the project. What does early mean? Honestly, the closer to the beginning of the project, the better. The advantages to early engagement are many. Does this mean communication and engagement looks the same at the beginning of the project as in the middle or at go-live? Absolutely not. The stakeholders, means of engagement, and pace, breadth, and content of communication are different and should be aligned to each stage of a project.

The benefits of early engagement

Early in a project, perhaps before the project officially kicks off (companies view the start line of a project differently), a generally small set of stakeholders frames the project, looking at the scope, the business case, approach and solution alternatives. If a change manager is involved during this phase, it provides the opportunity to understand the big picture, the arguments, the players - all of which will be the foundation for later communications and engagement. The change manager can also give input on the change implications of project alternatives.

It is said that change disrupts 4 Cs: comfort, control, confidence and competence. To reduce change resistance, a change programme works to increase people's feeling of these 4 Cs. As one might imagine, doing this is a process, not a one-off effort. They are addressed throughout the project, with the stakeholders appropriate for the given phase of the project. In the early phase of the project, these are the leaders, decision-makers, and subject-matter experts. These stakeholders will be absolutely key as the project moves forward. It is critical that they are on-board, understand and support the change, so they can then support the change to further stakeholder groups. With a smaller set of stakeholders at this stage, don't miss the opportunity for face-to-face and one-on-one engagement.

Building relationships early on with influencers will allow you to start testing the waters for likely objections and the valid concerns that your programme needs to know to succeed. Even if you disagree with their objections, it's important to listen. Genuine listening builds relationships and trust, and this will pay off in spades throughout the project. Without trust people won't reveal what they are really thinking. With trust, they are more likely to try something new when asked.

Share the big picture

Communication content will evolve throughout the life of the project. But early on- defined as the stage when stakeholders are first learning of the project and change- everyone wants the big picture. The big picture provides the context for people. They want to know:

- Why is the company doing this – what's the benefit?
- How does this fit with the company's strategy and goals?
- What will change and when (at a high level)?

Along with these, you may want to add how you would like their help or input, how they can learn more, or when they can expect more information. Always add contact information! Stakeholders will need to hear the big picture message more than once. And when people grasp and accept the big picture, you will see confidence and comfort levels improving.

Sometimes companies hold back from communicating too soon as they don't think they have enough to say, or don't have the competencies in-house to craft the communication strategy and messages. Don't let this stop you from early engagement and communications. Even if you don't have the full detail of your big picture, two-way discussions with key stakeholders can be valuable. If you don't have the in-house resources, an experienced advisor can help even on a short-term or part-time basis.

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