Addressing Uncertainty during Workplace Change: Communication and Sense-Making

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Change is a commonplace occurrence in today's organizations. In order to survive in an extremely competitive marketplace, organizations and their employees undergo change frequently. The ability to manage change and to learn from this experience is now viewed as a key competency for sustainable competitiveness in most business markets. However, while change management processes are employed and followed, a high percentage of change efforts are judged to be unsuccessful by upper management. Moreover, a number of scholars suggest that communication strategies during organizational change are an important element to the success of a change initiative, yet such strategies are not given primacy in the research literature. This suggests the need to further investigate communication factors which aid in the successful implementation of change in the workplace. The purpose of this paper is to add to the discourse on communication and workplace change initiatives by reporting on a research project that explored communication actions which were employed and viewed as useful by those experiencing a change in the workplace. This paper will present the findings that emanated from the study and explore their meaning in relation to selected scholarly literature on communication and change. Suggested implications for practice and future research are also explored.

Change is a commonplace occurrence in today's organizations. In order to survive in an extremely competitive marketplace, organizations and their employees undergo change frequently. The ability to manage change and to learn from this experience is now viewed as a key competency for sustainable competitiveness in most business markets (Burnes, 2009; Connor, 1998). However, while change management processes are employed and followed, a high percentage of change efforts are judged to be unsuccessful by upper management (Armenakis, Harris, & Field, 1999; Clegg & Walsh, 2004). Moreover, a number of scholars suggest that communication strategies during organizational change are an important element to the success of a change initiative, yet such strategies are not given primacy in the research literature ("A critical analysis of communication approaches," 2012; Burnes, 2009). This suggests the need to further investigate communication factors which aid in the successful implementation of change in the workplace.

The purpose of this paper is to add to the discourse on communication and workplace change initiatives by reporting on a research project that explored communication actions which were employed and viewed as useful by those experiencing a change in the workplace. This paper will present the findings that emanated from the study and explore their meaning in relation to selected scholarly literature on communication and change.

The study took place in a quasi-governmental organization located in the south central region of the United States. The organization operates four general business lines within an operating budget of approximately 650 million, employing close to 2,500 individuals. The workplace change included new budgeting software and revisions to the chart of accounts. Through purposeful sampling, nine individuals were selected for the study. All of the study participants were involved in supporting the budget process. Three personal interviews and two critical incident reports were completed with each participant over the course of the change, which was a period of six months. All study participants were receptive to, and supportive of, the change initiative, and, therefore, the study focused on the implementation phase of the change

Three themes were identified through an analysis and evaluation of the data: individual experimentation, along with communication with coworkers, were important factors for sense-making and learning; contextual reasons for major modifications during implementation of the change, along with details of why and reasonable adjusted timeframes, facilitated study participants' handling of their roles and functions in support of the change efforts; and, statements of appreciation for their work, along with expressions of empathy, from management were valued by study participants.

The first theme aligns with a number of concepts contained in the literature on change communication and sense-making. The combination of taking action through experimentation in addition to dialogue with co-workers for help in problem-solving and/or confirmation of beliefs aligns with the concept of "social-mutual understanding"; a shared interpretation and understanding through interaction with others, a form of meaning creation ("A critical analysis of communication approaches," 2012). In addition, this theme very closely resembles the concept of sense-making as defined by Weick & Sutcliffe (2005) as the "interplay of action and interpretation" (p. 409), and includes such factors as being action oriented and involving the social system of the work environment.

The second theme appears to be supportive of the positions of scholars who advocate for ongoing and consistent communication that strives for clarity, the reduction of ambiguity in one's work, and an understanding of the expectations of management (Lewis, 2006; Duck, 1998). While study participants were receptive to the change they all reported experiencing uncertainty and frustration in their work with the new software system and the ongoing changes that occurred in the development of the new chart of accounts, within tight timeframes.

The final theme could be associated with the celebrating of accomplishments as asserted by a number of change transition scholars, along with the recognition and normalization of the internal feelings experienced by the employees involved with the change (Bridges, 2009). Aside from celebration serving as a ritual to mark the beginning of a "new normal", communicating success along with empathy appears to have addressed participants' personal efficacy, and had the potential of forming a strong achievement oriented group identity.

These findings suggest several implications for practice. First, while support for the change is critical there is also a need for communication during the implementation phase where much uncertainty and ambiguity can occur. In addition, it appears that sense-making is a social phenomenon that occurs within credible circles of workers. This would suggest the need for management to assist in strengthening intragroup communication, through such means as arranging physical space strategically that will allow for, and encourage, interactive dialogue; conducting frequent meetings of working groups to discuss and problem-solve issues that arise; and, advocate for information in areas that need to be addressed. In addition, it appears that recognition of the anxiety brought on by uncertainty and ambiguity is helpful in minimizing frustration and allowing for continued motivation of employees to pursue problem-solving. Management may play a significant role in modeling behavior through the way they frame an issue and by acting in a problem-solving manner. Lastly, success can enhance confidence and competence, and the recognition of success by management through spoken and/or written words could send messages of personal and group mastery along with a sense of personal value.

There are limitations to this study. This is a single case study with limited participants who were of the same professional field and worked within the same corporate culture. Future studies should be conducted that explore communication and sense-making actions during the implementation phase of a change for those in different professions and from different organizations in order to assess similarities and differences with the findings from this study.

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