Leadership Communication for Change Management in the COVID-19 Era: A Discussion

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Abstract:

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic introduced unprecedented challenges that demanded swift and effective communication from leadership to steer organizations through a landscape of uncertainty. In this context, the significance of effective leadership communication has risen to prominence as a pivotal element in maneuvering through these turbulent circumstances. This research paper delves into the imperative role that leadership communication plays during the era of COVID-19, delving into its ramifications on employee well-being, organizational resilience, and crisis management. Through an extensive exploration of pertinent literature and real-world case studies, this study sheds light on the strategies and optimal approaches that leaders can adopt to cultivate communication that is transparent, empathetic, and intelligible during the pandemic's upheaval. The research underscores the critical nature of communication that is not only transparent and empathetic but also adaptive, underlining its capacity to establish trust, preserve organizational coherence, and facilitate proficient decision-making. By emphasizing the pivotal nature of leadership communication, this paper extends valuable insights to organizations aiming to navigate the intricate intricacies of the COVID-19 era with success.

Keywords: leadership communication, COVID-19, crisis communication, employee engagement, organizational resilience, transparency, empathy, adaptability

1. Introduction

1.1 Change management during COVID 19

Change management is frequently characterized as a procedure aimed at instigating adaptation, revitalization, alteration, or even a complete upheaval in the manner in which an organization conducts its regular operations. Furthermore, in the midst of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, the significance of change management has been underscored as a crucial factor enabling certain organizations to thrive and others to endure (Hartmann &Lussier, 2020; Kuckertz et al., 2020; Sobieralski, 2020). However, change management encompasses more than just the methods or the reasons; it also centers on the individuals involved in the

process**.**According to McKinsey's 2020 report, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic prompted new business approaches, compelling organizations to transform their operations and rethink the role of office spaces in fostering secure and successful careers (Catalyst, 2020; McKinsey, 2020b; PwC, 2020a; World Economic Forum, 2020b). The pandemic exposed existing vulnerabilities in business, particularly in transitioning from physical to virtual interactions. This shift allowed companies to determine the necessity of in-person interactions for certain roles and shed light on effective alternatives (BCG, 2020; PwC, 2020b). Consequently, the importance of leadership communication has gained prominence.

1.2 ResistancetoChange

Multiple rationales contribute to resistance, encompassing misconceptions about the necessity for change, apprehensions related to the unknown, deficiencies in skills, comfort with existing practices, absence of involvement in decision-making, inadequate communication, diminished trust, and feelings of fatigue or saturation. The spectrum of reasons behind this resistance includes a preference for maintaining the status quo and reluctance to step out of comfort zones (Goodman & Rousseau, 2004), fear stemming from uncertainties (Howell, 2005), anxiety provoked by the prospect of acquiring new skills (Quick & Gavin, 2000), apprehension about job loss and relinquishing control over job performance (Sandberg, 2005), as well as the insecurity provoked by adopting novel work methods (Gray & Starke, 1984).Lehman et al. (2002) conducted a comprehensive assessment of the concept "organization functioning and readiness for change." They established that this model possesses satisfactory psychometric properties. Furthermore, they contend that delving into functional barriers facilitates a more nuanced study of organizational change. Of noteworthy significance is the extent to which an individual is affected by the change. Higher levels of change impact tend to correlate with increased resistance, as suggested by Kyle (1993). Resistance to change has long been recognized as a significant hurdle in organizational change endeavors (Lawrence, 1954; Lewin, 1947).

Effective communication is underscored by behaviors such as responsiveness, transparency, and adaptability (Naor et al., 2010). It is incumbent upon organizational leadership to communicate to all stakeholders (Nordin et al., 2011) the genuine objectives of the change initiative— sustaining competitiveness in the global arena. Amidst this journey, the distinction between leadership and management becomes clear: leadership propels change initiatives, whereas management maintains stability; leadership centers on people, while management revolves around processes, implementation, and systems (Bush, 2007).

Resisting change can prove challenging both for individuals and organizations (Moon, 2009). Leaders are tasked with a multifaceted challenge: serving as a positive exemplar, empowering others, validating relevance, and cultivating the commitment necessary for constructive change. This approach mitigates conflict, effectively resolves disputes, and diminishes obstructive resistance within the workplace (Ozmete& Hira, 2011).

Furthermore, resistance to change is contingent upon the significance of tradition in the cultural context. As Kotter and Cohen (2002) assert, "people alter their actions less due to analytical

persuasion than they do because they encounter a truth that resonates with their emotions".

2. **Leadership, communication and organizational Change: Literature review**

The significance of leadership becomes evident in the context of change, as it involves addressing the requisite skills and roles of leaders for effective organizational change management. This involves establishing connections between change, organizational change, change management, and leadership literature (Harlak, 2018). Furthermore, leaders are entrusted with the responsibility of ensuring that the change process aligns harmoniously and cohesively with the business's strategies, policies, visions, goals, objectives, values, and beliefs, thereby facilitating proficient change management.

An exploratory study by Khan et al. (2016) underscores the pivotal role of leadership in change management, emphasizing the need for leaders to possess diverse qualities, attributes, and styles, such as visionary leadership and innovative approaches, to foster successful organizational change. Through empirical evidence derived from a qualitative case study conducted at NDPL (India), Bhatnagar et al. (2010) delve into the crucial role of cultivating employee trust and a sense of belonging in effectively driving transformations within the organization.

Recognizing that effective communication is integral to successful change, HR professionals must manage the distribution of messages and the messengers themselves. Maintaining transparent communication with employees is essential for clarity and to avert misunderstandings regarding desired changes (Robbins & Judge, 2009). Different forms of change, including technological, structural, and shifts in work roles, can influence employee trust in management (Morgan &Zeffane, 2010). This study concludes that direct engagement between senior management and employees significantly impacts the change process.

Adeniji et al. (2013) contribute a model illustrating the relationship between human resource intervention strategies and the effectiveness of organizational change. Nellison & Selm (2008) investigate the correlation between management communication and the positive or negative outcomes of planned organizational change. Their findings indicate that leadership communication plays a pivotal role, with positive responses growing over the course of the change process in contrast to initial negative responses.

Qjan & Daniels (2008) introduce a communication model concerning employee cynicism during organizational change, utilizing the Social Information Processing framework. This model demonstrates that perceived information quality, cynicism among colleagues, and trust in administration contribute to the intent to resist change. Elving (2005) presents a framework for studying communication's role in preventing resistance to organizational change. Internal communication plays a positive role in the change management process, and feelings of uncertainty influence the change effort's efficacy (Kitchen & Finbarr, 2002).

A company encompasses more than just compensating individuals for their labor; it's also about fostering a sense of pride in their work and cultivating collaboration and innovation in new ways

of conducting business as usual (Baran, 2010). Furthermore, within an interactive and productive learning organization community, the acknowledgment and nurturing of workplace communication serve to disseminate new knowledge throughout.

Transformational leaders inspire others to contribute to necessary changes. Proficiency in relationship management, where self-awareness, self-management, and empathy converge, is pivotal for transformational leaders (Kotlyar et al., 2011). During change requirements, transformational leaders guide individuals toward shared aspirations, providing clarity and fostering team commitment (Stevens, 2011).Effective communication encompasses responsiveness, openness, and flexibility (Salem, 2008).

In the absence of senior leadership's explanation, the change may be misperceived by many within the organization as a betrayal of fundamental beliefs and values (Chreim, 2006). The manner in which information is disseminated during change holds comparable importance to the eventual resolution. Leadership plays a pivotal role in communicating with all stakeholders during change events (Garcia, 2006). To effectively implement change, organizational leaders need to communicate comprehensively with internal stakeholders such as leaders, managers, employees, unions, activists, as well as external stakeholders including stockholders, vendors, consumers, government bodies, and community groups (Fusch & Gillespie, 2012, p. 57). Leaders, acting as mediators, wield significant influence over the organization's response to change through their communication and conflict resolution approaches(Adner & Snow, 2010; Salem, 2008).

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, business leaders need to swiftly address change to safeguard customers, employees, and communities while transitioning to a new business-as-usual model for growth and survival (Hartmann &Lussier, 2020; Kuckertz et al., 2020; Sobieralski, 2020).

The impact of leadership on subordinates' perception of effective implementation during significant reductions in workforce is well-established (Appelbaum et al., 1999; Luan et al., 2013). Companies facing challenges in adapting to the global market often resort to necessary downsizing, and leadership is crucial in managing a potentially demoralized workforce (Bragger et al., 2013). In such scenarios, leadership necessitates new strategies, roles, responsibilities, and a comprehensive plan encompassing outplacement services, severance packages, employee transfers, and addressing survivor syndrome (Sherman & Garland, 2007). Effective management and leadership yield improved profitability and productivity (Buehlmann et al., 2007), while inadequate planning can lead to absenteeism, excessive turnover, and legal issues stemming from employee fears and uncertainties (Iverson &Zatzick, 2011).

The official organizational chart often doesn't accurately portray the true power dynamics and informal communication pathways within a company (Eshraghi & Salehi, 2010). Successful implementation of change initiatives is often most effective when led internally by those who

understand the interconnectedness of various components (Miller et al., 2010). These internal experts possess insights into the underlying dynamics of change, especially among employees closely tied to the transformation (Miller et al., 2010). Trust is a crucial element for effective communication (Maria, 2009), not only for overall organizational success but especially during change implementation (Maria, 2009). Many established organizational systems resist change and strategic efforts (Salem, 2008), highlighting the vital role of skillful communication. Uncertainty in the workplace can impact employee morale and productivity, necessitating management to address these perceived challenges during change introduction. Emotional responses to change may not always be rational but can linger longer than practical concerns, reflecting an individual's self-concept in the work environment (Sherman & Garland, 2007).

Leaders not only allocate resources but also recognize the importance of delegating authority for effective task completion (De Vries et al., 2010). They should foster shared vision, enthusiasm, and emphasize soft skills (Fallesen et al., 2011). Maintaining open communication between leadership and all members (Nordin et al., 2011) is crucial to convey the organization's true goals and remain competitive globally.

3. Importance of Leadership Communication during a change: Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown every aspect of life into disarray, disrupting personal interactions and global economies alike. In this formidable backdrop, the importance of effective leadership communication has risen as a pivotal element for both organizations and individuals. The capacity of leaders to communicate with transparency, empathy, and resoluteness stands as a crucial factor in instilling purpose, curbing uncertainty, and nurturing resilience when confronting unparalleled challenges (Avolio & Hannah, 2020; Men, 2021).

Senior leadership and management bear the responsibility to effectively communicate information. The selection of language and phrasing assumes significance in the management of change initiatives (Thurlow & Mills, 2009). Certain adaptations encourage innovation, while others discourage deviations from established norms and established communication patterns (Thurlow & Mills, 2009; Weick, 2011).

When transformative change unfolds, the framing and communication approaches transform as well (Goleman et al., 2010). Responsiveness, openness, and adaptability emerge as pivotal components of effective communication amidst change (Naor et al., 2010). Effective change management hinges on articulating the need for change as well as the process to others. Neglecting the wider ramifications within the entire system can undermine the change process (Kotter, 1996). Change initiatives necessitate action plans, often regarded as vital tools for optimizing organizational efficiency, yet regrettably underutilized by leaders and managers. Needless to say, the most comprehensive action plans are rendered ineffectual unless leaders can effectively communicate to subordinates (Salem, 2008) what needs to be done, when, why, how, and by whom.

Organizational change can manifest in either episodic or continual forms. In the end, for any initiative to succeed, leadership must secure employee commitment (Chreim, 2006). The formal organizational hierarchy doesn't always accurately reflect the distribution of power within the company or the true nature of informal communication channels (Eshraghi & Salehi, 2010). A change initiative doesn't necessarily need to be sweeping; it can be a minor adjustment with significant impacts. Similarly, the effectiveness of change implementation doesn't always hinge on a person's position within the organization. Often, the leadership of an individual sitting at the adjacent desk can significantly influence change adoption.

The importance of organizational change is heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic. The International Labor Organization (ILO) projected that approximately 436 million companies will experience substantial business disruption and subsequent change. The ILO also noted that "around 68 percent of the world's total workforce, including 81 percent of employers and 66 percent of own-account workers, are currently living in countries with recommended or required workplace closures" (ILO, 2020, p. 2).

4. Strategies for Effective Leadership Communication:

4.1 **Employee Well-being and Engagement:** The emergence of remote work, social isolation, and heightened anxiety in the wake of the pandemic has underscored the significance of employee well-being and engagement. Leaders who prioritize consistent communication and demonstrate genuine empathy contribute significantly to maintaining the well-being and engagement of their workforce (Huang et al., 2020). It is of utmost importance for leaders to exhibit empathy towards employees' concerns and challenges. By conveying authentic care and understanding, leaders can alleviate stress and uplift morale, ultimately fostering heightened employee loyalty and productivity (Grossman, 2020). Leaders should be attuned to the well-being of their employees, acknowledging the emotional toll of the crisis, and providing resources to effectively manage stress and maintain a healthy work-life balance (Men, 2021).

4.2 **Crisis Management and Decision Making:** Effective leadership communication plays a pivotal role in crisis management. Leaders who furnish accurate information, acknowledge the existing challenges, and communicate adaptive strategies enhance the organization's readiness and responsiveness to crises (Huang et al., 2020). Timely and transparent communication is pivotal for expeditious decision-making, preventing confusion and panic (Men, 2021).

4.3 **Organizational Resilience:** Building and maintaining organizational resilience is imperative during times of crisis. Leaders who communicate a clear vision, foster open dialogue, and endorse innovative problem-solving empower the organization to adapt and persevere (Avolio & Hannah, 2020). Transparent communication about the organization's obstacles, strategies, and alterations nurtures a shared commitment to overcoming adversity (Huang et al., 2020).

4.4 **Transparent Communication:** Transparency in communication is paramount when navigating crises. Leaders must provide precise and punctual information regarding the

pandemic's ramifications for the organization, operational adjustments, and measures to ensure employee safety. This practice nurtures trust and alleviates anxiety among employees (Smith, 2020). Regularly disseminating accurate updates regarding the pandemic's impact on the organization, safety measures, and forthcoming plans is essential for maintaining clarity (Avolio & Hannah, 2020).

4.5 **Multichannel Communication:** The utilization of diverse communication channels, such as video conferencing, emails, intranet platforms, and social media, facilitates the efficient conveyance of information to both remote and on-site employees (Men, 2021).

4.6 **Two-Way Communication:** Nurturing an environment of open dialogue, soliciting feedback, and addressing questions promptly is pivotal. Actively listening to employee concerns and responding to them in a timely manner is crucial (Huang et al., 2020). Encouraging a workplace culture where employees can freely express concerns, offer suggestions, and contribute ideas cultivates a sense of ownership and collaborative problem-solving (Poulsen, 2020).

4.7 **Adaptive Leadership:** Adapting communication styles to suit different situations and audiences is paramount. Tailoring messages to provide relevant information and guidance demonstrates effective leadership (Avolio & Hannah, 2020). The ability to customize communication to cater to individual and team needs is vital. Some employees might benefit from more frequent updates, while others may require additional support during periods of uncertainty (Maitland, 2020).

4.8 **Clarity and Authenticity:** Leaders must provide unequivocal guidelines for remote work expectations, communication protocols, and performance evaluation (McGregor, 2020). Furthermore, leaders who infuse authenticity into their messaging by sharing personal experiences and challenges forge deeper connections with their teams, fostering a sense of unity (Giang, 2020). Regularly scheduled virtual check-ins are essential to sustain connections and address queries or concerns promptly (Llopis, 2020).

Conclusion:

In a dynamic world where change is the sole constant, an organization's capacity to swiftly respond to emerging opportunities and threats holds paramount importance for its sustained prosperity. Amidst the global pandemic of COVID-19, organizational leaders have been compelled to promptly navigate change to safeguard customers, employees, and the surrounding communities. Simultaneously, they must embrace new norms to ensure survival and growth. The COVID-19 crisis has underscored the significance of leadership communication as an invaluable tool for addressing unprecedented challenges. Effective leadership communication in this era is pivotal to steering organizations through uncharted waters. Employing transparent, empathetic, and multi-faceted communication strategies is essential in upholding employee engagement, reinforcing organizational resilience, and nurturing a shared sense of purpose. Transparent, empathetic, and adaptable communication strategies serve as pillars for promoting employee well-being, bolstering organizational resilience, and proficiently managing crises. By

implementing these communication strategies, leaders adeptly guide their organizations through the uncertainties of the COVID-19 era, fostering cohesion, active involvement, and achievement. Recognizing the pivotal role of leadership buy-in and communication stands as a pivotal element in achieving successful change.

Limitations of the paper: Considering the time constraints, an only in-depth literature review has been incorporated in this paper. The research papers reviewed so far leave a scope for industry or sector-specific primary research that need to be empirically conducted to gain further evidence and a better understanding of the related concepts.

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