Communication: The launching point to lead high impact strategic change.

Communication is a key factor to facilitate people get ready, want and can adapt to change. Without it, the efforts to introduce a change and/or lead a strategic transition may be null and/or counterproductive. Thus, this article explores as in the so-called "change trips and/or organizational transitions started upon introducing a strategic change". Communication will go beyond simply hold information meetings, send out emails and/or make any sporadic campaign that highlights the benefits of making things in a different way. Are you ready to get started?

Scope

Why sometimes, although a company has a strong and well founded work plan to introduce strategic change this instead of being accepted is rejected? Why if sometimes resources (money + time) have been invested to design and develop a new technological system, a new work model and/or simply to attempt introducing a new way to operate; this investment is lost; this because the moment people learns about the arrival of a new way of doing things, people rejects the model? Although in order to answer the previous questions - from the change management perspective - there is a variety of risks that may have influence in the rejection of the new model. This range from those that are directly inherent to the organization (such as: lack of alignment of the new model to the strategy, lack of agreement of the heads, resistance, a lack of financial resources and/or lack of time, as well as culture itself); to those that are directly linked to individuals who will experience the change (such as their own level of motivation and the distractors that they experience throughout the organizational transition). In this article, the approach is to see communication as one of the crucial risks that are directly in the hands of the team who plan to introduce the corresponding change, as described in the following diagram:

Title: The three levels of change: Individual, team and organization. Source: Kamaleo

Going back to the point that introducing a strategic change in an organization is not a mechanical process but a trip where there will be ups and downs, good times and moments of tension...and the like, a series of many experiences. Communication is something like a launching point, the flag or what is setting the road and/or measuring the spirits and strength to know if it is necessary to speed up or slow down the pace. This departing from a perspective that a person, team or organization may get committed with the new model and adopt it, it is necessary to go through different stages as described in the following graph:

Commitment and adopting

Positive perception

Understanding

Degree of commitment

Notion

Time
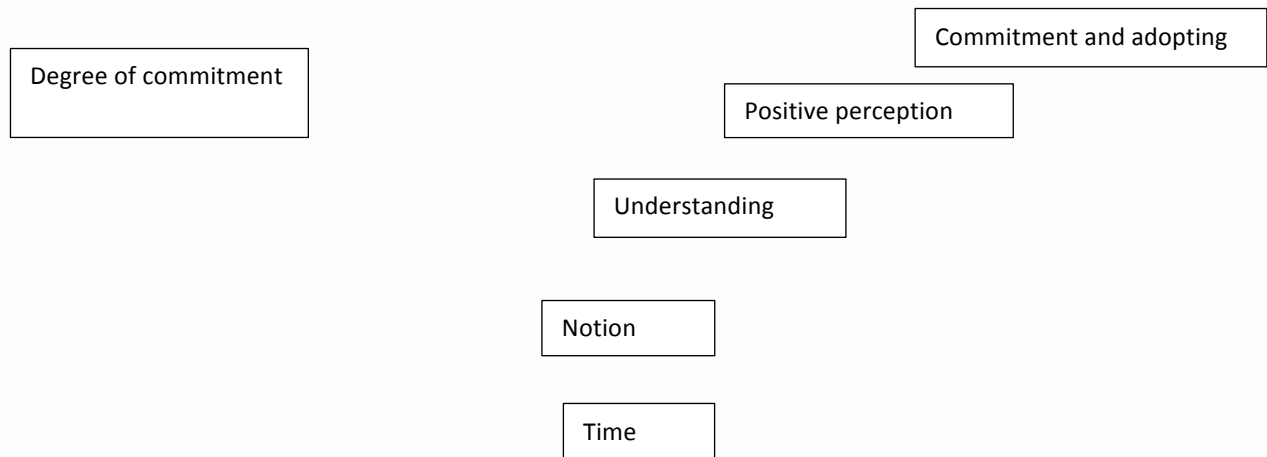
Thus, in order to assure that such launching point is strong, it is important to complete

The strategic perspective: It is the departing point to assure that a change program has a high-caliber launching point is to respond to questions as simple as the following:

What does change consist of?

Is this change directly linked with a specific strategy? Is there a

business case that supports the introduction of this change?

Are the heads or top management team aligned with respect to the nature and value of this change?

Is there clarity with respect to the meaning and scope of this

change? Is the change timetable known?

What are the different audiences? That is, the different groups to which the change is going to mean different things (they may be organizational entities such as the purchase, production, IT, logistics teams, etc. or

top management, or managers or operative teams, or the people at the points of sale and/or the administrative people, or the branches in other states and the main facility, etc.

- What are the benefits associated to this change?
- Do people already know or have been informed with respect to these benefits?

Now, having found the answers to these questions, then we have the raw material to then develop a plan that supports the introduction of strategic change. It is worth stating, as something directly related to this plan that from an integral approach, the highly effective communication plans generally take into consideration the following three stages in their making:

Analysis: Stage where the key variables are explored and identified in order to have solid bases to proceed to make a high impact plan:

1. Define the mission of the communication plan.
2. Determine the objectives of the plan.
3. Develop the goals of the plan.
4. Perform audits on communication (means, history, impact indicators, etc.).
5. Identify audiences (primary and secondary).

Design and Development: Stage in which departing from a solid reference framework, it is proceeded to "create a plan and to initiate the development" of a communication plan through actions such as those briefly indicated as follows:

1. Identify what has to be done, when and who are the ones responsible to execute the different communication activities. In other words, set the basis to make things happen with the support of the plan.
2. Create a communication calendar identifying, throughout time, the means of communication or what audiences have to be reached (make reference to Appendix A).
3. Make the nature of the messages that have to be created. In other words, what is intended to be communicated to the different audiences throughout time to precisely go from the ignorance stage to the positive appreciation stage and later to the commitment and adoption stage?
4. Identify the means to be used, which are to be compatible with the organizational culture in order to have a high impact:

a. People: Periodic meetings, coffee talks, presentations, strengthening informal networks, etc.
b. Technology: Telephone calls, video conferences, intranet, web page, voice message, cell messages, etc.
c. Printed: Newspapers, posters, leaflets, letters, etc.
d. Other: Blackboards, ambassadors program, souvenirs, etc.

5.   Create the matrix of messages from the following table:

Message:	Date of launching	Person responsible of execution	Communication Milestones	Milestones of the project (Key Events)	Primary Audience	Other Audiences

The foregoing in order to have clarity on what to say, to whom, how and under what timetable to inform the different audiences so that they become sensitive on the nature and scope of the coming change. So that people, thanks to communication, though time, get ready, want and can embrace the corresponding change.

Execution: Stage when the action is started in such an orderly, definite and flexible fashion. This, both to promote the credibility of the initiative and to generate an open and transparent dialogue with people.

1. Generate and/or tune up the communication plan.
2. Execute the plan: It is during this stage that the combination of the two elements will be crucial:

3. That the issuances are timely, if it has been informed that a means (for example, a virtual newspaper) will be issued every two weeks on Thursdays; that is, every Thursday every two weeks, but not a day before or after.
4. To assess that a message is sent out at the right time may make the difference between the success and failure of the entire initiative.
5. Evaluate the plan: Is it working? What modifications are necessary to make?
6. Perform reviews.

The operative perspective: Now, although it is true that a communication plan Is crucial to assure that people at first get familiarized with the change and then adopts it; from a practical perspective, the following questions as well as the communication matrix are crucial factors to develop an effective communication program:

1. Who is responsible of the communication of the company and/or within the implementation team?
2. What are the most used means to reach the different audiences and/or interest groups within the company? "Face to face", virtual, telephone meetings, videoconferences, email, newspapers, leaflets, billboards, circular letters, videos, comics, etc.
3. In the past, what was the budget for variable communication within a project?
4. Is at this time known the effectiveness of the means used?
5. Who is responsible of handling the list of all the employees and/or of the corresponding audiences?

At the same time, if besides of having a work plan (MS project or other tool) it is wished to generate a general written strategy of the communication program, this index may be useful:
1. Executive Summary
2. Situation Analysis
3. Role of communication in the initiative: Contribute to people to be ready, want and can embrace a change.
4. Roles and responsibilities of communication.

5. Communication strategy.
   a. The vision of effort (nature and scope).
   b. The logo and slogan (characteristics that were considered in its design and development to support the project or the corresponding initiative).
   c. The means used to support the communication effort (according to applicable the culture and budget).
6. Analysis of the audience.
7. Communication planning.
   a. Deliverables.
   b. Means.
   c. Staff Responsible
8. Recommendations.
9. Appendixes.
   a. Communication Matrix.
   b. Communication Timetable.
   c. Live examples of the materials created.

The tactic perspective: Already having a communication plan, the matrix and the calendar of the actions; something that is essential to have throughout the initiative is to stop to review some tactic points that may also become factors that make the difference to support a specific initiative.

1. Besides the organization chart, have we had the opportunity to identify how the information networks have reacted within the company and/or the different groups of interest?
2. If the implementation plan had a delay or any unforeseen event, should this situation still be communicated? Of course it should! To this respect, remember that the most important thing is to bear in mind that communication is a 2-way mechanism. On the one hand, it allows informing the status of the project to make credibility among the different groups and/or audiences. It also allows to identify what people thinks or how they are reacting to what they are being informed. That is, what are the most frequent questions, their concerns, fears, etc., since this is precisely this information what will be key to be adapting the communication plan.

Tips to manage highly effective communication

After having designed and implemented different successful communication programs, because - according to the clients - these programs have been the trigger to "open the road to understanding what a change or a specific project value are", it is worth sharing some tips or some of the best practices that have been resulted in actions. This so that you or somebody in your team can benefit out of it:

- Bear in mind that communication is a catalyst of change since it allows opening the road for people to go through the following stages in such a simple way:
  - of not knowing the notion of what change is all about,
  - of the notion to understanding or of the notion of positive perception,
  - of understanding to involvement and
  - of involvement to commitment and adoption.
- The time invested in planning and/or generating the communication plan is very valuable. An hour invested in planning will prevent n hours of re-work and/or the lack of support to a specific initiative.
- A communication plan will be successful to the extent it is anchored to the plan of the project and/or the change to be introduced. In other words, the technical project is the starting point to structure the communication plan especially with respect to the type of messages that will be generated with respect to every milestone.
- If the work plan of a project has omitted or missed to consider a communication plan, this is serious. This is so because it is very likely that the people - given the lack of clarity on what is happening - will not only baffled but they will become resistant to change.
- Once the communication plan has been initiated there is no turning back - even if the news that occasionally have to be given talk about delays or changes to the original plan. This is so because open and clear communication is the basis of congruence and trust.
- The most successful communication plans are bilateral and not unilateral. That is, they are the channel to inform what is happening or what is coming, but they are also the channel to survey how people are reacting to the initiative and/or what changes are needed to be made since there may be gaps or blind spots to take care of.
- The highly effective communication programs do not necessarily have to be linked to a high investment. Bear in mind that the most important is the organizational culture and to be very creative to capitalize what we have.

About the question of how much to invest in communication initiatives, it has been seen that in successful change projects, the range runs from 20% to 35% of the total amount for managing change.

- As for communication programs, bear in mind that less is more. That is, to have more impact, concentrate the efforts in only three or four central ideas and always make sure that the language used is clear and simple.

- When the messages are to be launched to all audiences, take into account the time needed for their launch and/or the technological limitations that may arise. This for example, about sending out messages to different users to their corresponding email accounts.

- Validate that the user's accounts and/or the data bases of the different audiences are up to date.

- Make sure that if a Web page is created for the project and/or you simply have an email account or a drop box for people to give feedback, there is someone responsible to follow-up each question or comment.

- Be open to receive critics since this is key to make adjustments to the communication plan and/or program.

- Be open to introduce new ways of communication such as blogs or other cybernetic spaces to promote participation and feedback as well as to avoid underestimating the power of informal networks.

Glossary:

Finally but not less important, bear in mind that words are the way of triggering action. Then, here we have a list of words that will allow you to get familiar with the term used in this article and therefore, to be more effective in the design, development and implementation of communication programs.

- **Change**: Something external to the individual, something that happens and that affects human beings. Examples: The loss of a love one, getting a new job, the birth of a new son/daughter, the arrival of a new top management team, etc.

- **Strategic change**: A planned event that will arrive to or introduced into the organization so that it is more productive and/or more competitive. Examples of strategic changes: Introducing a new technological system, introducing a new commercial model, introducing a new production model, the arrival of a new director, etc.

Levels of change: This refers to the perspectives under which the change within an organization can be triggered and/or supported: Change in the company, in the team or individual change.

- **At the team level**: Perspective that includes elements that are within the area of influence of the implementation team such as the support that may be given to change on top, the development of new skills that will be required (training), the approach oriented to initiative and/or communication as the launching point to withstand the introduction of change.

- **Individual level**: Perspective that includes criteria that are within the area of influence of individuals such as their own level of motivation and distractors they experience within a specific period and/or throughout the applicable organizational transition.

- **Organizational level**: Perspective that includes the criteria that are within the scope of the top management of a company such as: the lack of alignment the new model with the strategy, lack of agreement of the heads, resistance, lack of financial of the heads, lack of financial resources and/or time, as well as culture itself that is in the making or experienced.

  - **Communication Matrix**: Basic tool that allows identifying what should be said, to whom, when and who is the one responsible to do it. Effective communication matrices have the following elements: - Audience: Individual or groups of whom communication needs to be processed so that it conveys a specific message. These are generally those within an organization which way of perceiving the arrival of change is common because of their affinity.
  - Frequency: The times a message is going to be issued (once only, every hour, once a week, biweekly, monthly, every two months, etc.).
  - Medium: It is the way through which communication is going to be made. The most common means include the following: People, technology, printed media and other.
  - Message: Set of words or symbols which purpose is to communicate.
  - Person responsible: Person on whom the timely and proper realization of something depends.

- **Transition:** Something internal to the individual, the adaptation process the human being is experiencing upon the emergence of change. Examples: When someone losses a love one, the process faced by the corresponding person; when a job of many years is lost, the psychological adaptation experienced by a person.

Given his/her new reality; when an operator is informed that his/her manual tools will be replaced by technological tools, the way in which he/she will adapt to this change.

- **Organizational transition**: The trip made by an organization from the moment when a change arrives or as of a change starts to be planned. That is, to move from point A to point B, in such a smoothly way (with the least setbacks, so that the levels of productivity do not dramatically fall or time increases) assuring in this way to recover the investment of the strategic change that is being introduced.

Do you have questions or do you wish to have more information on how to introduce a strategic change and/or how to successfully approach the communication program so that people are ready, wants and can adapt to a planned change? Just send me a note, and regardless of where I am, I will gladly talk to you.

Dulce María Vázquez
dmvazquez@kamaleo.net
Web page: www.kamaleo.net
Phone numbers: +52 222 2987193 / 01 800 252 9871

About the author

She is Mexican. A Facilitator of Strategic Change. She is a founder partner of Kamaleo ® since 1995, a company specialized in facilitating high impact strategic changes. She is a current member of CFAN (*Change Facilitation Associates Network*), based in Europe, she is a mentor of the Endeavor Network in Mexico and she is also a director of companies in accelerated growth.

Dulce Maria has unusual enthusiasm, creativity and passion for her profession. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration earned from the University of the Americas in Puebla, she holds a Master's degree in Organizational Management earned from the University of Phoenix in the U.S. and she is continuously open to "learn" at different local and international forums.

It is worth mentioning that after working for over 15 years in Europe and the U.S., she has decided to have her base in Latin America. Thus, she is currently supporting top management executives in Europe, promoting the value of the Change Management in her native country: Mexico.