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Communication, sensemaking and change as a chord of three strands
Practical implications and a research agenda for communicating organizational change

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper aims to propose practical and theoretical consequences of emerging lines of thinking about communication during organizational change.

Design/methodology/approach – This conceptual paper suggests several benefits that a sensemaking approach may have in enhancing organizational success in general and the effectiveness of communicating change in particular.

Findings – It is suggested that the negative effects of a myopic view on information provision during change distracts from the importance of other communication activities. The fact that changes often fail to meet the expected goals can be partly attributed to the misbalance between information and communication. For practical purposes, it is suggested to stress the importance of energy in organizations and work meaning. Future research could benefit from a focus on framing. Three topics that relate to framing, i.e. conflicts, informal communication, and storytelling are suggested.

Practical implications – Suggestions for practice how to organize communication during organizational change and which topics to address are offered.

Originality/value – Several insights that emerge from new lines of thought in literature on organizational behaviour, organizational communication and change are used in this paper to give practical advise to change agents, and suggest directions for future research.

Keywords Organizational change, Communication, Critical success factors, Change management

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

If there is one thing that the collection of papers in this special section makes clear, it is that change penetrates every little corner of organizations, irrespective of the variety in circumstances. Change is influenced by every level of an organization (Nelissen and van Selm, 2008) in different ways (Salem, 2008; Johansson and Heide, 2008) and influences individual perceptions (Qian and Daniels, 2008). The importance of communication on change has been reiterated by repeated calls to study communication during organizational change in detail (Jones *et al.*, 2004; Lewis and Seibold, 1998). We join this chorus by inciting the international organizational

communication community of cooperating practitioners and scholars to study the crucial role of communication for changing successfully. In this final paper of this issue we want to share some thoughts on the ways we believe this can be achieved.

Before we will elaborate on the things, we believe practitioners and scholars could be working on in the years to come, we have to get one thing straight. This involves one of the basic distinctions in change communication, i.e. the difference between information and communication (Elving, 2005). Communication departments in large organizations put much effort in putting all kinds of information about the change in newsletters, on web sites, in (bulk) e-mails, etcetera. Communication, however, aims for the creation of mutual understanding and trusting relationships (Elving, 2005). Such interactions are as vital as information for reaching organization's goals. From this point of view, change efforts are often too narrowly focused at information, like explaining the rationale for the change. The benefits of participation, like a more willing attitude towards change (Nutt, 1999), is just one of the many ways that stresses the importance of communication.

The communicative turn in change research can be linked to the awareness that strategic change involves a cognitive organizational reorientation. Discussing the implications of a cognitive approach to change, Fiss and Zajac (2007, p. 1173) state that:

[...] the success of strategic change will depend not only on an organization's ability to implement new structures and processes, but also on the organization's ability to convey the new mission and priorities to its many stakeholders.

This is not new, but it seems like communication suffers from the "Fat Smoker Syndrome" (Maister, 2008). A fat smoker knows the strategy for more healthy living: stop smoking, eat less, and exercise regularly. But obvious solutions are not *per se* easier to achieve than far-fetched ones.

The emphasis on either information or communication stems from different perspectives on change. These perspectives may differ in their approach on the definition of an organization (Boonstra, 2004) or whether the change is a first order or second order change (Cheney *et al.*, 2004). We will describe both perspectives.

Depending on the perspective on the organization, Boonstra (2004) discerns a top down, planned approach to change from a developmental approach. A planned approach takes top management as the architects of a blueprint for the new organization, suggesting that the proposed changes overcome observed shortcomings. This approach is in line with the aforementioned information approach, as the change has to be communicated without any possibility of alteration of the change program. The organization needs to provide information and has to persuade the organizational members to embrace the change.

The developmental approach does not view organizations as a resource of experiences rather than an entity with shortcomings. The workforce, using their knowledge and skills for the organization's benefit, is the main point of interest. Thus, in the developmental approach, the organization interacts with the workforce and involves them in diagnosing the problems the organization encounters. In this communicative context, there is a way for exploring possibilities for the future. The distinction between the planned and the developmental approach is not proposed to identify on beforehand bad (planned) from good (developmental) change processes. Not every change needs participation of the employees, or is suitable for participation

of the employees. For instance, implementing a new software program, or moving to another building do not necessarily need to involve employees, and it seems unwise to use a developmental approach when the organization decided that it needs to be downsized. In these kinds of changes change communication needs to be mainly informative.

The other perspective named in this context discerns first order changes from second order changes (Bateson, 1972, as cited in Cheney *et al.*, 2004). This distinction may be helpful in recognizing which communicative efforts the organization has to undertake to communicate about the change. First order changes are minor, incremental changes that living systems have to practice in order to avoid the more fundamental second order changes (Cheney *et al.*, 2004). To put it differently, first order changes are adjustments in the organization. The end state of the organization is clear and will not differ fundamentally to what the organization already is. One might even question why these changes are labeled as change. Innovations, adjustments or learning processes seem to be more appropriate as label in many of the cases that are presented as change. This could prevent the organization with the negative connotation that the word "change" has for most employees. Change communication in first order changes are merely providing information about the desired end state, and the steps that will be taken to reach that state. Second order changes, on the other hand, are those changes in which the end state of the organization is not clear, although all indicators show that the organization has to change. Change communication in second order changes will be harder than first order changes, as they involve an unknown end state. It is a start of a process, and success depends largely on the quality of the interaction processes and the extent to which mutual understanding is achieved.

Numerous studies (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Elving and Bennebroek Gravenhorst, 2005; Hales, 2005; Hansma and Elving, 2008; Huy, 2002) underline the crucial role of middle managers during such changes. Lower level managers, and direct supervisors are perceived as the primary sources of information for employees (Bosley *et al.*, 2007; van Vuuren *et al.*, 2007). Distorted information and troublesome communication is fatal on this level, as this is the place where strategies have to be turned into actions. This starts with the labeling of the change. As an illustration (Hansma and Elving, 2008, for a description of the context), consider a top management introducing a second-order change program as a cultural change. Within a few weeks, several middle managers were interviewed about the announcement of this change program. No one mentioned the change as being a cultural change, but labeled the program as a downsizing operation, as a structural change or being a necessary operation to change the attitudes of the workforce. As with so many other changes, cynicism became a more likely result of the initiatives than enhanced productivity and engaging culture.

We will focus in the rest of this paper on the communicative processes that involve change. This perspective has become dominant since the introduction of "sensemaking." Sensemaking is in nature a matter of communication as both research on management (Quinn and Dutton, 2005; Weick *et al.*, 2005) and communication scholars (Taylor and van Every, 2000) have reiterated. Taken together, communication, sensemaking and change make a cord of three strands that hold organizations together in the complexity and pace of the twenty-first century. However, the abundance of literature on sensemaking, change and communication

complicates what to do as practitioners and what to study as scholars when addressing communication and organizational change. This final paper of this *CCIJ* special issue aims at two goals. First, we will aim for distilling advice to practitioners that follows from the quite conceptual and technical articles that have been written. Second, we want to propose a research agenda for scholarly work on communicating organizational change.

Practical: implications

In order to take change for what it is in practical contexts, we have to take a closer look at the way people make sense of their lives and the role of change in this sensemaking process. One of the major issues is whether change is good or bad. Or, to put the question differently, is change either a temporary disruption of the cherished state of stability or is it the hallmark of being alive? The former perspective has a long tradition, tracing back to Lewin's (1951) elegant model of unfreezing-transition-refreezing. Here, the reality of organizations is perceived as a fixed state with certain characteristics. The trouble with change then becomes that "the one thing more dangerous than doing one is never doing any!" (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2006, p. 161). The latter perspective – which is more in line with the sensemaking approach – perceives something fixed not as stable, but an indication as being dead. Organizational life, in contrast, suggests development, transformation, flow. The freezing model is just "too cold" to be alive. From a sensemaking perspective, an organization is a process rather than a fixed thing. Therefore, Weick (1979) proposes to use the word organizing instead of organization to make this clear. Seen through this lens, the continuously changing character is the essence of life and not a problem. As Tsoukas and Chia (2002, p. 570) state: "Change must not be thought of as a property of organization. Rather, organization must be understood as an emergent property of change." Leaving aside the ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying this approach (Allard-Poesi, 2005; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Weick, 1995), we point out the centrality of communication of the sensemaking perspective. One of the most exciting developments in the scholarly field of organizational communication, i.e. the rise of the Montreal School, can be understood as a confirmation of the link between sensemaking and communication. The basics of organizations, coordination of actions, are seen as conversational experiences (Quinn and Dutton, 2005) as conversations help to make sense of situations by providing a narrative structure for the interpretation of events (Cooren, 2000). Weick *et al.* (2005) start their review of sensemaking with a reference to this Montreal School by citing Taylor and van Every (2000, p. 275) "[S]ensemaking is a way station on the road to a consensually constructed, coordinated system of action." They proceed to conclude that sensemaking is "an issue of language, talk, and communication. Situations, organizations, and environments are talked into existence" (Weick *et al.*, 2005, p. 409).

Notwithstanding the complex and rather conceptual nature of these thoughts, the centrality of communication suggests that the sensemaking tradition offers fertile ground to generate helpful insights for communication practitioners regarding change and organizing. We therefore looked for practical implications that stem from the sensemaking tradition. We propose that at least two general implications can be derived:

(1) the importance of interpersonal communication; and

(2) the meaning that is derived from interactions.

Energy in conversations
By nature, organizations face goals that cannot be achieved by a single individual, so people have to coordinate their actions in order to achieve its complex and time-consuming goals (Keyton, 2005). Boden (1994) showed that coordination is a conversational experience. Putnam and Fairhurst (2001) have explained the intertwined nature of coordination and communication. In contrast to functionalistic approaches that perceive communication as a tangible substance, coordination from an interpretivist stance is mainly an emotional experience that influences eagerness and willingness to act (Quinn and Dutton, 2005). The plea to practitioners thus becomes that they should be aware of the emotional dimension of conversations, as the ebb and flow of the energy level influences the process of organizing. This is quite a different way of approaching communication than popular press books advice about communication during change normally do. To give an extreme example of the latter:

> If there is a single rule of communication for leaders, it is this: when you are so sick of talking about something that you can hardly stand it, your message is finally starting to get through (Duck, 1998, as cited in Lewis *et al.*, 2006).

In contrast, it is suggested to focus on the energy levels that follow participant's interpretation of interactions. A rule of thumb that is derived from motivation theory suggests that when people interpret an interaction as meeting basic human needs like autonomy, competence or relatedness, their energy increases (Quinn and Dutton, 2005). On the other hand, energy "decreases if they interpret a speech act to decrease their autonomy, competence or relatedness" (pp. 42-3). Coping with the dynamic and change-full nature of organizing thus suggests the evaluation of conversations, messages, letters or speeches in terms of the ways that energize all those involved. The appropriate questions then become: what will this message mean for people's autonomy? How can the increase of people's autonomy and responsibility help to reach our goals? What competences are available and may by insufficiently used that can be helpful to keep things going? How can we improve lasting, positive and significant interpersonal relationships at work? How can we help organization members to identify where they belong to by being member here (Baumeister and Leary, 1995)?

A useful resource for further study in this regard can be found in the efforts taken by the community of scholars that are united in the center for Positive Organizational Scholarship. For example, Dutton and colleagues (Dutton and Heaphy, 2003; Dutton and Ragins, 2006) focus on the power of so-called high-quality connections, elaborating on the energizing and deenergizing effects of interpersonal communication.

The importance of work meaning
Several studies have shown that communication contributes to higher levels of job satisfaction, commitment (Rodwell *et al.*, 1998; van Vuuren *et al.*, 2007), suggesting that one of the major contributions of communication is to create the conditions for organizational success. This can be understood as communication feeds connections, and connection, in turn, is perceived as the essence of meaning (Baumeister and Vohs, 2002, p. 608). The connection with others keeps the sensemaking process going, continually shaping shared understandings of the content and significance of each one's contribution to the organization (Wrzesniewski *et al.*, 2003). The emergence of meaning making as a topic of interest in organizations is striking. Work meaning is a

new branch on the fruitful tree of work motivation, and is proposed as the way to keep employees engaged and to be an antidote to cynicism (Cartwright and Holmes, 2006). Especially, in the context of organizational change, cynicism has become a topic of major interest (Stanley *et al.*, 2005), suggesting it to be a reason for resistance to change. One has to note that in the conceptualization of change in terms of the sensemaking literature where change is omnipresent, and resistance to change therefore refers to the observation that people are not doing what leaders want them to do. The reasons why organization members refuse to cooperate may be found in the way they make sense of their work. As Cartwright and Holmes (2006, p. 206) eloquently note:

> [P]eople desperately need meaning in their lives and will sacrifice a great deal to institutions that will provide this meaning for them [...] As individuals become increasingly disenchanted and disillusioned with work and fatigued by the constant demand to change and to be flexible in response to organizational needs, employers now need to actively [...] recognize the meaning and emotional aspects of work [...] Work is about a search [...] for a sort of life rather than a Monday to Friday sort of dying.

This perspective suggests that people who intend to change the way people work have to consider what this means to the meaning that people hold about their work, job, role, and the status they derive from daily interactions in the work place.

Theoretical: a research agenda
Thus, far, we have argued why sensemaking is a viable perspective for understanding and managing opportunities and threats in organizational change processes. In terms of interesting research questions, we will focus on issues of framing. Framing refers to the organization of experiences in a meaningful way (Goffman, 1974). The active interpretation of a certain reality helps to make sense of a situation one encounters. This is especially relevant in the context of organizational change as a previously fixed and framed reality has to be transformed. Organization members involved in a change usually do not resist the change itself, but rather the uncertainty associated with the change: loss of job, the fear of losing status and power within the organisation, and the uncertainty about whether they will fit in the changed organisation (Dent and Goldberg, 1999). Uncertainty and fear can lead to stress, a lack of trust between employees and management and low levels of commitment; it may even encourage people to leave the organisation (Schweiger and Denisi, 1991). Uncertainty during a change will reflect on the implications for the individual employee and the employees' occupational environment. It comes with such questions as "Will I still have a job after this change?" "Will I still have the same co-workers after the change?" and "Can I still perform my tasks in the same way I used to?" In this sense, feelings of uncertainty are about the process of the change and the personal and social consequences of the change (Buono and Bowditch, 1993; Tourish *et al.*, 2004). Framing the motives for change also helps reducing uncertainty. In that sense, effective change communication can be viewed as a means properly to manage uncertainty (DiFonzo and Bordia, 1998). We will illustrate research on framing in the context of organizational change with three different approaches, i.e. conflicts, informal communication and storytelling.

Conflicts
Change initiatives confront institutionalized and familiar conceptualizations of reality with new ideas and alternatives of organizing. This leads to conflict. Of course, managers prefer a smooth change process, but one has to be aware that such a confrontation of old and new insights is a new way of organizing experiences in need of framing and inevitably will be felt as conflicting ideas. Therefore, work by communication scholars on conflict framing can be helpful in understanding the process of change. Brummans *et al.* (2008, p. 28) describe how repertoires of conflict framing involve the sensemaking process of discerning what information is essential and what are side issues: "[framing] refers to the communicative process through which people foreground and background certain aspects of experience." A change essentially involves a suggested rearrangement of what should be seen as foreground and what as background. With this idea in mind, the ways people filter information and frame conversations becomes extremely complex. Research on resolution of conflicts may help to understand how renewed definitions of foreground and background are achieved.

Informal communication
The Uncertainty Reduction Theory by Berger and Calabrese (1975) suggests that when a person experiences uncertainty, he or she will seek information to reduce this uncertainty. Any information may be used for framing, regardless of the source of this information, formal or informal. Organizations however, should try to limit the amount of informal communication as much as possible, because informal communication threats, destroys or disturbs all kinds of formal communication. Again management at all levels in the organization have to take steps to limit the amount of informal communication and/or try to address the issues raised in informal communication.

Given the key position of direct supervisors as sources of information during change, the mere absence of research in the specific roles of line managers is surprising. Hansma and Elving (2008) suggested to study line communication in more detail. Line communication is defined as the hierarchical information provision and communication of decisions and other organizational policies made at the top of the organization, that need to be presented at the lower levels of the organization. Line communication includes also the feedback loops present in the organization, in which suggestions made by employees needs to reach the top of the organization, in order to be followed by actions. There is a lot to learn from the leader-member exchange literature (Howell and Hall-Merenda, 1999) in this regard. However, fundamental questions remain about the ways communicative action both depends on the perception of a situation and defines the (perceptions of) situations.

Storytelling
Stories might be a powerful tool for organizations to communicate about changes and to limit the amount of misinterpretations, informal communication and or communication failures. In his unique poetic style, Weick (1995, p. 127 vv.) states that "sequence is the source of sense" (p. 128), stressing the importance of storytelling for sensemaking. By suggesting a logical order for events, one imposes a frame of occurrences to attach meaning to a selection of cues. Langer and Thorup (2006, p. 375) have presented in a metaphorical way the use of storytelling:

Rather than seeing an organization as a single body with a single (management) voice telling one grand story, it should be regarded as an orchestra consisting of many different instruments and voices. Al the different instruments and voices enable an organization to play more than one tune. An orchestra consisting of only drums may be able to produce a certain noise, as long as everyone can be persuaded to play in the same rhythm.

Communication management exists, according to Langer and Thorup (2006) on facilitating and coordinating all these voices in order to create opportunities for expression and contribution to a new organizational framework. Storytelling should not be used to orchestrate all voices to one singular (management) story and what needs to be done and how the change must be shaped. Such an orchestration will results in conflicts and misunderstanding of the purposes, goals and benefits of the change, resulting in informal communication, and most likely, failure of the change process.

We believe that the papers in this special issue have shown communication during organizational change to be an intriguing arena for practice, training and scholarly investigation.

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