Journal of Management Development

Developing communicative competencies for a learning organization

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Received September 2004
Accepted September 2005

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the developmental needs of managers operating in continuous change contexts. Special attention is drawn to communicative competences through the use of Kent and Taylor's five principles of dialogic communication. A case study is used to illustrate the communicative challenges in creating a learning organization.

Design/methodology/approach – The research uses longitudinal case study methodology and provides details on the multiple methods used, specifically: participant observation, focus groups, and document analysis.

Findings – Findings suggest that existing management development literature needs to reconceptualise change communication as communication during change, rather than to communicate the change. In so doing attention is drawn to the power of communicative expectations and communicative competence. Successful transformation to a learning organization is hampered by a misalignment of the employee's communicative expectations and management delivery of change communication.

Research limitations/implications – Whilst single case studies can be criticized for a lack of generalisability, the use of multiple methods and a longitudinal study bolsters the rigor and validity of this study. Management development needs were not formally addressed in this case study, and thus it is difficult to offer prescriptive statements to improving communicative competences.

Practical implications – The field study provided ample opportunity to identify change management development needs, and reflect on how to bolster an often difficult area of change management, communication during change.

Originality/value – This research provides in-depth empirical data from an organization attempting to transform to a learning organization. In prior studies the communicative theoretical framework is rarely tested, and this paper provides evidence of the communicative theoretical applicability. This contribution is extended to management development needs.

Keywords Change management, Communication skills, Learning organizations, Individual development

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The continuous nature of contemporary change highlights several difficulties for managing the process of change and in particular, managers need to develop competencies in change management that accommodate continuous change efforts (Buchanan *et al.*, 1999). This paper reports on some of the difficulties encountered when an experienced change leader attempted to introduce "intellectual transformation"

Journal of Management Development
Vol. 25 No. 3, 2006
pp. 201-212

0262-1711
DOI 10.1108/02621710610648141

(Waldersee, 1997) in a public sector agency. In highlighting the barriers, we offer value to management development by using the empirical data to reflect on the importance of communicative skills development when implementing change.

The guiding research question is how organizational change communication impacts on change receptivity in continuous change contexts. The focus of this paper is the communicative competences that managers need to acquire in organizations dependant on continuous change.

Change communication and the learning organization

Originating from Schön's (1973) concepts of a "learning society" as a way to manage the continuous processes of transformation within our society and institutions, the learning organization presents as an ideal type. It is noted that it represents a systematic response to the pressure of globalization (Schön, 1973). The learning organization is defined as:

> Learning organizations [are] organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together (Senge, 1990).

Waldersee (1997) suggests that this journey requires an intellectual transformation within the change process. Part of successful change leadership requires maximizing message reception (Waldersee, 1997), and this perspective regards change communication as a monologic approach, incorporating a traditional linear perspective on change communication. However, one of the key components of the capabilities required to create a learning organization is the emphasis on dialogue (Senge, 1990; Isaacs, 1999). Dialogic approaches to change form a "core relational practice" for learning organizations, however these are inherently risky as they require managers to reveal what they do not know (Bokeno and Gantt, 2000). Kent and Taylor (2002) argue that there are key differences between monologic and dialogic communication. These differences are illustrated in Table I.

Organizational change communication research derives from a body of literature in which organizational change is perceived as a communication problematic (Bourke and Bechervaise, 2002). This perspective suggests that the frequent failure of

Differences	Monologic communication	Dialogic communication
Process	Seeking to instrumentalize receivers by engaging in goal-directed, feedback orientations	Both parties have genuine concern for each other, rather than seeking to fulfil their own needs Creating meanings by means of dialogue
Purpose	Achieving a relationship characterized by "power over people and viewing them as objects for enjoyment or as things through which to profit"	Move a discussion up or down between levels of abstraction
Style	Command, coerce, manipulate, exploit	Authenticity, inclusion, confirmation, supportive climate, a spirit of mutual equality
Focus	Communicator's message	Relationships and attitudes that participants have toward one another

Table I.
Differences between monologic and dialogic communication

organizational change (Weick and Quinn, 1999) results in part from ill-considered or misused organizational communication strategies and tactics. Organizational communication is initially defined as "The process by which information is exchanged and understood by two or more people, usually with the intent to motivate or influence behavior" (Daft, 1997). This perspective represents an instrumental, information-processing view of communication that complements the planned model of change. In planned change, change communication involves exchanging and transmitting information to influence changes. It is here that Waldersee's (1997) emphasis on message reception resides. The more recent change communication scholars (Lewis, 1999; Ford, 1999) take a constructivist approach to organizational communication. In this way, the understanding of organizations is that these are "socially constructed realities" (Czarniawska, 1997). Bourke and Bechervaise (2002) explain change communication as the instrument used to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct existing realities in order to effect change. The implications for today's managers are that to develop communicative competencies they need to accommodate both perspectives and this requires a reconceptualization of change communication as communication during change, rather than to communicate the change.

Communication is widely acknowledged as important in management development programmes, but there is less recognition of the intricacies and nuances of communication during change such that it is the neglected "specialist knowledge" of change (Buchanan *et al.*, 1999). It is argued that it is the delicate and often subjective interplay of communication styles, expectations and competencies that can unhinge a change program (Frahm and Brown, 2004).

Development of "soft skills" remains of paramount importance in the management development literature (Coppelli, 1998). Accordingly, managers are urged to develop communication skills to minimize occurrences of workplace sabotage (Analoui, 1995) and develop competences in inspirational communication (Frese *et al.*, 2003). Methods of communication development beyond workshops and training seminars include action training (Frese *et al.*, 2003), coaching (Wales, 2003), and concentrating on "in context" practice (Doyle *et al.*, 2000). Vecchio and Appelbaum (1995) suggest techniques for improving communication in organizations include: using appropriate language, practicing empathic communication, encouraging feedback, developing a climate of trust and using effective listening. These are examples of dialogic change communication

From a communicative perspective what has been advanced in terms of continuous change is the concept of dialogue (Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1999). Within dialogic communication processes, "People function as essential information and idea resources, creating solutions we have never seen before" (Eisenberg *et al.*, 1999).

Principles of dialogic communication

In order to reflect on how communicative competences may be developed within organizational change there is a need to establish the different types of communication in the case study under review. In this study we identified dialogic communication with use of Kent and Taylor's (2002) principles of mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk and commitment.

Mutuality acknowledges that organizations do not exist without employees. It is characterized by a collaborative orientation and a "spirit of mutual equality". Through dialogic processes, reality is socially constructed rather than positions wonnor lost (Kent and Taylor, 2002). Participants in dialogue are viewed as persons, not as objects, or "targets of change". This principle provides the first clue for management development, which to date has focused on workshops that train managers to "maximize message reception".

Propinquity is more than mere proximity (Buber, 1970). Rather, it has a temporal aspect whereby the participants of dialogue are engaged in communication in the present, instead of after the decision-making. The dialogue acknowledges the past, present and future discussions. Propinquity also refers to the level of willing engagement in the process (Kent and Taylor, 2002). This is similar to what Wales (2003) describes as Past-Present awareness. Developing competencies in evaluating who to involve in discussion about change and at what stage, is key to future management development.

Empathy refers to the necessary atmosphere of support and trust that must exist for dialogue to succeed. It embraces supportiveness, communal orientation and confirmation or acknowledgement. Whilst this is primarily an emotional prerequisite, it also translates to the provision of empathetic space or fields where dialogue about change can occur. The importance of empathetic listening skills is already highlighted in the literature (Vecchio and Appelbaum, 1995).

Risk involves vulnerability. It is contended that vulnerability is a position of strength, rather than being detrimental in dialogic processes. When the participants involved in a dialogic communication acknowledge what they do not know, only then are they able to build and construct new understanding that benefit the organization (Kent and Taylor, 2002). Unanticipated consequences are another consequence of risk. With continuous change comes a high level of ambiguity and uncertainty, and accordingly it is difficult to script an exact plan. Risk in dialogic processes is one of the more difficult concepts for change communicators, as much of their charter is in minimizing risk to achieve the organizational goals. In this sense, risk is generative of new meaning and understanding and a considerable challenge for management development. Others have noted the importance of developing courage for change (Furnham, 2001), and risk requires courage.

Commitment is the final principle of dialogic communication and refers to genuineness, commitment to conversation and commitment to interpretations. Weick and Quinn (1999) suggest, " If continuous change is altered by freezing and rebalancing, then the role of the change agent becomes one of managing language, dialogue and identity", and this approach has research implications for everyday conversations and discourse and for the language of change in the process of continuous change. It then follows that change leaders need to develop linguistic competences, and be comfortable speaking the different "languages" of change.

Methods

In this section of the paper, a current research case is used to illustrate the key themes of one organization's experience of communication during change and how this impacted on the development of a learning organization. As is appropriate in conducting case study research the research methods employed in this case study are participant observation, document analysis and focus groups.

Participant observation

In this study we were provided unfettered access to the organization, and allowed attendance at formal management and staff committee meetings, as well as informal meetings, gatherings and lunchroom discussions. Such access allowed for the improvement of internal validity through triangulation of data between the interviews, focus groups, formal correspondence and observations.

Document study

Scrutiny of organizational documents such as emails pertaining to the changes and communication, the communication plan, the strategic planning records, intranet logs and the minutes of change meetings assisted in providing further rigour. We were able to analyze the company documentation for themes relating to communication during change and this bolstered the case study methodology (Forster, 1994).

Focus group interviews

The use of focus groups also allows for the efficient collection of greater quantities of rich data. Conducting the focus groups in the employees' environment aids the quality of such data (Morgan, 1997). We used four main questions to elicit the group's understanding of what type of change was occurring, how they felt about that, and how they believed the communication of change was being handled. Additionally, as "continuous change" is a relatively new area of study and a senior management initiative, we felt it important to obtain the perceptions of the work groups about continuous change. This approach would enable management to have a better understanding of the impact of their initiatives as well as provide a clearer understanding of what "continuous change" is.

We conducted five focus groups three months after entry in the organization. A total of 28 staff members participated with the smallest focus group consisting of two participants and the largest involving nine, and covered the major work divisions in the organization. Managers were excluded from the focus groups in order for people to participate in full and frank discussion. The duration of each focus group varied from 45 minutes to 90 minutes, and the focus groups took place in a meeting room on site. All but one focus group were taped and transcribed before analysis. One focus group had a follow-up meeting with the CEO the next day and this enabled the researcher to confirm the main findings and preliminary analysis with the members. A research summary page was provided to the remainder of the participants to ensure an accurate representation of the focus group's dialogue. All groups agreed with the representations. This process was replicated a year later. Owing to the restructure and downsizing that occurred during the previous 12 months, four focus groups were conducted, with a total of 20 staff members involved. The number of participants in the second round remained representative of the overall size of the organization as in the first round.

Case study overview and discussion

The case study was a public sector organization chartered with the role of technology diffusion. A new Chief Executive Officer had entered the organization and it was his desire to create a "continuously changing, a learning organization of the Senge [CEO's reference to "The Fifth Discipline by Peter Senge, 1990] type." Employing 75 employees, the occupations of staff in the organization ranged from foundry workers, engineers, model finishers and business consultants.

The organization was operating under seemingly volatile conditions, subject to political change, both in terms of government budgetary decision-making as well as technological obsolescence. The case study's charter required it to source high-capital-cost new technology in order to facilitate uptake within state and national firms in the manufacturing sector. This means that it operates within the boundaries of "market failure". The firm is undergoing a directed change effort. Some of the changes introduced over the last 12 months included: a commercialization focus, team working, organizational restructure, downsizing, culture change, continuous improvement, and 360-degree feedback. Given the turbulent environment in which the organization is situated, the CEO rejected a planned change path – preferring to be adaptable as new information was presented. The strategy could be considered ad hoc strategy formation, whereby strategies emerge from a fluid process of learning and adaptation (Mintzberg, 1987). Initial findings of this process indicate a scant application of either monologic or dialogic communication during the change. It was found that this situation prevented the establishment of a learning organization and detracted from achieving the change goals.

Monologic communication

Organizational communication proved problematic initially as the organization was removed from the principles of dialogic communication and lacked traditional monologic change communication. The communication manager was one of the first to be made redundant, with no replacement intended. The CEO, whilst experienced in "intellectual transformation", eschewed traditional managerial communication strategies favoring more organic, open door, relational communication. He was also increasingly distracted by the political/fiscal negotiations as the organization was not in the "shape" he was initially led to believe. For his part, communicative attention was drawn to survival, and thus internal change communication strategies were unplanned and rarely considered as an integral part of the change process. The technical orientation of the firm meant that many of the employees favored a linear, hierarchical approach to change communication, and accordingly, possessed strong monologic expectations. The participants in the research highlighted the lack of formal channels, stating they had a preference for face-to-face communication and this was lacking. Information needs dominated conversations about change.

There were limited feedback channels and communication flowed in a downwards direction – what change communication occurred came from above, and it was not perceived that there is a mechanism to feed "up" information. (For example: "Given-up – it's a one way valve; you can't get back up it.") In the absence of formal communication and information about the changes, rumors and grapevine discussions were filling the gap. As one participant noted: "The only time we hear anything is when we bump into someone in the corridor." At times when the CEO's communicative attention was drawn elsewhere, the middle management was not competent at meeting employee communicative expectations.

In contrast to the dissatisfaction about communication of change, there was a general sense of satisfaction with the CEO's personal communication style in that he was perceived to be open, frank and approachable. On his introduction to the organization the CEO implored the staff to read Senge's (1990) *The Fifth Discipline* and

Katzenbach and Smith's (1993) *The Wisdom of Teams*. This appeal was ignored by all but one staff member and the lack of commitment led to an inability to "understand" the CEO. He spoke of change from the understanding of a "learning organization", but employees were unable to comprehend the references and metaphors to these works (Katzenbach and Smith, 1993; Senge, 1990). In conversations further down the process, it never occurred to him that the employees wouldn't embrace the works. Politically, it was curious that they didn't and perhaps evidence of an initial "push back" to the move towards continuous change.

Those who were closest in proximity to the CEO spoke confidently about being able speak with the CEO about change issues. However, the lack of formal communication channels such as dedicated group meetings, "whole-of-staff" get-togethers, weekly reports and staff newsletters, and use of intranet discussion boards indicated a lack of space or forums for dialogue to occur. The latter issue indicates that the principle of empathy and commitment were not entertained. Despite perceptions of openness, there was not the provision for, or enabling of, dialogic fields. Part of communicative competences is not just knowing what to say or who to involve, but how to resource the dialogue that needs to occur.

A possible solution to the problems associated with the level and type of change communication entails a change in management attitude to the importance of dialogic communication. In this case, communication was considered an adjunct function to the management function, rather than a core competence. No time or resources were dedicated to correcting this positioning. In the absence of genuine commitment to communication during change and understanding of communication practices that construct new meaning and processes, the organization relied heavily on linear communication model and ad hoc responses. Based on the findings of the first data collection round, the small amounts of monologic communication provided were not improving change receptivity; rather as expectations were violated, receptivity decreased and cynicism about change increased.

A year into the study, the focus groups indicated that in general the communication during change had substantially improved. There were some indications of a shift to a dialogic approach; however some serious problems remained with overarching monologic styles. Monologic communication was not proving effective in continuous change communication, as there was not the opportunity to clarify, challenge and interpret messages, which occurs under the principle of commitment. The emphasis on using emails as news bulletins proved problematic with employees expressing dissatisfaction about the use of the email system. Despite the groups having weekly meetings with managers, employees were reading "between the lines" and subjectively adding interpretations that may not be the intended interpretation as illustrated by the following comment: "We're not stupid you know, we can read into these e-mails." (Focus group participant, round 2). At this point, the research focus groups were the only "settings" to openly discuss what the emails meant.

Brown and Eisenhardt (1997) advocate that firms need to constantly communicate when undergoing continuous change; however, this advice requires some refinement. The CEO had recently increased his emails to all staff about change, but this elevated the anxiety of many. Sources from the information technology section reported that immediately after staff received an e-mail update from the CEO, they would log on to recruitment web sites. This reaction can be explained with the principle of mutuality, which, when applied, provides for symmetrical communication exchange. In a dialogically contained exchange, the staff and managers know that they are in asymmetrical power positions, but for the purposes of dialogue, are at the same level and can freely exchange views. In a monologic organization, as much as the CEO believes that email provides access for staff to ask him questions, there is clearly an asymmetrical relationship occurring. Whilst peers may challenge each other using email, they will not challenge the CEO. If management had been provided some form of coaching on relative effectiveness of media use, more mutuality may have been entertained.

A tentative move to dialogic

It is posited that dialogic communication is the preferred model in continuous change contexts (Eisenberg *et al.*, 1999). Over the first 12 months, this case study showed a tentative shift away from the domination of monologic models of change communication to a dialogic model. This situation was most evident in their reframing of language. The principle of commitment in dialogic communication was highlighted in the work groups, with their insistence on changing the language used in the change process. In particular, there was an objection to the term “continuous change” as it was considered to be connotative of negative consequences. Thus, the importance of word choice and the language of organizational change became very apparent in reframing the change effort and maintaining their commitment to the change goal.

All except one of the groups preferred the term “continuous improvement” to describe the change process. For example, one group made statements such as, “Everyone can work with continuous improvement – “cause then you are making things better.” The participants were comfortable with the concept of “continuous” but not “change”. According to these participants, continuous change had negative connotations attached, such as “a buzzword”, “change for change sakes”, “not secure or positive”, “more personnel turnover”. Weick and Quinn (1999) highlight that the change agent role is to make sense of the language. In this case, the staff have actively reframed their terminology to be more receptive of change without the management’s assistance.

The use of the term continuous change clearly had an impact on how they felt about change. This was further reinforced 12 months later with the work groups objecting to the use of the term “market failure”. From an economic perspective, the organization operates in an environment of market failure – it is their role to assist firms who are not able to be competitive in their own right. However, whenever the CEO spoke of market failure at a public address, the staff understood him to be speaking poorly of them, implying that they were under performing. Even when the term was explained to them, the employees were adamant that another description should be sought. By taking ownership of the change language they were able to make the change more palatable. This discourse demonstrates a change from the passive acceptance of “one-way valves” from the earlier data collection points. Whilst not quite in dialogic mode as understood by Kent and Taylor’s (2002) principles of mutuality, commitment, risk, propinquity and empathy, they are further towards creating a dialogic organization, one that expresses empathy for other perspectives, and co-constructs the emerging organization through language. This highlights the need for managers to develop multi-lingual competencies throughout change, being able to understand what change jargon means to the employees and reframe in terms more conducive to achieving change goals. A downside to the employees' reframing the language was that it prevented true understanding of the change vision. Opportunities where both management could discuss the change goals and establish a joint language would have enabled the development of a learning organization.

It is already suggested that it is not possible to transform a bureaucratic organization by learning initiatives alone (Finger and Brand, 1999). This study suggests the same and illustrates some of the communicative pitfalls. In this case, it appeared that the CEO, who was possessing of dialogic competencies, expected that the employees after having read Senge's work would intuitively start to build and co-create a learning organization. However, given the lack of existing dialogic competencies and dialogic settings this result was highly unlikely. In this sense, the observation that the creation of a learning organization is a top-down initiative is supported (Hughes and Tight, 1998). Importantly, it was found that a monologic approach is required to create and cultivate dialogic processes, particularly when the employees possessed monologic change expectations.

Conclusion

In summary, this paper started by noting that much of the management development literature focuses on a one-way, linear model of change communication in skills building. In order to bolster the manager's competencies in managing continuous change this paper investigates the change communication of an organization intent on creating a learning organization. Whilst the study is still ongoing, the initial results from the first 12 months suggest success is limited when there is a mismatch between employees' communicative expectations and managers' communicative competencies.

By using a dialogic lens and Kent and Taylor's (2002) principles, we establish that the case study organization defaults to a monologic approach initially, but the limitations implicit in a lack of formal communication channels and limited feedback mechanisms meant that the change communication was decreasing the staff receptivity to change. As the process of change continued we noted a shift to more dialogic approaches to communication primarily from the lower level employees. The main principle evident in the data was commitment. The employees were genuinely committed to conversation and discussion about the interpretation of the change goals. The management team demonstrated empathy in acknowledging the employees' concern and supported the reframing of the term "continuous change" to "continuous improvement". In response to the lack of information and sense-making from managers, the lower level employees initiated a reframing of the language within the organization, in order to be more receptive to change. However, this was not sufficient without ongoing direction and guidance from the senior management.

Implications for future development

Some argue that dialogic competences should not be considered a panacea to solving communication issues during continuous change (Botan, 1997). This paper seeks to highlight potential applications of an existing theoretical framework that may assist in improving change communication competence development. Dialogic communication can be recognized as an inimitable resource, and one that creates competitive value (Peteraff, 1993). Emphasis on principles of communication rather than understanding communication in terms of tactics and tools suggests an intangible asset, and thus it is difficult to replicate. This approach supports the argument of dialogue being a key driver of learning organizations in managing the demands of continuous change.

Regardless of the benefits in developing managers' skills in dialogic and monologic competences, there are some important caveats. Whilst a dialogic approach offers a sustainable business practice, it is difficult to institutionalize. Dialogic communication requires sophisticated communicators, that is, people who are comfortable relinquishing their power bases, suspending their beliefs and committing to alternate interpretations in order to build a relationship. This implies an organizational commitment to learning and up-skilling of all employees. If the most sophisticated communicators are the managers or the change agents, a power imbalance exists, and the dialogic process is violated. Transformation of a bureaucratic organization into a learning organization in this context is particularly challenging, as asymmetry of power is central to considerations of bureaucracy.

Dialogic communication processes take time, and many organizations need short-term responses. Kent and Taylor (2002) acknowledge that not every stakeholder should be expected to participate in dialogic exchanges and that dialogic communication is not required in every change agenda.

Finally, dialogic approaches to communication are costly and run the risk of "too much talk and not enough action". Further, just as it takes someone skilled enough to communicate on this level, it takes expertise in knowing how to take the dialogue into a tangible outcome, one that can be recognized for its value to the organization. However if, as some suggest, up to 75 percent of popular change management programs fail (Beer *et al.*, 1990), perhaps the high cost of dialogue is not as great as the costs of failed implementations and additional change consultants.

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