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# First steps: linking change communication to change receptivity

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Change receptivity is recognised as an important factor in successfully implementing organizational change strategies. The purpose of this paper is to examine the process of change in the initial stages of a change agenda within a public sector organization and analyze the communication of change. It traces the resultant receptivity to organizational change. The paper investigates whether organizational change communication is a crucial element in employees' receptivity to change.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A case study design is employed and the multiple methods employed include surveys, focus groups, archival data and participant observation.

**Findings** – The findings indicate that the initial change communication is problematic. The employees respond to a lack of instrumental change communication with a constructivist communication approach in order to manage the implications of continuous change.

**Research limitations/implications** – This research provides an overview of the first 100 days of change in a public sector organization only, and so the limitations of single case studies apply. However, the close investigation of this phase provides further research directions to be addressed.

**Practical implications** – The findings suggest managers need to align employees' expectations of the change communication with understanding of the change goal.

**Originality/value** – The primary value of the paper is in using a communicative lens to study the change process.

**Keywords** Organizational change, Communication, Change management

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Receptivity of employees to organizational change is an emerging and significant issue for those involved in creating successful change implementation strategies. Avoiding problems associated with change fatigue and change resistance are important considerations given ongoing agendas for change in contemporary organizations. We argue that organizational change communication is a crucial element in employees' receptivity to change and accordingly, use an organizational change communication lens to map and analyse organizational change in a public sector organization. A recent call for empirical studies in relation to organizations engaged in continuous change and change receptivity (Pettigrew *et al.*, 2001) highlights the importance of undertaking further research in this area.

This study describes the findings of the first 100 days of change in a public sector, not-for-profit organization engaged in technology diffusion, Tech D. We had the unique opportunity to gain access to the organization prior to the change process being undertaken, and thus could track the receptivity and the communication efforts in real time, over time. In particular, we focus on how the way organizational change communication impacts on change receptivity in the context of continuous change. The findings arise from the initial data collection, with primary data collection tools being participant observation, document analysis and focus groups. The temporal setting was the first "100 days of change".

The initial change sequence is important to an organization, as the responses to the initial change implementation can signal the likelihood of successful implementation (Amburgey *et al.*, 1993). In this case, the time period also carries political value for a new CEO, as ultimately the board of directors will be looking to see some "early wins" to validate its choice of the new CEO as a successor to the past CEO (Gaines-Ross, 2000). The information collected over this time period will be used to compare later data collections in order to map the process of organizational change over a three-year period, and thus satisfy the quest for temporal and processual research on change (Pettigrew *et al.*, 2001). In viewing the organizational change process as a communication problematic (Bourke and Bechervaise, 2002), the research will focus on the organizational change communication in terms of formal communication, memos and briefings, as well as conversations and dialogue about the change process. First, the literature on organizational change communication is reviewed and then the research methods and setting are described. The findings indicate that initially, an instrumental, one-way view of communication occurs, with deficits noted in formal and manager/employee communication. The employees then use a constructivist communication approach in order to manage the implications of continuous change. The consequences for managing planned and emergent change will be discussed.

## Organizational communication and change

An implicit, normative assumption that communication is simply a linear process and a methodologically fractured field characterizes the research on organizational change communication. Despite many change scholars (Axley, 2000; Doyle *et al.*, 2000) arguing that communication is necessary and good, organizational change communication is little studied explicitly (Eisenberg *et al.*, 1999, p. 135). Doyle *et al.* (2000) contend this lack of empirical research leads to practitioners frequently lacking success in change communication goals. As Salem (1999, p. 21) notes, integration of organizational communication research remains a primary challenge. In understanding organizational change communication, we use two frameworks to inform the discussion; an instrumental framework, that reflects the managerial use of communication to effect change (Putnam, 1999) and a constructivist approach, that focuses on how organizational change is created by communication change (Taylor and Van Every, 2000).

Planned change is often analysed using an instrumental framework and utilising a transmission theoretical model of sender-message-receiver-feedback-interference (Shannon and Weaver, 1949). However, emergent organizations can be analysed in terms of a constructivist framework, using critical theory (Taylor and Van Every, 2000). Weick and Quinn (2000, pp. 373–81) validate the different change communication perspectives when they suggest the role of change agent in planned change is that of

prime mover (i.e. sends message to change behaviour) and in continuous change models (emergent change) the change agent is seen as sense-maker of the active dialogue that creates the organization. Therefore, in investigating how organizational change communication impacts on change receptivity we are cognizant of the two approaches and recognise that there may be a shift in focus of the research if the organization in question starts with a planned change approach in order to become a continuous change organization.

Most of the studies in the management literature rely on the first framework as a way of understanding organizational communication and change. It is argued:

> Communication is the process on which the initiation and maintenance of organizational change depends. . . Ultimately the success of any change effort depends on how effectively the strategy for and the substance of the change is communicated to those who are the targets of change (Witherspoon and Wohlert, 1996, p. 378)

Understanding employees as "targets of change" suggests planned change, and does not consider the proactive and "driver"-like roles those employees pursue in continuous change efforts. This difference can be explored from a constructivist perspective in terms of how employees make sense of change and construct their new realities. In their study, Witherspoon and Wohlert (1996) found that information is distributed downward and differentially. Information was found to be a commodity to be brokered and a scarce resource to be guarded and that the flow of information stops at supervisor level. This finding raises questions concerning how lower level employees make sense of change without information provided by supervisors. We contend this aspect should be examined more closely through an empirical study of continuous change, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of the communication flow.

Lewis and Seibold (1998) investigated how communication affects the successful implementation process, and determined that communication is central to predicting outcomes of planned change. They argue the central communication processes involved in the implementation of planned change has received less attention by communication scholars. However, the communication process involved in the implementation of emergent changes has received even less attention.

In signaling future research directions Lewis (2000a, b) argues that more research which details the specifics of change processes, and which addresses questions of how change is communicated, by whom, and with what result is needed. This paper specifically addresses these aspects in terms of the relative effectiveness of communication strategies. The research directions outlined by Lewis (2000a, b) can be considered typical of instrumental communication research.

When considering the second framework, some management studies investigate organizational communication in terms of discourse and dialogue. Butcher and Atkinson (2001, p. 554) argue that the active management of language in the context of change has received less attention and that language norms and taboos can be a key anchor to maintaining the status quo of the organization. They highlight "framing" as a potential area to pursue in change management research. This avenue is supported by Graetz's (2000, p. 551) work on case studies about strategic change leadership. Whilst the change agents in Pilkington Australasia were communicating the change, they were not necessarily doing so with the appropriate "enthusiasm and vigour" and thus apathy became a crucial framing issue in the implementation (Graetz, 2000).

In contrast, Smith *et al.* (1995, p. 28) reported on the difference in change receptivity during the communication process of a large change initiative with the State Transit Authority in Victoria. After a series of continuous discussion sessions and other site inspections, the employees were given a sense of ownership of the change. This process resulted in a commitment to the change and a sense of enthusiasm and personal challenge. Through ongoing dialogue the participants of the change process created new meaning and acceptance.

In summary, after a preliminary investigation, there are several previously unexplored and productive research directions to follow. Our primary aim is to investigate the relationship between change communication and change receptivity. Our secondary purpose is to undertake research on continuous change organizations to establish further empirical studies of the context of organizational change. This research has the potential to progress beyond the current understanding of change receptivity, which then leads to increasing the success rates of change implementation. A deeper understanding of the processes that facilitate continuous change will enable organizations to adapt to the challenges that exist in today's business environment.

## Continuous change organizations

Organizations that undergo continuous change are argued to have the "ability to change rapidly and continuously, especially by developing new products (core competence and culture driven)" (Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997, p. 1). The changes are "those that are ongoing, evolving and cumulative ... small uninterrupted adjustments ..." (Pettigrew *et al.*, 2001, p. 704). These continuous change organizations have had limited treatment in the literature; the case-studies provided so far can be classified as either public sector organizations, learning organizations or firms engaged in New Product Development (NPD). An initial scan of the literature suggests that each of these contexts displays varying degrees of change receptivity.

Much of the previous research uses NPD Teams as the unit of analysis (Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997; Miner *et al.*, 2001). These studies interpret continuous change as innovation, and consequently focus on NPD. Continuous change research has consisted largely of case-based studies as is appropriate in new areas of research (Eisenhardt, 1989). With the emphasis being on NPD, the samples have consisted mainly of technically-oriented employees. Brown and Eisenhardt (1997) and Miner *et al.* (2001) have highlighted the necessity to create semi-structures that allow flexibility and order to co-exist in order to facilitate continuous change. Miner *et al.* (2001) and Sitkin *et al.* (1998) situate continuous change organizations in the organizational learning literature. In terms of findings, Brown and Eisenhardt (1997) highlight the importance of communication and future probe teams in managing the continuous innovation processes. All of these studies are concerned with emergent change in the form of NPD. In doing so, they are studying a population that is pro-innovation, and therefore, quite positive about continuous change as their role is to be innovative. It is also important to note that in these studies the product/product lines and supporting technology are continuously changing, not necessarily the structure of the organization. This situation creates a research need to balance this initial work with a research agenda that focuses on organizational innovation.

Studies from Hazlett and Hill (2000) and Baden-Fuller and Volberda (1997) suggest different organizational settings (i.e. public sector organizations) may produce different results. The type of continuous change discussed includes changing political

environments and the move towards economic rationalism. Their studies showed that in the public sector context, continuous change is associated with high levels of change fatigue. This result is also confirmed in preliminary findings from another study of a state government department with a large-scale culture change program (Brown *et al.*, 2000). This early work indicates there is ample opportunity to explore what continuous change may mean in particular contexts, and then to identify the factors that enable continuous change (i.e. semi-structures, future probes) and those that act as a barrier. Few of these studies examine the situation in which the organization is intent on becoming a continuous change organization, for example, by adopting a learning organization framework (Senge, 1992). However, the work on continuous change also highlights the importance of change fatigue and resistance as part of the continuous change process. Although Pettigrew *et al.* (2001) establish that change receptivity requires more research, it is difficult to find an established definition. In order to do so, we now discuss the research related to change receptivity.

### Change receptivity

Change receptivity (Pettigrew *et al.*, 2001) is a relatively new term, and this paper contends that change receptivity embraces a number of responses to change, ranging from the negative to the positive. It is considered a measure of how receptive a person, group or organization is to change. Accordingly, this embraces a number of responses such as frustration, uncertainty, positiveness, passive acceptance and change contempt and can be conceptualised as multidimensional attitudes to change (Piderit, 2000). Table I classifies the different dimensions of change receptivity.

Our overview of the change receptivity literature (Buchanan *et al.*, 1999; Eby *et al.*, 2000; Ket de Vries and Balazs, 1997; Lawson and Angle, 1998; Mabin *et al.*, 2001; Miller and Taylor, 1995; Okumus and Hemmington, 1998: Piderit, 2000; Smith *et al.*, 1995; Weber and Weber, 2001) suggests that most studies have focused on individual factors such as personality attributes and cognitive processes, and accordingly have used surveys as instruments of data collection. Consequently, this approach ignores collective responses to change and produces a need for group level analysis and qualitative approaches to provide deeper insight. There is also a lack of receptivity literature deriving from continuous change efforts – all of the above studies related to single, one-off planned change initiatives. Accordingly, our research addresses how organizational communication impacts on change receptivity employing group and individual level analysis, and uses a case-study analysis of a firm that is intent on transforming to a continuous change organization.

### Change setting

The case-study researched in this paper is a public sector organization chartered with technology diffusion, and whose new CEO has stated that he wants the organization

| | Negative | Neutral | Positive |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Table I.**<br>Range of change<br>receptivity responses | Change contempt<br>Frustration<br>Change fatigue<br>Fear | Passive acceptance<br>Change readiness<br>Ambivalence | Pro-innovation<br>Change commitment<br>Excitement |

to be "continuously changing, a learning organization of the Senge (1990) type". The organization has less than 75 employees and the occupations range from foundry workers, engineers, model finishers and business consultants.

The organization is operating under seemingly volatile conditions, subject to political change, both in state and federal budgetary decision-making as well as subject to a high degree of technological obsolescence. Increased defence spending has reduced the federal government funding available for technology initiatives. The charter of Tech D also involves sourcing high-capital-cost new technology in order to facilitate uptake within state and national firms in the manufacturing sector. Accordingly, at the time of research, the organization was not yet "typical" of continuous change and is undergoing a directed change effort. Given the turbulent environmental context, the CEO is not following a planned change path – the change effort is being adapted as new information is presented.

The organizational change process ongoing at Tech D can be described as a directed transformation, with the CEO using restructuring, culture change, high performance work teams, and process re-engineering as the methods for achieving the transformative goal of developing a continuous change organization.

## Method
In this particular case-study we used multiple methods, including participant observation, documentation, focus group interviews, and organizational surveys for data collection. This approach enabled the data collected to be triangulated across methods. Triangulation of methods is advised as a way of overcoming construct validity as multiple sources of evidence provide multiple measures of the same phenomena (Yin, 1994, p. 92). Multi-method data collection is also a hallmark of process research, enabling the researcher to study events as they unfold over time (Hinings, 1997).

### Participant observation
With participant observation the researcher is immersed in the experience, collapsing the traditional separation between subject and object of study (Yin, 1994) and can access "real time" data, unencumbered by the constraints of selective and reconstructed recall. In this study, we were provided unfettered access to the organization, and access to formal management and staff committee meetings, as well as informal meetings, gatherings and lunchroom discussions was unqualified. Such access allowed for the improvement of internal validity through triangulation of data between the interviews, focus groups, formal correspondence and observations. This type of participant observation has elements of the ethnographic tradition (Dawson, 1997).

### Document study
Data were also gathered from organizational documents. The organizational documents consist of e-mails pertaining to the changes, the communication plan, the strategic planning records, intranet logs, and the minutes of change meetings. Hermeneutic analysis or textual interpretation of company documentation bolsters the case study methodology (Forster, 1999).

### Focus group interviews
Three reasons determined the choice of focus groups as a medium for obtaining the perceptions of employees. It is argued that change resistance is caused by individual

factors, group factors and organizational factors (Mabin *et al.*, 2001). Focus groups, therefore, provide the opportunity to observe the interaction of individuals within, in this case, their own working groups (Morgan, 1988). 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, 1988).

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. The questions were:

- In terms of the organizational change process – how would you describe what TECH D is doing?
- How would you describe the communication of the changes within TECH D?
- How do you feel about the organizational change process?
- What does continuous change mean to you and how do you feel about continuous change being a goal of TECH D?

During April and May 2002, five focus groups were conducted. The participants of the groups were constituted from the five major functional work divisions. This method enabled us to look for group level effects, as well as protect the participants from "spilling secrets" to participants from another group. After witnessing the "silo" effect in the organization, we made the choice not to mix people from different divisions, in order to encourage full and frank discussion. For this reason managers were also excluded. A total of 28 staff members participated with the smallest focus group consisting of only two participants and the largest involving nine. The time of each focus group varied from 45 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. The remainder of the participants were provided with a research summary page of their focus group discussion, so that they could ensure that the contents were an accurate representation of the focus group's dialogue. All groups agreed with the representations.

*Organizational survey*

Weber and Weber (2001) have noted few studies collect data on attitudes before and after change, so this study conducted a survey to determine the organization's openness to change prior to the start of the continuous change process. This acts as a basis for comparative measures over the change process within the organization. Follow-up questions will be asked to evaluate possible changes in employee perceptions of openness to change and reasons for these changes will be explored.

The questionnaires were administered to all organizational members not on leave, and with the exception of the CEO, with 69 questionnaires administered. Each questionnaire was attached to a self-addressed reply paid envelope and the response rate was 44 (64 percent).

Change receptivity was assessed using a set of items adapted from Klecker and Loadman's (1999) study measuring Principal's Openness to Change. This scale was originally adapted from Dunham, *et al.* (1989) Inventory of Change in Organizational Culture. The 18-item questionnaire used, measures respondents' attitudes to change with a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). The items used in our study consisted of a listing of change scenarios as described by the CEO of the case study organization, and the scenarios were applied to a hypothetical organization.

## Results and discussion

Table II provides the interpretation from the "between method" triangulation over the first 100 days of change. These results are now discussed using the four main questions posed in the focus groups, with supplementary evidence from the document analysis, participant observation and survey results. Results for employee receptivity showed very high means on each factor, cognitive (think), behavioral (act), and affective (feel), indicating the majority of the respondents felt positive and accepting of the proposed changes. The mean score of the cognitive scale was 4.17, the mean score for the behavioral scale was 4.10, and the mean score of affective scale was 4.19 (scale of 1-5, with 5 being the highest score). However, as the following discussion reveals, being very open to change did not indicate there was continued positive receptivity to change throughout the process.

## Groups' description of change: restructuring and uncertainty

Broadly, the responses to this question could be summarised as categorising the change process as a method, i.e. either restructuring, or downsizing (redundancies). It was established that the redundancies were a symbol of the restructuring. The groups were mixed in their feelings about the redundancies with discussion ranging from the rational need for redundancies such as "It's unfortunate but a healthy part of [change] – when you're gardening you're always picking off the leaves to help the tree grow" to the more fearful implications of the redundancies, for example, "there's a fear about from people coming and going". All groups expressed dissatisfaction with elements of how the redundancies were implemented. The language used to describe redundancies once again varied from the rational "I can identify with the management decision re the redundancies, but I don't particularly like the way they have been implemented" to a more sinister tone, for example, "cloak and dagger approach" and "sudden disappearance overnight".

All groups followed up this question with discussions of uncertainty about what was going on and in which direction the change was heading. The participants expressed a concern at the lack of organizational vision and direction. Participant observation and document analysis revealed a number of reasons for this finding. First, the initial planning day had been unsuccessful in achieving a clear vision and purpose statement. Second, the CEO told staff in management meetings and informal discussions on a number of times that he was not clear on what the vision was. The vision and purpose became considerably clearer by the end of the 100-day period and this reflects a reality of communicating uncertain information. The idea that there are two stages of organizational change, planning and implementation, can be described as a myth. It is more likely that when changes are complex, the plan evolves along with

**Table II.**
Selected interpretation from between method triangulation

| Diagnostic dimension | Survey data | Focus groups three months later | Archival data (e-mails and newsletters) | Participant observation | Interpretation from method triangulation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Change receptivity | Respondents have a high mean on affective, cognitive, and behavioural scales of openness to change. | Emphasis on restructuring and redundancies | Public letters of criticism of the company to the CEO affirming commitment to change | At the beginning of change process, employees are excited at the prospect of change, keen to be involved, and looking forward to a new work place. During the change process: Shocked at redundancies fearful of future frustrated at speed of change or direction of change Anxious about ambiguity Demanding statements of direction from CEO Enthusiasm from those close to CEO Discontent with number of outside consultants bought in Cope with change by taking on organizational roles: i.e. the stoic, the champion, the counsellor Initial CEO briefings were met with silence, nonplussed acceptance, or covert contempt. Later CEO briefings received with challenges and questions | High levels of expectation initially led to disappointment and anger with initial implementation, i.e. redundancies and restructure Change team and CEO responded by introducing more initiatives such as intranet discussion board, and newsletters, and CEO addresses/e-mails to all staff |
| | | Uncertainty and ambiguity | Discontent with labelling of change process as "Continuous change" | | |
| | | Lack of communication major focus | Introduction of intranet discussion boards (low usage) | | |
| | | Range of attitudes towards change | Development of specific change newsletters designed to celebrate achievements | | Staff responding to change team interventions with more positive feelings/attitude to change. Still pockets of discontent |
| | | Reframing of the term continuous change | | | |

the implementation (Larkin and Larkin, 1994). Third, there was not a concerted communication strategy designed to communicate the outcomes of the initial planning day. This impacted the participants on multiple levels, ranging from a strategic perspective to operational decisions, and day-to-day tasks. Issues were raised in the focus groups and via the e-mail and intranet about "who do I contact now that X is gone" and "who looks after Solutions [external newsletter]" to uncertainty about what type of customers to approach.

There was divergence amongst the participants about the speed of change over the first 100 days. Many participants expressed frustration at how slow the process was occurring; yet others were equally vocal in expressing surprise at how much had been accomplished and the speed of change. This finding underscores the social construction of time. When these responses were further explored it became apparent that those individuals who had close involvement with the change team or were part of a group whose manager consciously worked at keeping line of communication open, perceived that there was much happening. The researcher attended a number of the weekly team meetings. The one focus group that perceived that much had been accomplished worked with a manager who conducted "group check-ins" and expected all team members to reveal personal and professional goals for the week. This style of management facilitated trust and openness within the team, and the team members were comfortable asking that manager about the changes and potential implications. If the group did not have open lines of communication with their manager, they perceived that there was not a lot happening: "We've covered a lot in a small time – but some of the problems is the communication gets lost". This finding underscores the importance of the change team and the middle managers as conduits of information regarding achievements and performance.

As earlier noted there were a number of changes being introduced in the first 100 days. The finding that four of the five groups understood the organizational change in terms of only one of these changes occurring can be explained by the impact that restructuring has on work groups. In the early stages of change – the restructuring was highly visible by way of the unexpected redundancies, e-mails from those made redundant sending farewell e-mails, and an influx of external consultants. These events were symbols of the change process and became a focus of the organizational work groups. Each of the groups interviewed had their own culture including group rules, norms and values and therefore the prospect of a restructure meant that those subcultures were threatened. With a lack of management communication about the change process, it is difficult to classify this finding as an instrumental approach to change communication. However, the resultant focus on restructuring indicated a constructivist approach to change, whereby the employees were actively making sense of what was happening, and generating an understanding that change means restructuring. Restructuring is not the only process being undertaken at Tech D, but the other change initiatives such as culture change, 360 degree feedback, and process improvement were subsumed by groups' collective focus on restructuring.

Accordingly, believing that their "work-life" was about to change, the groups initiated information-seeking behaviour. Many employees find ambiguity and uncertainty in the workplace uncomfortable, particularly if they have been used to a high degree of predictability. In discussing organizational vision and direction,

the members sought clarification and justification for why they were being subjected to the discomfort of change ambiguity.

Recent literature on downsizing (Larkin and Larkin, 1994; Merryman, 1995) suggests that the optimal way of handling the loss of a staff member is for managers to gather their groups together at the same time and communicate who has been made redundant, why, and most importantly what this means to the remaining employees. The role of the manager is to make sense of this experience in terms of how will things be different, i.e. who will pick up on X's role and tasks. The message needs to provide information on why the person has been made redundant and how the decision was made. To this end, the findings about the middle managers not passing down information concurs with Witherspoon and Wohlerts' (1996) findings on the information flow being downwards and differential. While the transmission of information belies an instrumental approach, once it stops, the employees react with a constructivist approach. Future research will determine whether this pattern will continue.

### Communication of change: problematic

Consistent with earlier in-house surveys conducted by management consultants on organizational climate (Gibson, 1999; Frahm and Brown, 2002), organizational communication remains problematic. Using the instrumental approach, organizational communication is defined by Daft (1997, p. 560) as "the process by which information is exchanged and understood by two or more people, usually with the intent to motivate or influence behaviour". More recently in an innovation context, organizational communication has been described as an information processing and uncertainty reduction activity. This definition would imply that the information exchange and processing activities at Tech D are not sufficient in meeting the needs of employees. The responses to this issue were the most consistent across groups of all the responses to the questions.

It was perceived that managers are responsible for communication breakdowns – the middle managers were attributed with responsibility for communicating what is happening at a senior level about the change, and in all but one case this was described as insufficient. The participants also highlighted the lack of formal channels, stating they had a preference for face-to-face communication and this was lacking.

There were limited feedback channels and communication flowed in a downwards direction-what communication occurs about change comes from above, and it is 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, rumours and grapevine discussions are filling the gap, and this finding validates our proposition that a constructivist approach to change communication becomes dominant by default.

In contrast to these findings, there was a general sense of satisfaction with the CEO's personal communication style in that he is perceived to be open, frank and approachable. Those who were closest in proximity to the CEO spoke confidently about being able speak with the CEO about change issues. This situation may indicate that the current communication channels had deteriorated in the time preceding the new CEO's appointment and sufficient time had not elapsed to transfer the CEO's supportive communication style to the middle managers and the lower level employees. It appears that there is also a lack of formal communication channels such as dedicated

group meetings, "whole-of-staff" get togethers, weekly reports and staff newsletters. The intranet is seldom used and the content on the intranet is outdated. This contradiction may be understood in terms of the CEO's preferred change communication approach. He has already openly spoken of his desire to follow a Senge path, and implicitly a dialogic approach to creating a learning organization. This requires a personal commitment to openness, respect and listening. It appears an instrumental communication style is contrary to the CEO's personal beliefs on appropriate communication. However, employees within the organization seem to express a preference for traditional change communication models such as instrumental.

Managing this tension entails a change in management attitude to the importance of communication. Currently, it appears communication is considered an adjunct responsibility to the management function, and in many cases it is not raised at all. This means that much of the organizational change communication occurs as an *ad hoc* response or through informal channels of communication. The finding that the CEO is considered open and approachable is positive, but it is argued that this type of communication should not diminish the importance of formal communication. Likewise, whilst the value of *ad hoc* and informal communication should not be diminished, it cannot replace formal communication for consistency and timeliness.

It is easy to blame middle managers as being responsible for communication breakdowns, however communication is a symbol of organizational culture (Schein, 1982). If the existing organizational culture does not value information exchange and processing, then it is unlikely that the managers will deviate from the norm. Additionally, very few of the employees took responsibility for communicating their needs and providing feedback. These findings regarding organizational communication indicate that Tech D requires a significant shift in cultural values for the employees' perception of organizational communication quality to improve. The observation that the CEO is perceived to be open and frank indicates the cultural shift is possible, as cultural change requires commitment from the top (Kotter and Heskett, 1992).

### Change receptivity: multi-dimensional attitudes to change

As previously discussed, change receptivity encompasses a number of responses and we found a broad range of attitudes on site. The importance of these responses lies in the success of change programmes. The failure of many major corporate change initiatives can be attributed to employee resistance (Maurer, 1996; Maurer, 1997; Spiker and Lesser, 1995; Waldersee and Griffiths, 1997). In the first 100 days of change, the responses to this question indicated that staff were primarily responding on an individual level, not at a group level. Within each group there were many different responses to the question.

Those who spoke of frustration were typically frustrated by a lack of involvement in the change process, and frustrated by a lack of information about the changes. The lack of information was also responsible for those who were feeling uncertain about the changes. There were sub-groups who were quite positive about the changes and saw change as a welcome response to perceived organizational problems carried over from the past, as well as being an opportunity for personal gain. These were also participants who had a higher degree of involvement in the change process than other participants.

The group members who described their feelings as being accepting could see the difficulty of the process, despite their disappointment at how change had occurred (or not occurred). Acceptance was also one group's coping mechanism with the strain of change – "It's just something that has to happen, it's part of the process, there's no way around it". The participants who expressed change contempt did so as a response to implementation issues and perceived failings of management to handle the change process. This contempt mainly related to the handling of the redundancies.

The findings indicate that there is a relationship between the change communication and the responses to the question about change receptivity. Those who were frustrated and contemptuous did not perceive that they had a "voice" or enough information to help them make sense of the changes. Conversely, those who had strong relationships with middle managers who were very communicative, or who were geographically close to the senior management and had more access to reliable informal communication, were more accepting or positive about the changes. Like the participants in Smith *et al.*'s (1995) study, those who had higher levels of participation and dialogue responded more positively to change.

### Continuous change: a dialogue that reframes

Continuous change, in management theory, has the capacity to create "cumulative and substantial change" (Pettigrew *et al.*, 2001, p. 704). In seeking the perspective of those undergoing this change, it was apparent that there was considerable difference between what the employees understood continuous change to be and what management theory defines it to be. This difference is critical as communication scholars as far back as Aristotle in 350 B.C. suggest that for communication to be successful in changing behaviour it needs to be receiver-oriented (Larkin and Larkin, 1994, p. xii). Thus, if there is a difference between the employees" understanding of a concept and that of their managers the change will not be as effective. The importance of the language of organizational change and of word choice became very apparent when considering the responses to this question.

All but one of the groups preferred the term "continuous improvement"; for example, "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". Change had negative connotations attached such as "a buzzword" "change for change sakes" "not secure or positive," and "personnel turnover".

In terms of conceptual understanding and value to Tech D, the groups understood continuous change (improvement) to be useful as a way of "continually looking for a better way of doing things in a more efficient way" and possessing "evolutionary" scope. Continuous improvement appears to have substantial support as a change goal. However, one group specified that it did need to be linked into task analysis and learning. Another group cautioned against indiscriminate continuous change, for example, "I think that's one of the things when you are involved in continuous change you are always questioning why you could be changing, with valid reason". This finding moved away from the instrumental view of communication of change, and demonstrated a discourse – and dialogue-driven approach to the impending change. The participants constructed a new organizational understanding of the change goal.

In summary, the lack of a formal change communication strategy led to a primary focus on the restructuring and information seeking behaviours. Information was not

forthcoming and the CEO carried a different perspective about what change communication should be. The middle managers held what information they had close, and the resultant vacuum led to the employees constructing their own information through grapevines and informal discussions. This situation led to decreased receptivity to the change process and was manifested in cynicism, contempt, uncertainty and frustration, and for those close to the managers, acceptance and positiveness about change. The discussion about the word "change" provides guidance to management as to the progress of the transformation. It also establishes the empirical evidence for the secondary research purpose to understand the contextual implications of change. In the management literature (Baden-Fuller and Volberda, 1997; Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997; Hazlett and Hill, 2000; Miner *et al.*, 2001; Sitkin *et al.*, 1998; Zorn *et al.*, 2000) a continuous change organization is described in three ways:

(1) a public sector organization continually undergoing change;

(2) a learning organization; and

(3) an organization engaged in NPD.

An initial sweep of this literature indicates that those organizations in the public sector undergoing change do so with substantial resistance, that is, employees do not like change, and may display a resigned acceptance and/or contempt. However, those who are engaged in NPD are quite positive about change, and very pro-innovation. Given that Tech D is currently a public sector organization, with a CEO who espouses a learning organization focus, and is engaged in NPD activities, it will be interesting to track the transition to a continuous change organization. The finding that work groups are not comfortable with the term continuous change does parallel with the results from public sector studies. However, the fact that they have "reframed" the term into one that is more acceptable is indicative of a learning organization and emphasises the constructive nature of language in change (Butcher and Atkinson, 2001).

The preference for the term continuous improvement is not surprising given the manufacturing context of the organization. Continuous improvement can be defined as "one of the activities whereby process and procedures are implemented that contribute to organizational goals through the continuous improvement of work processes, work places and work interactions" (Berlin, 2000). It is a term that consistently used in the total quality management literature (Berlin, 2000; Bessant *et al.*, 2001) and this is a dominant approach in manufacturing organizations. The main criticism of continuous improvement is that it is prescriptive and does not cover implementation, assumes a "tool" focus and neglects behavioural and cultural approaches (Bessant *et al.*, 2001). What is important, though, is that Continuous Improvement has an evolutionary, positive connotation to it for the employees of Tech D, and thus to use this term within Tech D rather than Continuous Change will not deter the change goals. Depending on how fast the organization's culture changes, the term continuous change may be re-introduced later.

### Concluding remarks

The final finding offers the most significant contribution to management theory and practice. Organizational communication scholars are only just starting to pursue new directions for organizational communication that departs from the instrumental and linear-like use of communication in achieving change goals. It then follows that there is

a lag in applying these new constructivist approaches to the management literature. It implies potential in actively involving employees, not just "to make them feel included" and therefore more receptive to change. It recognises the constituents of the organization as human capital, capable of generating knowledge and ultimately creating a continuously changing organization.

This approach provides challenges for leaders and managers alike and moves the concept of the learning organization into a dynamic processual reality. Many managers and employees operate with a fundamental understanding of change programmes resulting from traditional three-step models of planned change (Lewin, 1951). The tension between the CEO's espoused constructivist communication style and the existing employee expectation of an instrumental communication style presents as a lack of clarity in relation to what continuous change means. This suggests that those leading emergent change processes need to ensure that employees and managers expectations align with understanding of the change goal, and the accompanying styles of communication.

This research has strengths and limitations. One of the major strengths is the in-depth nature of the research and multi-method data collection, across all levels of the organization that allows additional insight into areas not yet covered at length in previous studies. The willingness of the participants to discuss early analysis, and to engage with researchers in the ongoing research project, has also enabled this account to be grounded in the "voices" of the organization, and illustrate the varying implications of communicative management of change receptivity in the first 100 days of change. The limitation inherent with this type of study, though, is the use of a single case-study and thus has limitations in transferring the lessons learned. With this in mind, later stages of our research will involve access to further cases, and replication of the research methods.

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