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Surviving organizational change: how management communication helps balance mixed feelings

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine the correspondence between the use and evaluation of management communication on the one hand and positive and negative responses to a planned organizational change on the other hand.

Design/methodology/approach – The study was conducted among employees of a Dutch branch of a large international organization which had survived a recent planned organizational change. In a survey, respondents were asked to report on their opinions about the organizational change at the time of the study, and retrospectively report on their opinions about the organizational change at the introduction of the organizational change.

Findings – It was found that positive responses to the planned organizational change increased and negative responses decreased in the due course of the organizational change. In addition, survivors were ambivalent in their attitude towards the organizational change, as positive responses existed next to negative ones. With respect to the role of management communication it was found that satisfaction with management communication is most strongly related to responses to the organizational change as survivors who are satisfied with management communication score high on positive responses and low on negative responses.

Research limitations/implications – The study has methodological limitations as it employs a one point in time measurement.

Practical implications – This paper is a source for practitioners in the field of management communication as the results may guide them in focusing on maximizing employee satisfaction with management communication as this communication component is most strongly related to response to the organizational change.

Originality/value – This paper provides empirical evidence of the value of management communication for survivors of organizational change processes.

Keywords Organizational change, Communication, Communication management, Employee communications

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In this study, we examined the role of management communication in the process of balancing responses among survivors of a planned organizational change in a Dutch branch of a large international organization. This episodic organizational change (Weick and Quinn, 1999) involved organizational restructuring and downsizing of the number



of employees. The main objectives of the organizational change were the improvement of customer-friendly services and a better cooperation between departments. The management informed employees about the objectives and consequences of the organizational change using newsletters, the intranet, and team meetings. The study focuses on the extent to which the use and evaluation of information provided by the management, at the start and throughout the implementation of the organizational change, correlates with perceived positive and negative responses regarding the organizational change among survivors.

Understanding how to communicate an intended organizational change is one of the challenges for organizational communication scholars for the new century (Jones *et al.*, 2004). In their review of recent literature, they found that although the centrality of communication during the change process was recognized, surprisingly little empirical research has been undertaken to assess its actual role (Jones *et al.*, 2004, p. 736). Little research examines change in organizations and more attention should be paid to the ways employees perceive, talk about, and manage change in their work (p. 737).

The urge for longitudinal research is often emphasized in order to study the dynamics underlying (the implementation of) organizational change as a process (Armenakis and Bedeian, 1999; Klein, 1996). Studies on implementation processes often refer to Lewin (1947), who theorized a three-stage model of change, involving unfreezing, moving/changing and refreezing. This model was widely discussed (Burnes, 2004a, b) and criticized as static, linear, and mechanistic (Kanter *et al.*, 1992). Burnes (2004b) however, argues that Lewin's approach is still relevant to the study of organizational change as Lewin believed that the key to resolving social conflict was to facilitate learning and so enable individuals to understand and restructure their perceptions of the world around them (p. 981). We do not intent to elaborate on this discussion but only use the labels unfreezing and refreezing in order to make a distinction between the introduction and the completion of the organizational restructuring and downsizing.

The focus in this study is on the role of communication on individual employees, and more in particular on the responses to a planned organizational change. Many studies concentrate on management attitudes towards organizational change (Carbery and Garavan, 2005; Jiang *et al.*, 1997; Kotter and Schlesinger, 1979). Others emphasize the corporate success or failure criteria such as profitability, market share, and operational effectiveness and efficiency (Hayes, 2006). In our study, we do not go into the functionality or the desirability of the organizational restructuring and downsizing. Instead we will explore the correspondence between the use and perceived quality of management communication about the organizational change and employees' individual responses to organizational change.

Armenakis *et al.* (1993), studied the evolution of employee responses to change over time. In their research review, they discovered a number of affective reactions to organizational change, such as organizational commitment, job satisfaction, receptivity, resistance, cynicism, commitment, and stress. These positive and negative responses show that organizational change involves a multidimensional phenomenon (Armenakis and Bedeian, 1999, p. 305).

The multidimensional character of responses involved in organizational change was further elaborated on by Pideret (2000). She suggested new research based on a reconceptualization of individual responses to change as multidimensional attitudes.

Attitudes are structured along three dimensions, labeled as cognitive attitudes (beliefs), emotional attitudes (individual feelings), and intentional or conative attitudes (evaluations based on past or intentional behavior) (Pideret, 2000, p. 787). Each dimension ranges from positive to negative. Research on individual responses to organizational change shows different responses along the different dimensions. Pideret describes the occurrence of conflicts between dimensions: employees experience ambivalence within and between cognitive, emotional, and conative responses to organizational change and therefore recommends to assess responses over time (Pideret, 2000, p. 791). In our study, we focus on how positive and negative responses to organizational change differ between the unfreezing and refreezing phase.

A large number of studies have been conducted on survivors of organizational restructuring and downsizing (Allen *et al.*, 2001; Carbery and Garavan, 2005; Lee and Corbett, 2006; Noer, 1993; Tourish *et al.*, 2004). Allen *et al.* (2001, p. 146) examined changes in work attitudes over time, using a longitudinal field research-design. They observed that over time downsizing has a negative effect on work attitudes but after a longer period (i.e. one year) attitudes may begin to return to their pre-downsizing level (Allen *et al.*, 2001, p. 159). This finding points to the idea of “time eases the pain.” It might be that changes in work attitudes among survivors happen autonomously, and are not affected by communication interventions.

Noer (1993) introduced the concept of “layoff survivor sickness,” that describes the attitudes, feelings, and perceptions that occur in employees who remain after involuntary staff reductions. Survivors report feelings and emotional states including fear, insecurity, uncertainty, frustration, resentment, anger, sadness, depression, guilt, unfairness, betrayal, and distrust (Noer, 1993, p. 13). In interviews with survivors, Noer found that “time does not heal all wounds” (p. 71), as five years after the initial downsizing, feelings of depression, anger, and distrust remained. Makawatsakul and Kleiner (2003) studied the effect of downsizing on morale of survivors. They came across negative feelings of survivors such as job insecurity, perceptions of unfairness, depression, and stress (p. 56).

Studies on the role of communication during organizational change focus on issues such as design and adoption of the change process (Jones *et al.*, 2004), creation of employee participation (Langer and Thorup, 2005; Lewis, 1999), the role of (middle) management communication (Armenakis and Bedeian, 1999; Covin and Kilmann, 1990; Klein, 1996), and the distinction between the informative function of communication to stimulate readiness for change and communication as a means to create a community (Elving, 2005, p. 136). What strikes is that these studies are seldom based on empirical evidence. Most studies try to conceptualize aspects of change processes, using theoretical perspectives coming from a variety of disciplines, discuss the implications of these conceptualizations for organizational change, and give directions for future research (Klein, 1996; Liu and Perrewé, 2005). Reviews of the literature on organizational communication emphasize the lack of empirical research into the communication of the change process itself and the extent to which employees feel that change is communicated effectively to them (Elving, 2005; Jones *et al.*, 2004).

Looking further into empirical studies on the role of communication in the process of organizational restructuring and downsizing, we came across interesting results and discussions that were helpful for our study. In a survey among staff members at a psychiatric hospital undergoing large-scale restructuring, it was concluded that

communication helped overcoming uncertainty and enhanced employees' control and well-being (Bordia *et al.*, 2004). Uncertainty is often mentioned as a major source of psychological strain during the process and outcome of organizational change. Bordia *et al.* (2004) tested a model that outlines the relationship between communication, uncertainty, control, and well being. Data were collected from staff at a psychiatric hospital undergoing an organizational restructuring. The quality of change communication was related to the other three variables in the predicted direction. Communication not only reduces uncertainty but also increases a sense of control over personal circumstances related to change and job satisfaction (Bordia *et al.*, 2004, p. 358). A similar result was found by Kramer *et al.* (2004). In a longitudinal study, they examined the role of communication in reducing uncertainty among airplane pilots during the acquisition of their airline. Quantitative results indicate that communication helped to reduce uncertainty and was predictive of affective responses to the acquisition (Kramer *et al.*, 2004, p. 71).

The role of communication was less obvious in a study by Jimmieson *et al.* (2004) who examined employee adaptation to organizational change over time. These authors discovered that employees who perceived higher levels of change-related information reported higher levels of psychological well being, client engagement, and job satisfaction in the early phase of the change process, but these correlations were not found two years later (Jimmieson *et al.*, 2004, p. 22). Furthermore, they discovered that there is no direct relation between the use of change-related information and intended adaptations. These relations are moderated by psychological variables such as self efficacy and role ambiguity. We may conclude that employee adaptation is not completely self-directed but influenced by communication under certain psychological conditions.

Looking at the studies reviewed above, it shows that responses to organizational change can be conceptualized as a balance between positive and negative responses, in a given context and at a given point of time. In this study, we will empirically explore the role of management communication in the process of balancing responses among survivors of an organizational restructuring and downsizing. Based on the preceding section, the following research questions will be addressed:

- RQ1.* To what extent are positive and negative responses to a planned organizational change interrelated and to what extent do they change over time?
- RQ2.* To what extent do positive and negative responses to organizational change correspond with the use of management communication?

Methods

Subjects

The study was conducted among the employees of a Dutch branch of a large international organization, who had survived the organizational change. All employees ($n = 180$) were approached to fill out a questionnaire, and 120 employees returned the questionnaire resulting in a response rate of 67 percent. The sample included 59 male and 61 female rather young employees, as 80 percent was younger than 35 years old. On average, respondents had been employed for two-and-a-half years. Respondents' educational level varied from low (27 percent) to middle (42 percent) to high (31 percent).

Instrument

A survey questionnaire was administered at one point in time; three months after the organizational change took place. We employed a cross-sectional design in which the respondents were asked to report (on a five-point Likert scale) on their opinions:

- about the organizational change at the time of the study; and
- retrospectively report on their opinions about the organizational change at the onset of the organizational change.

This means that respondents were asked to relate their opinions about the present situation to what they thought of the organizational change at the time it started. Responses to retrospective questions are in principle prone to measurement error (de Vries, 2006), as respondents may:

- evaluate the past situation as (too) positive because at present they are the “lucky” employees who survived the organizational change; or
- evaluate the past situation as (too) negative because at present they feel disillusioned due to the organizational change.

Inasmuch as we did not assess in which direction this bias occurred we can only speculate that our sample consisted partly of respondents with a positive attitude and partly of respondents with a negative state of mind. This would mean that, overall, the measurement bias might be leveled-off.

In order to ground the questionnaire items in the experiences from those involved, we conducted qualitative interviews among employees who had undergone the organizational change ($n = 15$). Interview topics were:

- positive challenges;
- negative consequences; and
- the role of management communication.

The interviewers probed in order to elicit experiences with respect to the level of individual jobs and the level of the entire organization. The interviews were analyzed in order to delineate key elements regarding the three interview topics. Key-elements of positive challenges are being optimistic about one’s own career chances, taking up a positive state of mind, and clarity about the necessity of the organizational change. The former two key-elements reflect concerns on the individual level, whereas the latter element signals a concern at a collective level. Key-elements of negative thoughts are fear of becoming appointed with less attractive tasks, lack of confidence in management, and concern about the work-atmosphere. The first negative key-element indicates a response at the individual level whereas the latter two negative elements refer to the collective, organizational level. Key-elements of thoughts about communication are use, satisfaction, quality, and usefulness of management communication regarding the organizational change. This resulted in a questionnaire consisting of 17 items reflecting positive and negative responses, and use and perceived quality of the management communication (see Appendix). The items were formulated in the natural wording employees expressed during the interviews.

Analysis

Correlational analyses were conducted on the correspondence between positive and negative evaluations of the organizational change and opinions about the use and quality of the management communication both in the unfreezing and the refreezing phase.

Results

In order to address *RQ1*, we first compared the responses to the organizational change at the unfreezing and the refreezing phase. Results are shown in Table I.

The descriptive statistics show that most responses developed in an expected direction over time; positive responses increased whereas negative responses decreased. An exception is the item on the positive state of mind on the organizational change. The mean score on the item "From the beginning I took up a positive state of mind on the organizational change" significantly decreased over time ($t(109) = -4.86$; $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed); $d = -0.41$).

Looking further into the responses separately, in the unfreezing phase the employees' scores on the item "I considered the organizational change as a chance to show my qualities" were rather low ($m = 1.97$). Although this positive response improved significantly over time ($t(109) = 4.77$; $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed); $d = 0.45$), it stayed lowest compared to all other positive and negative responses. Employees agreed most with the negative response on the worsening work atmosphere. Although the mean score on the negative item "I was afraid that the atmosphere at work would deteriorate" reduced significantly over time ($t(118) = -5.46$; $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed); $d = -0.50$), it is a dominant response in both phases, compared to the other responses.

		Unfreezing	Refreezing	$d = \text{re-un}$	Paired-samples t -test
<i>Positive responses</i>					
Corporate survival	Mean	3.56	3.56	0.00	Ns
	SD	1.08	1.06		
	N	109	112		
Personal opportunities	Mean	1.97	2.42	0.45	$t = 4.77^{**}$
	SD	0.90	1.11		$df = 109$
	N	115	114		
Positive state of mind	Mean	3.63	3.22	-0.41	$t = -4.86^{**}$
	SD	0.99	1.02		$df = 109$
	N	112	116		
<i>Negative responses</i>					
Fear tasks	Mean	3.05	2.95	-0.10	Ns
	SD	1.17	1.09		
	N	117	119		
Fear atmosphere	Mean	4.15	3.65	-0.50	$t = -5.46^{**}$
	SD	0.83	0.99		$df = 118$
	N	119	120		
Lack of confidence	Mean	3.59	3.50	-0.09	Ns
	SD	1.01	0.91		
	N	117	114		

Notes: $**p < 0.01$ (two-tailed). Mean scores on a scale from 1 – totally disagree to 5 – totally agree, standard deviations and paired samples t -test

Table I.
Positive and negative
responses to the planned
organizational change

The ambiguity of the responses to the organizational change is shown in Table II where correlations between responses are disposed.

In the upper-right part of the table the correlations in the unfreezing phase are shown whereas the correlations in the refreezing phase are presented in the lower-left part of the table. A successful implementation of the organizational change would mean that at least over time, we should find positive correlations among positive responses and among negative responses and negative correlations between positive and negative responses. In other words, an employee who agrees with a positive item is likely to agree also with the other positive items and is expected to disagree with the negative items. Looking at the result in the unfreezing phase we see that significant correlations (eight out of 15) are in the expected direction. Especially, the positive state of mind on the organizational changes correlates positively with all positive and negatively with all negative responses. The opportunity to show personal qualities correlates significantly with the lack of confidence. Other positive and negative responses show no differences or correspondences in the expected way and positive and negative responses do exist side by side.

The lower-left part of Table II shows that (nine out of 15) correlations are significant, in the expected direction. In contrast with “the punctuated equilibrium” at the start of the organizational change (van de Ven and Scott Poole, 1995), the situation seems to be more balanced again in the refreezing phase. The positive state of mind correlates with all negative and one out of two positive responses. All negative responses correlate with each other significantly. Positive responses seem to reflect different dimensions; most positive responses are not correlated significantly in the expected direction. Especially, the opinion on the corporate survival stands apart from other positive and negative responses as it only correlates with the positive state of mind on the organizational change. The results in Tables I and II show some movement in the responses over time in an expected direction; negative responses decreased, positive ones increased. Responses to the organizational change are more balanced in the refreezing phase.

Responses	1 (pos)	2 (pos)	3 (pos)	4 (neg)	5 (neg)	6 (neg)
<i>Unfreezing phase</i>						
1 Corporate survival		0.07	0.24*	0.08	-0.07	-0.06
2 Personal opportunities			0.24*	-0.01	0.01	-0.23*
3 Positive state of mind				-0.25**	-0.25**	-0.37**
4 Fear tasks					0.35**	0.038
5 Fear atmosphere						0.32**
6 Lack of confidence						
<i>Refreezing phase</i>						
1 Corporate survival						
2 Personal opportunities	0.01					
3 Positive state of mind	0.26**	0.18				
4 Fear tasks	0.16	-0.29**	-0.30**			
5 Fear atmosphere	-0.13	-0.15	-0.34**	0.48**		
6 Lack of confidence	-0.14	-0.32**	-0.27**	0.36**	0.33**	

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$ levels (two-tailed), respectively

Table II.
Correlations between positive and negative responses in the unfreezing and the refreezing phase (Pearson's correlations)

In order to address *RQ2*, we analyzed the role of management communication on the responses to the organizational change in the refreezing phase. We examined this phase of the organizational change as only at that time a meaningful impact of the management communication on the responses can be expected. Results are shown in Table III.

Satisfaction with management communication shows most significant correlations. Employees who are satisfied with the management communication see more personal opportunities ($r = 0.364$; $p < 0.01$) and have a positive state of mind on the organizational change ($r = 0.354$; $p < 0.01$). In addition, they have no fear of a worsening work atmosphere ($r = -0.284$; $p < 0.01$) and have no lack of confidence in a successful enrollment of the organizational change ($r = -0.197$; $p < 0.05$).

The use of management communication shows correspondence with some positive responses and none with negative responses. The use of management communication correlates with seeing personal opportunities ($r = 0.344$; $p < 0.01$) and having a positive state of mind about the organizational change ($r = 0.358$; $p < 0.01$).

Looking at the perceived quality of the management communication we only see one significant correlation with a positive response at the collective level; employees who think that without the organizational change the organization will not survive are positive about the high quality of the management communication ($r = 0.222$; $p < 0.05$).

Finally, the perceived usefulness of the management communication shows no correspondence with the responses in the refreezing phase.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the correspondence between negative and positive responses to organizational change and the role of management communication among survivors. Respondents were asked to report their opinions about the organizational change at the introduction of the organizational change (the unfreezing phase) and three months after the implementation of the organizational change (the refreezing phase).

We first examined the differences of responses to the organizational change and the correspondence between these responses. Results reflect the ambiguity of responses to

Responses refreezing phase	Management communication on organizational change			
	Use: mean – 2.81; SD – 0.86	Satisfaction: mean – 2.58; SD – 0.79	Quality: mean – 3.58; SD – 0.77	Usefulness: mean – 3.13; SD – 1.03
Corporate survival	0.15	0.16	0.22*	0.17
Personal opportunities	0.34**	0.36**	0.05	0.03
Positive state of mind	0.36**	0.35**	0.09	0.05
Fear tasks	0.02	-0.13	-0.10	0.06
Fear atmosphere	-0.09	-0.29**	-0.09	-0.11
Lack of confidence	-0.13	-0.20*	-0.18	-0.08

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$ levels (two-tailed), respectively

Table III.
Correlations between positive and negative responses and use and evaluation of management communication in the refreezing phase (Pearson's correlations)

organizational change, which means that employees hold both positive and negative thoughts about the organizational change at the same time.

Looking at the differences between responses in the unfreezing and the refreezing phase we can conclude that most responses developed in an expected direction over time; positive responses increased whereas negative responses decreased. Employees seem to have balanced their responses regarding the organizational change in favor of the organization and their personal position. On the basis of our data, we cannot conclude whether the situation has returned to the pre-change level of positive and negative feelings about the organization (Allen *et al.*, 2001). We doubt however whether returning to the pre-change level should be a goal in itself, as employees face and have to cope with changes and transitions continuously (Orlikowski, 1996; Weick and Quinn, 1999).

A striking exception to the expected difference of responses is the item “positive state of mind on the organizational change.” This positive response significantly decreased over time. This might be due to the fact that a positive state of mind on the organizational change was less expedient in the refreezing phase, as the organizational change was nearly completed at that point in time.

It is remarkable that in the unfreezing phase the employees saw hardly any opportunities to show their personal qualities. Although this response improved significantly over time, it stayed lowest compared to all other positive and negative responses. In contrast to this low score on individual opportunities, employees agreed much more on the impact of the organizational change on the collective level; the worsening of work atmosphere and the necessity of the organizational change. From these findings the picture emerges that organizational change is an event that lies beyond the control of individual employees. This organizational change seemed to be a necessary “evil” for survivors, with some advantages on the collective organizational level and hardly any benefits on the individual level.

Our results reflect the multidimensional (Armenakis *et al.*, 1993) and ambivalent (Pideret, 2000) character of responses to organizational change. The multidimensional nature of responses is indicated by the lack of correspondence among positive and among negative responses. Especially, positive responses have little correspondence among each other in both phases, which might mean that positive feelings about the organizational change represent multiple dimensions. Ambiguity of responses is demonstrated by the finding that positive and negative responses do exist side-by-side. Responses that at first sight seem to be in contrast appear to be subjectively experienced as a coherent entirety.

With respect to the role of management communication we see that satisfaction with management communication is most strongly correlated to responses to the organizational change; employees who are satisfied with management communication score high on positive responses and low on negative responses, in both phases. Negative responses are hardly influenced by management communication, which means that it did not succeed in counterbalancing negative responses (especially the lack of confidence in the management).

Our conclusion is that responses to organizational change are to a certain extent influenced by management communication about objectives and consequences of organizational change, but develop partially autonomously over time, comparable to everyday transitions employees face in their workplace. The results of our study underline Tsoukas and Chia’s (2002) conception that scientist need to give theoretical priority to microscopic change, as a normal condition of organizational life, by looking

at change in organizations from within, noticing how organizational members reweave their webs of beliefs and habits of action and how managers influence and intervene (p. 580). It is worthwhile to keep exploring the correspondence between management communication and the ambiguity and multidimensionality of responses to organizational change in future empirical research.

Our study has methodological limitations as it employs a one point in time measurement. Opinions and beliefs regarding the unfreezing phase were determined in retrospect in a cross-sectional design. As stated, we recognize that this type of self-report data might have some drawbacks on the results. However, although we would expect that the situation in the unfreezing phase was evaluated rosy in retrospect by the respondents who all survived the organizational change, the negative responses regarding that phase of the organizational change were dominant.

In order to keep employees satisfied with management communication, dialogue might be a necessary element in designing, implementing, and evaluating communication on organizational change (Schein, 1993; Weick and Quinn, 1999). Schein (1993) argues that dialogue enables different groups within organizations to create a shared set of meaning and a common thinking process.

In the designing process, executives have to connect their objectives with experiences in the past that led to the urge to change. Apart from self reflective analysis (what did I do wrong?), executives have to listen to employees in order to reconstruct and understand their way of thinking and acting. Employees can become peers and confidantes who challenge, change or even replace assumptions and goals of executives (Dervin and Frenette, 2001), and are co-producers of communication that leads to the intended change. In the implementation process, managers have to make sure that their messages are understood and implemented in the minds and hearts of the survivors of the organizational change. The process of communicating across the hierarchical levels of an organization will require further dialogue because of the likelihood that different strata operate with different assumptions (Schein, 1993, p. 37). Lastly, in the evaluation process managers and employees have to verify in dialogue with each other that a shared set of meaning and a common way of thinking and acting has been established.

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Appendix. List of items

Unfreezing phase

- (1) *Corporate survival:*
 - Without the planned organizational change the organization would not survive.
- (2) *Personal opportunities:*
 - I considered the organizational change as a chance to show my qualities.
- (3) *Positive state of mind:*
 - From the beginning I took up a positive state of mind on the organizational change.
- (4) *Fear tasks:*
 - I was afraid to become appointed with less attractive tasks in the course of the organizational change.
- (5) *Fear atmosphere:*
 - I was afraid the atmosphere at work would deteriorate.
- (6) *Lack of confidence:*
 - I had no confidence in a successful enrollment of the organizational change.

Refreezing phase

- (7) *Corporate survival:*
 - Without the organizational change the organization will not survive.
- (8) *Personal opportunities:*
 - I consider the organizational change as a chance to show my qualities.
- (9) *Positive state of mind:*
 - I have a positive state of mind on the organizational change.

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- (10) *Fear tasks:*
- I am afraid to become appointed with less attractive tasks because of the organizational change.
- (11) *Fear atmosphere:*
- I am afraid the atmosphere at work will deteriorate.
- (12) *Lack of confidence:*
- I have no confidence in a successful enrollment of the organizational change.

Management communication

- (13) *Information use:*
- I read the newsletters regarding the organizational change.
 - I attended meetings concerning the organizational change.
- (14) *Satisfaction:*
- I was pleased with the information on the organizational change.
- (15) *Quality:*
- The announcement of the organizational change was clear to me.
- (16) *Usefulness:*
- The information about the organizational change was relevant for me.

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