

Building Awareness

A common assumption is that awareness building is equal to communications. Yet, sharing information does not always produce awareness. Recall from Chapter 2 the factors that influence the degree to which individuals internalize awareness messages, including:

- Their view of the current state
- How they perceive problems
- The credibility of the sender of awareness messages
- The circulation of misinformation or rumors
- The contestability of the reasons for change

Because of these factors, the act of communicating does not always produce the result of awareness. For example, employees at an energy services company were interviewed after attending a meeting that announced a major restructuring effort. The goal of the meeting was to share the nature of the change and the business reasons for the restructuring. The following quotes from different employees show the range of awareness, from skepticism to total conviction, in the business's reasons for change.

We have heard all of this before. When things are not going well around here, a reorganization is usually the answer.

This is just another attempt to reduce costs.

We are changing so that we can remain competitive and streamline our processes.

Given the current market conditions, we must reexamine how we do business. Our current cost structure is too high and we risk losing business to competitors if some type of action is not taken immediately.

All of these employees were provided the same information. The first employee discredits the information. The last employee demonstrates a strong conviction for the need for change. Because employees internalize information about change in different ways, several observations can be made about the strategy for building awareness. Building awareness is a process; you cannot assume that a single message or event will result in uniform awareness of the need for change. Awareness is not achieved based on the messages sent, but rather how the messages are received and internalized by each person. The only way you can measure awareness is through interactions and feedback. Several change management tactics are effective for building awareness:

Tactic 1 – Effective communications

Tactic 2 – Executive sponsorship

Tactic 3 – Coaching by managers and supervisors

Tactic 4 – Ready access to business information

Before these change management tactics can be applied, it is necessary to brainstorm and discuss the awareness message. The group responsible for developing and implementing the change must have a common understanding of:

- The overall nature of the change and how the change aligns with the vision for the organization
- The reasons this change is necessary or important (why this change is needed now)
- The risk of not changing
- The market changes, competitor threats or customer issues that contribute to the need for change
- When the change needs to be implemented
- Who will be most impacted by the change

Once the foundation for an awareness campaign is established, a combination of change management tactics can be used to create awareness of the need for change.

Tactic 1 – Effective communications

Communicating through multiple types of media is the most commonly used method for building awareness of the need for change. Communications could include any of the following channels:

- Face-to-face meetings
- Group meetings
- One-on-one communications
- Email
- Newsletters

- Magazines
- Intranet
- Executive presentations
- Training and workshops
- Project team presentations
- Phone conferences and voice messaging
- Posters and banners
- Memos and letters
- Update bulletins
- Special social events
- Flyers and circulars
- Video conferencing
- Videotapes and plasma screen display boards
- Television
- Radio
- Demonstrations

To support awareness-building, these communication channels should be used only after a communication strategy has been developed. Your strategy should:

1. Identify and segment audience groups.
2. Determine the appropriate messages for each audience.
3. Develop the most effective packaging, timing and channel for these communications.

4. Identify the preferred senders for each audience.

Audience segmentation is essential to ensure that awareness messages are designed specifically for each group. Each group will have a unique context and reference point related to the change. Each group has access to different information on a regular basis and will have different “pain points” and areas of interest. Awareness-building will be most effective when the message is set in the proper context for each audience and the key messages are tailored for each group. Executive managers, for example, already have access to most financial data and changes in the marketplace. Front-line employees, however, may know very little about company finances or changes in the market. To communicate awareness of the need for change, the messages must be meaningful to that audience and must be designed with them in mind.

When developing the most effective packaging, timing and channels for these communications, you should consider:

- What types of communication would be the most effective for each audience group?
- When is the best time to send these messages?
- What communication channels have been the most effective in the past?

Recall from Chapter 2 that the preferred senders of information about change in the workplace include the business leaders of the change and an employee’s direct supervisor. Employees want to hear *why* the change is occurring and how that change aligns with the vision for the organization from the business leaders. Employees want to hear *how the change may impact them personally* (what’s in it for me) from their direct supervisor. So while general communications will be a critical change management tool, awareness-building requires more than the

simple broadcasting of information. Business leaders and managers play an essential role in the awareness-building process.

Tactic 2 – Executive sponsorship

The executive sponsor of change is the best spokesperson for communicating *why* a change is needed and the risk of not changing. Employees want to hear from the person in charge, as they believe this person has the broadest perspective and deepest understanding of the state of the business. Business leaders must:

- Share the nature of the change and how that change aligns with the vision for the organization
- Create an understanding of why the change is needed and the risks of not changing
- Establish the priority for the change; the expressed urgency in the message should match the relative importance of the change to the organization

However, a sponsor's role in building awareness goes beyond signing their name to a letter or email, or being the first speaker at events related to the change. Based on research data collected by Prosci in 2005 from 190 project managers,¹ the following roles are the direct responsibility of the primary sponsor:

1. Participate actively and visibly throughout the entire change process; stay engaged with the project team and collect feedback from employees.
2. Build a sponsorship coalition that reinforces the awareness message at all levels; enable peers, direct reports and managers to communicate the reasons for change to employees so that a consistent message is finding its way throughout the organization.

3. Communicate directly with employees; share why the change is happening, the risks of not changing and align the change with the overall direction of the business; repeat these messages through multiple communication channels, including face-to-face interactions.

Tactic 3 – Coaching by managers and supervisors

Part of awareness-building for employees is learning what the change will mean for them personally. Awareness of the business reasons for change takes on a unique meaning for each person. Individuals are already aware of their current state: health, comfort level, financial position, relationships, satisfaction with work, family status and the many other factors that comprise their personal situations. When a change is proposed at work, the change is compared with this awareness of self. It is a natural reaction to begin asking *why* as each person begins to map the change against his or her own life. A supervisor is in the best position to help employees understand the reasons for change in meaningful terms and to evaluate how the change will impact each person. Through this process, sponsorship for the change is sustained.

For managers and supervisors to be effective in this role, they must have the opportunity to build awareness of the need for change themselves. Project teams and sponsors of the change must ensure that managers have complete and accurate messages around why the change is needed, the risks of not changing, and what internal and external factors have created a need for change. Managers will also need basic skills and knowledge about change management in order to conduct effective sessions with employees.

Once these preparatory steps are complete, supervisors and managers should discuss the change with their employees. Through face-to-face communications, managers can reinforce the awareness message from the executive sponsor and correct any misunderstandings about the change. They can also collect

feedback from employees to better understand the background conversation.

Supervisors and managers should employ both group meetings and one-on-one sessions with their employees. Group meetings are often more convenient and useful for initiating communications. However, group meetings cannot be a substitute for individual discussions about the change. Recall that a key part of awareness-building includes sharing "what's in it for me." These discussions are only effective when you can have candid and confidential conversations with each employee.

This process of meeting with employees as a group and as individuals also helps correct misinformation that may be present in the background conversation. The background conversation surrounding change is powerful and difficult to control. Employees hear business messages and internalize those messages in terms of personal impact. They translate the business change into personal change. The personal impact of the change, along with each employee's point of view, creates the majority of the background conversation. Without supervisors and managers engaging in the process, employees are likely to develop an awareness based on rumors, misunderstandings and inaccurate information. In addition, the project team does not have a reliable channel to collect feedback on where employees stand in the change process without direct supervisor involvement.

Tactic 4 – Ready access to business information

Many companies underestimate the power of readily accessible information about company performance, market conditions, environmental factors, competitive threats and changing business priorities. Companies that keep information "close to the vest" with little or no information available to employees face a much greater challenge when building awareness of the need for change.

For example, a software training company used highly trained consultants as subcontractors to teach classes. The training coordinator assigned classes to consultants based on a priority system and how well the consultant matched the client's needs. In some months, the consultants had more work than they could handle. Other months, work was scarce and the consultants expressed concern over the work assignment process. They were frustrated with the unexpected schedule changes that were seemingly shared with them at the last minute. The CEO initiated a change to create better visibility of critical business data for all consultants. This data included training schedules for existing clients, clients in the pipeline, total requests for training information, training revenue and expense data per month. After several months of distributing this data, the tone from consultants changed. Instead of being surprised by changes, they anticipated them. Instead of being frustrated by constant adjustments, the consultants began to suggest ideas to increase business and became engaged in problem-solving. The ready access to information created awareness of the need for change and shifted the role of these consultants from subcontractors to business partners.

Readily accessible information builds awareness on an ongoing basis and supports not just the current change, but changes in the future as well. Creating a communication "culture" that values the sharing of information about the company, the market and the business direction translates directly to increased awareness of the need for change among employees. In some cases, where information-sharing is widespread and commonplace, it is not unusual for employees to be aware of the need for change and to be expecting it.

Frequently asked questions about building awareness

We have had limited success with written forms of communication for building awareness. Why are these communication channels not working?

Over the past eight years in four longitudinal studies by Prosci, project teams report that face-to-face discussions that are honest and straightforward, and that offer details of the change on a personal level, are the most effective form of communication. Face-to-face interactions are more effective than written communications for a number of reasons:

- Not everyone reads every email or newsletter article.
- What the author of an email or document meant as compared with what the reader understood are not always the same. One-way communications do not have the ability to correct these misunderstandings.
- Often emails or articles are not authored by a “preferred sender” – the person that an employee would respect or trust to convey the awareness message.
- The most effective communications include not only content, but also tone and body language. Written information cannot convey these other forms of communication. Often employees will key off the reactions of others around them. Getting those “nods of agreement” in face-to-face interactions can be half the battle.

Our executive sponsors believe they have repeated the message many times and that employees do not want to hear it anymore. What can we do to keep our sponsors engaged in this process?

A rule of thumb is that employees need to hear a message five to seven times before that message is cemented into their thinking. Now multiply that factor by the number of groups throughout an organization. It is easy to understand why an executive may think that a message is being repeated unnecessarily. However, data shows that the most common cause of resistance to change among employees is lack of awareness of why the change is happening. Because executives are common-

ly involved at the onset of projects, they often communicate the reasons for change very early in the change process. However, employees may not be ready to listen until the change is near implementation (when it begins to impact them personally). Executives may need to see evidence that the awareness message needs to be repeated. You may consider using an ADKAR assessment prior to implementation of the change to measure the level of awareness among different groups in the organization. Then share this data with the executive sponsor to help them target their sponsorship activities.

If we do a good job at building awareness, will this automatically create desire?

It is easy to assume that *your* intrinsic desire to support a change, based solely on awareness, is inherent in other people. In other words, I may think that if awareness caused me to want to change, then it will have the same effect on others. The reality is that desire to engage in a change is based on more than our intrinsic motivators, and even those intrinsic motivators are unique to each person. The nature of the change, my personal situation and the history I have with the organization all play a role in my ultimate desire to support a change. Awareness may create desire in some fraction of the population, but you should not assume that awareness automatically creates desire for everyone.

Is awareness-building focused more on what is changing or why the change is being made?

These two topics are difficult to separate for most changes. Explaining why a change is needed is integral to understanding the nature of the change itself. However, once employees understand the general nature of the change, you should avoid focusing your communications on the details of the solution.

The first question employees have is *why*. The details surrounding the *how* are only of interest when you have awareness of the need for change and a desire to engage in that change. A common mistake I observe with project teams is the strong tendency to create a story around the future state. Since they have invested time and energy in solving the business problems and designing the future state, they have an almost undeniable urge to share their design work. Unfortunately, at the onset of a change, employees want to understand the nature of the change and why the change is happening. Details about the future state often fall on deaf ears as employees struggle to sort out why a change is even necessary. This mistake is a case of jumping right to the *knowledge* stage of the ADKAR model before passing through *awareness* and *desire*. The time will come later when employees will seek knowledge about the details of the future state and how the change will be made.

My sponsor does not believe that he or she needs to have an active and visible role in the change process. Can we build awareness without the sponsor's involvement?

Several factors will influence the success of an awareness-building campaign, not the least of which is the credibility of the sender. Project teams have overwhelmingly reported that active and visible executive sponsorship of the change is the number one success factor for a project overall. Employees have stated that the executive sponsor is the "preferred sender" of messages related to why the change is being made. This data is ignored at peril to the project. Allowing a business leader to delegate their sponsorship will have direct consequences to the project's success. Can you build awareness without his or her involvement? You can certainly make forward progress through many other channels. Can you build sufficient awareness to move the change forward? That depends on the nature and size of your change, and the change-readiness of your organization.

In some cases you may build a limited amount of awareness, but ultimately fail at the *desire* element of the model.

Is it necessary to create a "burning platform" in order to create awareness of the need to change?

A "burning platform" is a term used to describe an extremely urgent or compelling business situation in order to convey, in the strongest terms, the need for change. Using this process, you can get people's attention and build awareness of the need for change very quickly. The only caveat is that not every change can have a burning platform. If this were to become the norm, employees may begin to ignore the message (not everything can be an emergency). As the old story goes, you do not want to be caught "crying wolf" for every change, in case you find yourself really faced by a wolf and no one responds to your call.

What if employees do not believe in or agree with the reasons that are being stated for the need for change?

If a business or organization is making a change, they most often are making the change to respond to a *real* threat or to act on a *real* opportunity. If this is the case, then employees will need an opportunity to understand the reasons for change in more detail. Since employees are not typically exposed to the same information that caused business leaders to initiate a change, this process will take time.

If, on the other hand, the change has been ill-conceived and the reasons for the change are not substantial, it may not be possible to build awareness of the need for change. In these cases the change could fail early in the process or struggle during implementation. If employees do not believe the awareness message because of a history of past failures within the organization or because of poor credibility of the sender, these will be difficult hurdles to overcome. It is sometimes necessary to deal

with the organization's history directly or find alternate senders of the awareness message.

It is important to separate a disagreement over the reasons for the change from any debate over the solution or future state. A debate about the solution is very different from a debate over *why* a change is needed. A debate over *why* a change is needed impacts the ability to create *awareness* of the need for change. A debate over the future state of the change may impact a person's *desire* to support and engage in a particular solution. An argument can be made for creating awareness of the need for change even before a specific solution has been developed, especially when the need for change is external and observable.

Based on the research data, what would project teams do differently next time regarding communications with employees?

The following answer is an excerpt from Prosci's Best Practices in Change Management report.² When asked what they would do differently next time related to communications, participants in the study stated:

1. Communicate more frequently. Share messages more than you think you need to.

"You can't over-communicate."

2. Find more effective ways to reach your audience.

- Use multiple channels (meetings, one-on-one, newsletters, presentations, brainstorming workshops, lunch and learns, Intranet Q&A forums, CDs, screen-saver messages, etc.).

"We actually did the communication part fairly well. Hardest thing was getting people to actually read it, so we constantly changed how and what we said."

- Develop two-way channels to improve feedback and involvement.

"Don't assume people understand."

- Increase one-on-one communication with those directly impacted by the change.
3. Design a formal communication plan tied to project deliverables. Determine what to share, when to share it, who the audience will be and how to deliver the message.
 4. Involve the entire organization in the communication plan. Give careful consideration to the sender of the message. There are times when the CEO is the preferred sender (to create awareness of the need for change). Supervisors will be critical in sending messages to those most impacted. Project champions (avid supporters) can also be advocates to enlist support.
 5. Prepare your management team to ensure a consistent message. Communication is not a one-time event, and individuals will need some time to accept and react to the changes as they are explained and implemented. Spend adequate time building awareness of the need for change, discussing the impact directly with individuals and highlighting the opportunities to come.

Summary

Awareness-building is a process that occurs over time. When multiple change management tactics are applied, a process results where:

- Key messages around awareness are brainstormed and discussed to create a common understanding among the project team and sponsor.

- Awareness messages are communicated to employees based on a well-developed communication strategy.
- The executive sponsor directly participates in the process of creating awareness of the need for change; a sponsorship coalition is created that reinforces this awareness message throughout the organization.
- Managers and supervisors at each level engage with their employees about the change and reinforce the messages from the executive sponsor.
- Employees have time to internalize the message and provide feedback.
- Managers and supervisors react to misinformation, discuss the change one-on-one with employees, and provide feedback to the change management team on gaps in the awareness-building process.

These steps form an iterative process that ultimately builds awareness of the need for change throughout an organization.