

COMMUNICATIONAL APPROACH IN THE ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE MANAGEMENT

Dragoş Constantin Vasile

The Academy of Economic Studies, Faculty of Commerce Piata Romana, nr. 1-3, sector 1, Bucuresti dragoscv@gmail.com, 0722251367

The need for information and communication increases when organizations experience organizational changes. The paper examines the need of communication in terms of the professor Tichy's theory of the technical, political and cultural systems of organizations. The change agents must operate at these levels. Starting from this imperative the question is whether communication can help with implementing change from both technical, cultural, and political perspectives. From technical point of view the management responsibilities are to make knowable the organization's world. The political perspective addresses the issues of power, interests and alliance games in organizations. The cultural change accompanying a new and revolutionary vision of the future requires a period of time for the staff to become familiar with it and instructing is the type of communication that seems the most adequate for this end.

Keywords: change, communication, information, organizational politics, organizational culture

JEL Codes:

The major role of information is to reduce uncertainty due to an imperfect knowledge of a reality. The need for information and communication is not a problem for organizations as long as their external environment is characterized through stability and they run smoothly based on well-known practices and well defined and stable relationships. But the external environment has generally lost the comfort of the stability that has been replaced by the turbulence caused by the dynamism of changes and increased complexity. Besides that, organizations in change move from a known current state to an unknown future state. In other terms, uncertainty grows.

1.The need of communication in organizational change management

The need of information and communication within organizations that run in turbulent environments and initiate change programs substantially increases. The current procedures and processes remain important, but they cease to be a solid support for designing and implementing changes. The exchange of information get a vital role to play for coordinating the efforts of the organization members. People aspire to a deeper knowledge of their role, their managers' expectations, and how their contribution and efforts articulate in the programs that triggered changes. People have to understand what it happens or it is to happen around, the events they live. But the knowledge of each individual is not enough, all members of the organization have to share their knowledge, which is achieved through an intense communication. It results that a deeper need of communication follows the need for coordination and the modifications of the collective knowledge of the organization in change.

Besides that, each step of the change process requires communication. For example, designing change is not possible without documenting its necessity, exchanging information about the organization capacity to change and the likely obstacles and resistance, or sharing understanding so that stakeholders should embrace the plans. Communication is probably the most important skill that people need to have in order to be effective change agents. In situations of instability, or ambiguity, communication becomes an essential ingredient. Poor communication around change issues can destroy commitment to an organization, irrevocably damage employee morale, generate huge resistance and hostility to change, encourage later performance problems.

The change situations are very different and they give birth to a lot of problems. Closed problems are generally less complex and easier to be defined and delineated from the context. Although cultural and political aspects does not lack at all in this instance, they can be tackled especially through means of technical instruments and tools. On the contrary, when open problems prevail organizational culture and

politics become significant dimensions of the change. Communication also has to be in accordance with the characteristics of different change situations.

We can describe several types of managerial communication:

- *Informing*. The communicator gives people information they need so that they can make better decisions and achieve adequately their tasks at the required standard. The information may take the forms of facts, opinions, interpretations and judgements based on facts, feelings about the facts and their interpretation, or, generally a mixture of the above. In giving the information the communicator is interested that it should be taken into consideration, although the relevance of the decisions and actions taken in consequence can not be an important issue.

- *Seeking information*. The reverse of informing is seeking information when the communicator attempts to get people to tell him or her. The communicator does this by asking questions, actively listening, giving information of his or her own, or by reading documents and reports.

- *Instructing*. Instructing subordinates is a more complex form of communication than informing. Communicators want people's behaviour to change as a result and people to act otherwise than before being instructed.

- *Influencing*. Communication always has effects on the recipients of the message, but sometimes influencing the recipient's attitude, behaviour and actions is the main purpose of the communicator, such as when motivating or encouraging. Influencing makes use of suggesting, persuading and other elements (ex: manipulating the components of the situation); power is also a relevant issue. A process in which mutual influence of the communicators is negotiation, based on clarifying the parties' interests and needs, and trying to find mutually satisfactory compromise.

Sometimes, informing can remove misunderstandings and reservations about the change. Other times, the interests of the stakeholders are affected by the planned change and informing has to be complemented by influencing. Certain large changes affecting organizational culture need time to be implemented and instructing the people in the organization.

2. Communication in the perspective of Tichy's organization systems theory

We examine further the link between change and communication in terms of the professor Tichy's "TCP" theory. Tichy sees the organization as a system with three components (fig.1):

- *Technical* - including activities and elements that serve to production operations and solving the associated problems.

- *Cultural* - concerning the components of the organizational culture and the dominant ideology.

- *Political* - encompassing practices and activities aiming to sharing power in the organization.

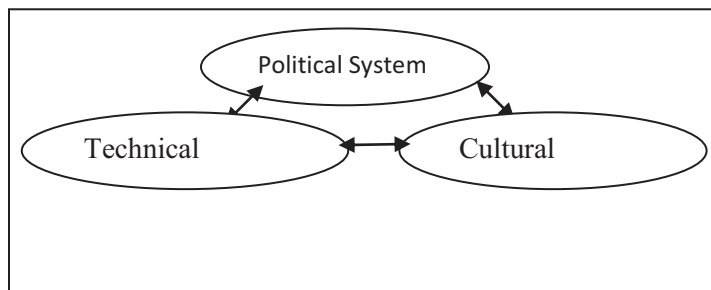


Figure 1 – The organizational systems

The three systems of the organization are tightly connected and their alignment is a condition of a sound organization. Hence managers must distinguish between technical, cultural and political aspects of a change situation and must intervene in a balanced manner following a holistic

approach. Addressing technical, cultural and political aspects of the organizational change may require the use of different types of communication or a mixture of them.

3. Communication and the technical perspective on change: informing

From technical point of view, communication is primarily linked to the effort of making knowable the organization's world. Making decisions requires relevant and timely information, hence change agents are interested to collect, analyse, process and store valuable data and information. Besides that, people in the organization aspire to be extensively informed about what is happening within the organization. So, informing the stakeholders about the change is needed not only for ensuring good decisions, but also for other two reasons: (1) coordinating the efforts of the people engaged in planning and implementing the change, and (2) motivating the people to engage in the change process and to cooperate each other in common endeavours.

Collecting and circulating relevant information raise a problem due to the fact that it is dispersed within the whole organization and is referring to a changing reality. The problem of the information needed for planning changes, coordinating the change efforts and motivating people can be approached into two manners:

- *In a centralized way*, by transmitting information from an resource allocation center. The key element is that transmitting center should be able to ensure information with a high degree of accuracy, in due time and at a reasonable cost.
- *In a decentralized way*, by transmitting much less information from the central point and letting the economic calculus and making decisions to more local levels, where information already exists. The key element in this instance is that the decisions should result in coordinated and coherent actions.

The information problem has similarity to the problem of initiating and leading the change processes. Centralized (top-down) change is initiated and lead from the top; directions of action, indications and measures are decided by the senior management and they must be implemented and observed throughout the organization. A weak of centralized change is that valuable information residing at inferior levels where people have direct contacts with the organization's external partners (e.g. salesforce) does not reach the deciders at the top of the organization, generally due to the high cost of collecting and circulating it. As a result certain opportunities of initiating changes are lost. Another weak is that instructions from the top are sometimes difficult to be adjusted to particular cases in different areas of the organization. The risk of infringement of the plans designed from the top is quite high at the levels where people lack the privilege of comprehensive information.

Decentralized (down-top) change has certain advantages. Based on genuine direct information, change agents may initiate interventions in response to external and internal pressures, and they have not to wait until their information is transmitted to the top and plans are received down. So the organization is able to react faster to external forces. Also, staff empowerment for taking change initiatives introduces a strong motivational element in the process. However, down-top approach gives birth to a problem, because too many change initiated locally may have adverse effects on the stability and direction of the organization. On the other side, there are ample projects and plans that envisage the whole organization or significant processes, systems and parts of the organization and they are result of inspiration, vision and efforts of leadership.

Combining "top-down" and "down-top" interventions seems to be the most effective approach (Clark, 1994). It is a way to take advantage of the strength of the decentralized change with its genuine valuable information leading to ideas for local improvements of the activity and the strength of the centralized change in terms of providing control and resources to the process. That's why any kind of change needs the implication of top managers who can become "owners" or at least "sponsors" of the change, even if it has been initiated from local area of the organization. The members of the superior management acting as "sponsors" or "owners" are responsible for providing direction and resources.

At the same time an effort must be made for finding solutions that the valuable information collected at the bottom could be conveyed at the top of the organization in due time and with affordable costs. The improvements of the informing mechanisms and channels is an essential factor of developing the capacity of the organization to change.

4. Communication and the political perspective of the change: influencing

A more general and very controversial issue of the change theory is the game of the interests in the organization. The understanding of the issue depends on the managers' perspective on organization and on ideology based on it. A unitary perspective on organization tends to ignore the individual interests of the managers and employees and focuses on the general common interests of the organization as a whole, generally based on strong organizational culture and paternalistic management. A different perspective means a recognition that in almost every organization there are varying interests and there are also clusters of interests. The change agents need to diagnose the political landscape and figure out what the relevant interests are, and what important political subdivisions characterize the organization. They do not assume that everyone necessarily is going to be their friends, or agree with them (Pfeffer, 1993).

From unitary perspective, change is a mostly a technical process, and the constraints that have to be controlled result mainly from resources, planning competences or process leadership. The change may easily be designed and implemented from the top by virtue of the leaders' authority to lead. In this context the issue of resistance to change is pointless as long as any divergent interests cannot appear. The senior management plans the change for meeting the organization's needs and people accept it because their needs are also met by implementing the plans. The crucial point is that the plans should be designed adequately and enough resources should be available to implement them. On the other side, the pluralist perspective on change involves participation of people in organization to designing and carrying out changes. The plans must take into consideration the interests of different stakeholders, and the change agents have to play a role of a coordinator of the political subdivisions within the organization, and deal with the conflicts caused by cognitive or material divergences.

Persons and groups within the organization attempt to promote their interests and in this respect they try to strengthen their power and influence. Power represents the capacity to influence situations, events, people and ourselves, for example managers can influence employees to become more performant. From unitary perspective the main source of the power is hierarchical authority, i.e. the formal and legitimate authority. From pluralist point of view the sources of power are diversified, the hierarchical authority co-exists with other forms such as expert power, dependence power, personal power a.s.o. Power and influence within the organization constitute the area of organizational politics, which are an important function of the change management. Organizational politics can support the change processes if an effort is made of creating favourable alliances.

Dealing with political issues, such as the creation of alliances in favour of the planned change requires an effort of intense communication that can help with clarifying and sharing different views and with making satisfactory compromises. One function of negotiation, as a form of communication, is the introduction of change into organizations (Faure, 1991). Negotiation is an adequate instrument when change involves cognitive and material divergences among stakeholders, or when some people or groups are affected by the planned change and lose something, such as the convenience of a familiar job or practices, a more intense work, or the necessity of acquiring new competences. Such losses have normally to be compensated. Negotiation represents a type of communicational interaction where the influence has a major role to play.

5. Communication and the cultural perspective on change: instructing

From a cultural perspective communication helps with carrying out more subtle processes of the change implementation, especially those involving the organizational culture that emerges from the collective experience of its members. According to Schein (1985), the culture of an organization helps it deal with essential problems. Firstly, organizational culture is important for the organization's external adaptation, through developing shared understandings of its mission and strategy, goals, standards, or the corrective actions needed to improve goal accomplishment. Secondly, it contributes to the internal integration through building a sense of membership, through developing a common language, establishing an ideology that gives meaning to unexplainable events, creating consensus on membership criteria, or standards for intimacy and friendship (*apud* Schermerhorn, Hunt și Osborn, 1991).

Implementing profound changes into the organization involves very often the challenge of making changes of the organization's culture. Miner (1988) argues that the organizational culture cannot be managed and intentionally changed, based on reasons such as:

- cultures are spontaneous, elusive and hidden, hence they cannot be accurately diagnosed;
- the organization's culture requires considerable experience and deep personal insight so that the effort of understanding could make cultural management infeasible in most instances;
- cultures provide organization members with continuity and stability, therefore members are likely to resist even modest efforts at cultural change because of concerns about discontinuity and instability (*apud* Wagner and Hollenbeck, 1992).

However the Minor's arguments have to be regarded in our opinion as reflecting the difficulties of cultural change endeavours, rather than the impossibility of changing the organizational cultures.

Communication is a way of helping with shaping and ensuring continuity of the organizational culture for example through the infusion of shared set of perception and meanings into their work of the organization's members. As McQuail (1997) puts it, the organization and the way people understand it are mostly the result of communication, at least in terms of its organizational culture. On the other side, communication has an important role in creating mutations in the organization's culture (Boneu, 1998).

Changing culture requires complex and subtle communicational efforts. Modifying the visible aspects of culture such as language, stories, rites and sagas is easier to be accomplished through management's proposal of interpreting situations in new ways and adjusting the meanings attached to important events. But it is much more difficult reshaping values and common assumptions of the people, which requires more drastic and radical action. Informing communication is not enough. Change agents have to produce a change in the current cultural paradigm, which needs efforts and time. They must help people to understand and live with the new paradigm and an adequate way to do it is by instructing. For example training programs can be created to help people understand the desired new state of the company, or to change their attitudes and acquire new skills and competences.

6. Conclusions

Major changes cannot be successful without the implication and participation of the organization's members in designing and performing different interventions and actions during its implementation. People's commitment and initiatives are ingredients of a successful change and they can be enforced through adequate communication within the organization. Communication becomes an important value of a company, especially when changes occur, which means an effort at creating a communication culture within the company. Such a communication culture may facilitate the main change processes such as creating an overall awareness of the need for change, reducing or removing people's resistance to planned changes, enforcing a sense of "ownership" of the designed interventions a.s.o. However specific change situations require specific communicational approaches. There instances when informing may be the main

instrument of communication, but generally, in case of complex and profound changes, other types of communication are necessary to be used, such as influencing and instructing.

References:

1. Abric, J.C., Psihologia comunicării. Teorii și metode (traducere din l. franceză), Polirom, Iași, 2002
2. Boneu, F., L'entreprise communicante, Ed. Liaisons, Paris, 1988
3. Clarke, L., The Essence of Change, Prentice Hall International Ltd., London, 1994
4. Dupont, C., La negotiation (4e edition), Dalloz, Paris, 1994
5. McQuail, Denis, Comunicarea, Institutul European, Iași, 1999
6. Schermerhorn, J.R.; Hunt, J.G.; Osborn, R.N., Managing Organizational Behavior, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., New York, 1991
7. Tichy, N.M., "Managementul strategic al schimbării", în Y.Tellier și D.Rovența-Frumușani (ed.), Resurse umane și dezvoltare organizațională (traducere din l. franceză), Cavallioti, București, 1999
8. Thatchenkery, T., Metzker, C., Inteligența emoțională, Ed. Codecs, București, 2008
9. Wagner, J.A. III; Hollenbeck, J.R., Management of Organizational Behavior, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1992