

Top communication strategies when managing change

IN-HOUSE SOLUTIONS

One thing we can likely all agree on is that change is hard. Whether you are embarking on transformational organizational change to respond to economic or geopolitical risks or rethinking the way in which you work with the onset of AI – change may feel constant and it doesn't always go as planned.

When change programs fail or don't achieve their desired outcome, it can have a damaging effect, including creating frustration over perceived wasted time and resources or, even worse, skepticism around future change programs. Of course, there are a number of reasons why change programs don't achieve the intended result - from lack of resources and capability, to support from the top. But one key principle that is often neglected or overlooked entirely is communication; being clear about what you say and do before, during and after change is a critical success factor.

We've assembled our top tips to help you navigate the complexities of communication during times of change.

Understand and manage your stakeholders

Thinking through who will be impacted by the change, either directly or indirectly, and what level of influence and/or control they have is an important step to mapping your communications. For example, those who have a high degree of power over outcomes and are directly impacted will obviously need to be managed closely with a high-touch effort on your communications. Create a list of those 'impacted and influential' stakeholders and map them on a matrix to understand how to prioritize your communications.

As you reflect on each stakeholder, you'll want to be clear about the objective you are trying to achieve. Is it simply buy-in and support? Do you need to conduct in-depth interviews to understand workflows? Or are you seeking their support as informal influencers? Map this out as part of your stakeholder engagement and communications strategy.

***Please click the tip button to learn more.**

It's also important to take the time to understand how these groups like to receive information. If it's your CEO or CFO who may be sponsoring this change, you'll likely want to keep status reports to a high-level, but supported by data and examples.

Engage 1:1

Spending the time to connect with your stakeholders, either in person or by video, to share your vision, and understand their perspectives is key to establishing support and ultimately buy-in for change. People will feel that their concerns are being heard and that they are part of the change, rather than having it happen to them. It's also important to keep in mind the sheer volume of information we receive by way of email and so finding the occasion to communicate face-to-face is key to making sure your message is heard. While engaging one-to-one is ideal, it may not always be practical and so you might need to consider conducting workshops with key stakeholder groups. Either way, ideally, you are connecting with your stakeholders at a very early stage in the change project.

If the change project you are leading is the result of feedback from internal stakeholders, it's helpful to make sure you highlight this as part of your narrative to demonstrate that you've listened and are responding to the demand.

Craft your narrative and vision

Being able to address the question "why change" is critical for any change communication strategy. Regardless of the project or situation, you will want your stakeholders to clearly see your vision as you see it. You will want to identify the burning platform issue behind the change to establish a sense of urgency.

As you create the case for change, it can be helpful to document your current state, including specifics around the problem(s) with any available data to define the situation. You will then begin to define your vision or future state and describe why you must embark upon this change. This might include detailing the specific drivers for change - which might be external factors or even internal organizational priorities such as corporate-wide digital transformation. You should also detail the cost of inaction or the consequences if you fail to change. This last point becomes your burning platform.

Think of using stories that will enable your audience to relate more concretely to your vision. Instead of kicking off your workshop with a checklist of the reasons for change, consider weaving a tale about a negative situation that could have been avoided had you already completed this change. How would that outcome be different if we were successful?

Another approach is to paint the picture - literally - around what success looks like. Consider drafting a fictitious press release that you would issue following your success, or even pen your 'law department of the year' award submission. What will you have achieved, who was involved and what benefits are you seeing because of this project?

***Please click
the tip button
to learn more.**

Transparency builds trust and buy-in

Communicating as though everything is 'coming up roses', particularly when things are not going well, is not going to win you the support for change. In fact, it's likely to do the opposite. The reality is not everything is going to go smoothly and setting expectations for a bit of a bumpy ride at the outset is a great way to help manage through challenging situations. Being transparent also forces humility and may also evoke empathy which ultimately leads to credibility and trust. If you've hit a bit of a bump in the road, be honest about it and be clear about how you intend to overcome it. Perhaps that may mean further consultation with key stakeholders. But waiting to communicate about it, or glossing over the challenges, will not create the buy-in you are seeking.

Build a communications plan

Communication efforts often fall short of the vision because it is an extra step, well beyond the efforts required to implement the actual change. But just as you would assemble a project plan or charter, consider documenting your communication efforts by identifying your communication goals and your audience/stakeholders, along with the specific tactics you will leverage for each group at each stage throughout the project.

Take some time to understand the communication channels that are available, particularly those beyond email. Is there an internal newsletter that you can feed into it? Can you leverage video as a way to communicate rather than email? Maybe you can conduct a few video interviews to highlight success stories along the way?

You might want to consider checking with your team, in the broadest sense, to see if someone might be interested in building on their passion for communications or social media and bringing them in to support. This can be a great way to engage your team members in projects that go beyond their day-to-day and satisfy their thirst for more creativity. Alternatively, is there an internal resource or specialist in another department that might be able to help you communicate and promote positive change?

In summary

This may all feel a bit overwhelming at first, as managing and implementing a change program can be a challenge in itself, not to mention the duties of your 'day-job'. But you should not underestimate the power of a clear and consistent communication strategy. During times of change, you will want to make sure you are communicating frequently, and with empathy for those involved.

***Please click
the tip button
to learn more.**

Here is a sample of a communications plan on a page which can be helpful when reporting on your approach.

Comms Plan on a Page - SAMPLE



About Dentons In-House Solutions

Empowering the legal team for success

We often hear from in-house counsel about the key priorities for their teams, which alongside the procurement and management of external law firms, also includes the challenges every business unit faces, such as:

- articulating their team's purpose and strategy
- recruiting, retaining and developing talent
- managing and defending budgets
- implementing efficiency programs and technology
- creating and maintaining strong relationships with other business stakeholders

Dentons In-House Solutions supports legal teams across all dimensions of the management of a law department – from developing a strategy and plan for the function, to introducing efficiencies and managing change to ultimately demonstrating the value of the legal function. We also help teams with their most important asset – their people – by ensuring smart resourcing as well as providing the right training and development opportunities.

Key contact



JoAnne Wakeford
 Chief Client Officer
 Dentons In-House Solutions
joanne.wakeford@dentons.com