

A PROCESSUAL PERSPECTIVE OF COMMUNICATION DURING CHANGE IN A UTILITY COMPANY: integrating monologic and dialogic communication.

Jennifer Frahm

School of Management, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

Dr Kerry Brown

School of Management, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

Abstract

The reframing of change as a continuous process in order to achieve organizational sustainability and market dominance creates new demands on organizational communicators. Organizations are facing challenges brought about by the trend to adopting continuous change models and shifting from approaches that treat change as one-off, planned, episodic event. In earlier years change agents managed change as a discrete event and co-ordinated the communication strategies and plans accordingly. While advice provide on change communication exists in the form of 'best practice' models, the complexities often defy simple step by step approaches (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979). This paper presents the processual dimensions of continuous organizational change within a business unit of a public sector utility company to enable better understanding of the complexities of change communication under conditions of continuous change. In so doing, it advances knowledge of how different types of change communication impact on employees' receptivity to change. The research findings indicate that the type of change communications strategy vary according to context and existing capabilities. Knowing when to shift from monologic to dialogic approaches has beneficial impact on change receptivity, and prevents unwarranted sense-making from occurring during the change process.

Organisational and Management Communication

Introduction

Contemporary organisations have responded overwhelmingly to the rhetoric of the emergence and prevalence of continuous change. There has been an unquestioning acceptance of the proposition that change is an enduring feature of organisational life (Cheney, Christensen et al. 2003). This acceptance is problematic for organisational communicators and change agents. In earlier times, change agents managed change as a discrete event and coordinated the communication strategies and plans accordingly. Despite the best practice advice from the works of change management experts (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979), findings of a survey of organisational change agents indicate that today's change agents find communicating change incredibly difficult

(Doyle, Claydon et al. 2000). The reframing of change as a continuous process in order to achieve organisational sustainability and market dominance creates new demands on organisational communicators. This paper presents the processual dimensions of continuous organisational change within a business unit of a public sector utility company to better understand the complexities of change communication under conditions of continuous change. In so doing, it advances knowledge of how different types of change communication impact on how receptive employees are to change. The research findings indicate the type of change communications strategy varies according to the external environment, the internal organisational context and existing capabilities, and that factors have differing impacts on change receptivity.

The fragmented nature of research into continuous change creates part of the challenge for communicators. When considering communication, extant literature focuses on three themes in continuous change; innovation, learning and public sector change (Baden-Fuller & Volberda 1997; Brown & Eisenhardt 1997; Sitkin, Sutcliffe et al. 1998; Hazlett & Hill 2000; Miner, Bassoff et al. 2001). Underlying these three themes, there is an implied emphasis on the employees being responsible for the continued evolution and success of the firm. Drawing from organisational development theory, firms undergoing continuous change ask employees to be empowered, more innovative, and develop cultures of excellence (Peters 1992; Kanter 1999). Yet, contrary to the organisational development assumptions of collective effort equating to effectiveness, it appears that change communication still depends on an instrumental perspective where communication is used as a managerial tool of control to effect change. This constitutes a monologic approach to communication. Monologic themes reflect unilateral action, where deviation from the norm requires a corrective and controlling communicative response (Bokeno & Gantt, 2000). Managers seek to stabilise the organisation by communicating vision and educating employees on the benefits of the intended change. As the etymology of the word suggests, the focus is one way, and is reflected in speech acts or written directives that suggest a one-way direction (Frahm & Brown, 2004).

In contrast, some authors argue that dialogic change communication is more appropriate for continuous change contexts (Eisenberg, Andrews et al. 1999; Weick & Quinn, 1999). Dialogic change communication includes speech, acts or texts that suggest a constructive and relational dialogue. Whilst it is distinctly different to usual patterns of management communication, the ability to engage with genuine care and respect, to generate reflective discussion and speak authentically is seen to have positive impacts on innovation and organisational change (Bokeno & Gantt, 2000). The nature of the communication is about creating new meaning, processes or products out of the conversations. In this sense, the purpose of change communication is to instigate change through the use of dialogic processes, in dialogic settings, and by people who are dialogically competent (Bokeno & Gantt, 2000).

However, for those in organisations that undergo continuous change, the 'real' communication of change is rarely as structured, formal or considered as the two previous approaches suggest. Yet this 'given' of change is not reflected in academic literature (Mills, 2003). Many conversations about change occur in the tearoom, by the water cooler and in the corridors. Individual sense-making of change can dominate and produces the 'background talk of change' (Frahm & Brown, 2004). Sense-making is an interpretive process where the individual seeks to reduce

ambiguity and uncertainty through selective interpretation of information and cues (Weick, 1995). Conditions of ambiguity and uncertainty flourish during continuous change, providing fertile ground for individual sense-making. The effect of sense-making during change is relatively unexplored (Mills, 2003). The research indicates that employees' sense-making is potentially problematic as the sense made deviates from the intended messages of change (Lewis, 2000); employees' emotional engagement impacts on the interpretation (Mills, 2000); and the impact of individual sense-making can be mediated by the presence of 'sense-givers' (Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991).

It is reasonable that change agents find communicating change challenging when the three approaches are considered *together* given the complexity inherent in monologic, dialogic and sense-making *separately*. To assist in addressing the challenge of communicating during change, this research draws upon a processual research design to answer how organisational communication impacts on change receptivity in continuous change contexts.

Process-based research involves studying a 'sequence of individual and collective events, actions and activities unfolding over time in context' (Pettigrew, 1997). Context shapes the subjective interpretations of the people involved in the process of change and therefore impacts how they shape the change process. Process research aids knowledge development by offering an understanding of the phenomena of interest as it occurs over time. However, one of the challenges confronting process researchers is the inevitable 'messiness' of the data collection and analysis, as the researcher maps the ebb and flow of the change process (Langley, 1999). To counteract the messiness, Langley (1999) advocates the use of a number of strategies to build theory from process research. This current study uses Langley's (1999) 'Alternate Templates' strategy to establish a credible theoretical approach to communication during continuous change.

This strategy allows the opportunity to analyze inductive data with deductive theoretical frames. In applying Weick's (1979) theory development criteria, the benefits of the use of 'Alternate Template' is that each theory (template) offers a simple and general way to build theory; however, on its own it lacks accuracy, as it provides only one perspective of the process (Langley, 1999). The use of multiple templates contributes to accuracy in theory building. Analysis of multiple perspectives also contributes to critical management studies, as it uses the interpretations created by different lenses to expose tension and conflict (Zorn, Page et al. 2000) and accommodate competing narratives (Dawson, 2003). Most research on change communication results from a managerial perspective (Frahm & Brown, 2003). Thus there is room for acknowledging the employee perspective and it is important to do so, given the reliance on the employee in creating an organisation that undergoes continuous change. However this type of research is lacking (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995.; Weber & Weber, 2001). The three analytic templates used in the study derive from communication research.

Change communication is considered integral to the process of organisational change, yet is seldom examined explicitly (Mills, 2003). By analysing the process data with three communication theories, monologic (Eisenberg, Andrews et al. 1999), dialogic (Bohm, 1998) and sense making (Weick, 1979), the interplay of interpretations offers

greater accuracy in understanding communication of change. The use of the three templates also allows for analysis of the contextual dimensions of this particular case study and is depicted in Figure one. Figure one depicts how the data is analyzed with the three templates, and notes the impact of the change contexts over time and the effects on the employees' receptivity to change. It is a cyclical, iterative process. This process takes place within a case study undergoing continuous change.

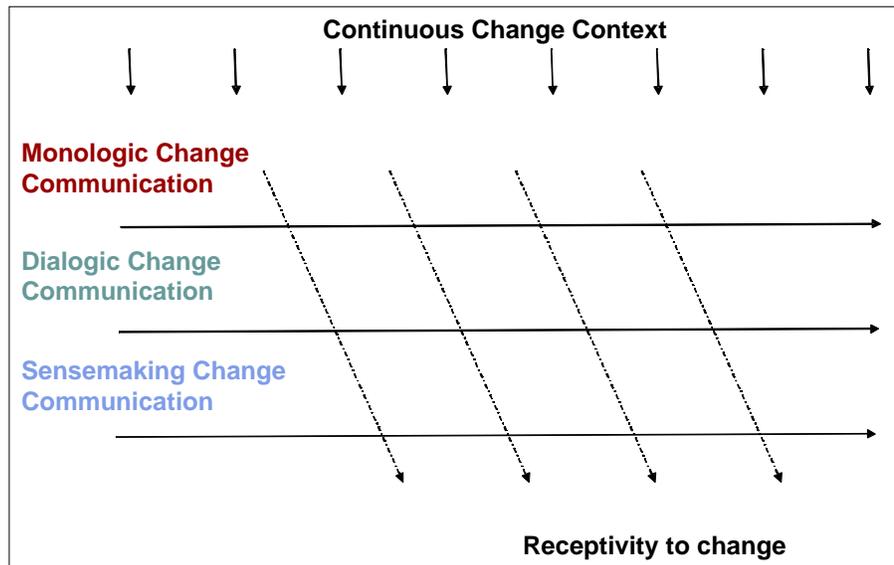


Figure 1: Alternate Templates Process Strategy

The case study¹

Kapow! is a three-year-old business unit within the Retail division of Kazowee. Kazowee is a large public sector organisation concerned with provision of services within Queensland, Australia. Kapow! focuses on selling a range of home products through their sales call centre, and contract to a number of franchisees to do the installation of the products. Originally Kapow! was managed by the entrepreneurial marketing manager who initiated the venture. After three years of declining profits, the Chief Executive Officer of Kazowee introduced a new manager whose mandate was to halt the losses, improve gross margin, and in so doing, turn around the business within the next 12 months. This manager brought an external consultant in to assist in this venture. Four months into the initiative, the new Kapow! manager was informed that he had succeeded in arresting financial decline, and was now responsible for an ambitious growth target. Some of the changes introduced over the 12 months include redundancies, business process re-engineering to improve gross margin, and culture change from isolated, fragmented departments to a unified 'whole-of-team' approach.

Research methods

Qualitative research is advocated when conducting process research that seeks to account for alternative perspectives (Dawson, 2003). Accordingly, after the CEO permitted open access to the researchers, data collection methods included focus groups, individual interviews, participant observation and text analysis of organisational documents relating to change.

¹ Names have been changed for the business unit, the parent company and the participants described in

Participant observation

With participant observation the researcher can access ‘real time’ data, unencumbered by the constraints of selective and reconstructed recall. In this study we were provided unfettered access to the organisation and were present at formal management and staff committee meetings, as well as informal meetings, gatherings and lunchroom discussions. This process created the opportunity to test the frequent data analysis iteration in an informal setting. This type of participant observation has elements of the ethnographic tradition (Dawson, 1997). By sharing observations within the research setting, the researcher has some effect in shaping the organisational change agenda. In recognition of this effect, efforts were made to minimize the impact of researchers, and strategies included the use of facilitative questioning and reflective listening. The ease of access to a range of sites within the organisation together with the different methods of eliciting information allowed for the improvement of internal validity and case study rigour. Data was triangulated between the interviews, focus groups, formal correspondence and observations.

Document study

Data were also gathered from organisational documents and the maintenance of a researcher diary. The organisational documents consist of emails pertaining to the changes undertaken and implemented, the communication plan, the strategic planning records, intranet logs and the minutes of change meetings. The research diary contained notations of impressions and methodological issues such as how group dynamics affected the flow of the focus groups. Thematic analysis of company documentation bolsters the case study methodology (Forster 1999), as the documents are an existing and independent artefact to study, not a response to research questions. These documents were analyzed for individual and group level findings, as well as for sweeping through for the three analytic frames.

Focus group interviews

The use of focus groups was beneficial in terms of time saving providing the employees with opportunities to discuss change events with each other and uncover differing perspectives. Conducting the focus groups in the employees’ environment aids the quality of such data (Morgan, 1997). The use of focus groups contributed to a more open sharing of information, as they had their friends and colleagues around them and interacted naturally with each other, as opposed to being conscious of the research in a one-on-one interaction. We used four main questions to elicit the group’s understanding of what type of change was occurring, how employees 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 part of the 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 change initiatives as well as provide a clearer understanding of what ‘continuous change’ is. The questions were:

1. In terms of the organisational change process – how would you describe what Kapow! is doing?
2. How would you describe the communication of the changes within Kapow!?
3. How do you feel about the organisational change process?
4. What does continuous change mean to you and how do you feel about

During July and August 2003, four focus groups were conducted. A total of 21 staff members participated with the smallest focus group consisting of three participants and the largest involving eight, and covered the four departments in the organisation. Like the procedures in the previous case study, managers were excluded from the focus groups in order to enable people to participate in full and frank discussion about the change issues. The duration of each focus group varied from 45 minutes to 70 minutes, and the focus groups were conducted in meeting rooms on site. All focus groups were audio-taped and transcribed before analysis. After the tapes were transcribed interpretive summaries were presented back to all of the participants. All groups agreed with the representations, with one participant asking for a quote to be deleted as it may identify her.

Research findings

The findings over the first six months of the field study reflect a dynamic interplay of monologic, dialogic and sense-making approaches to change, to varied effect. There was evidence of strong monologic and dialogic expectations of the employees involved in change. The monologic expectations were exemplified by participants of the focus group explaining that they need to be 'told' information, that management need to pass 'down' information, that the communication needed to be planned. 'A lot of information can't just go out willy nilly.' Dialogic expectations transpired through comments such as, 'It needs to be discussed within the team' and 'We need more opportunities to provide feedback.' It was evident in interviews and discussions that there was a clear delineation of change processes before and after the arrival of the new division manager (Charles). Historically, the business unit had been managed with an excess of processes that had the potential for dialogue. However, these forums were seen as 'talk fests', and highly creative interactions. 'There's all this hoo-ha, big bells and whistles and nothing really explains what they do.' The effect of these meetings was to spread cynicism about the management team.

However, several employees were scornful of this management style, as it did not appear to be genuine in inviting input, nor of a symmetrical nature. The employees perceived the power differential as they felt only the privileged were invited to participate, and ultimately the 'talk fests' were considered 'all talk no action'. There were no mechanisms to provide feedback or input to the change processes:

There's a lot of good ideas floating around as well. As you said there was obviously no channels before that people could've said, well, I think we should be doing this, let's try. That wasn't accommodated before, whereas now it is, and that's exactly right, cause we have had people like [department manager] who have been screaming about things for months and months and months and there hasn't been anything done about it.

All the focus groups participants spoke of the initial round of redundancies, and how they had no information about the redundancies over a period of six months. This produced a communication vacuum, which was filled by gossip, rumours and the background talk of change. In the context of continuous change, monologic communication, which is best illustrated by top-down, unilateral messages about change, was appreciated as it meant direction, action, and closure on dialogic

exchanges. Rather than reflect the conventional themes of managerial control and coercion, monologic change communication was welcomed, as it represented stability and security. 'Finally, we know what we are doing now.'

The arrival of Charles and an external change consultant, Jeannette, signified a major communication transition. Both Charles and Jeannette were highly competent at switching from dialogic to monologic styles, or could shift the conversational focus (Ford, 1999). This shifting ability was complemented with monologic and dialogic mechanisms, for example, monologic morning teas with addresses to all staff and power point information cascades, dialogic cross-functional management meetings, cross-functional business process workshops, and a cross-functional employee improvement team. Overall, this combination proved very successful in managing the continuous changes that occurred. The successful combination of dual change communication styles had a suppressing effect on the background talk of change and sense-making. The success was also possibly assisted by a cultural inclination of many of the participants to make sense of change as positive process. Continuous change was described as:

Development, learning ...otherwise you just stagnate but I see it as improvement and it is good, it is always good, even though you may hit one or two things that you may not want to do, you learn by that and change that.

Others noted the virtues of experimental learning:

It's not always for the better, but again that something that you mull over at the time and if it doesn't work then it changes again. Kazowee is really, really good at that, we are..lots of times where they put something into being where they can see in six weeks, two months it's not working as it should, it's not gelling, so the process is changed.

However, past experience with change provides an important voice in stories about the change communication and can temper cultural inclinations. Not everyone was as enthusiastic about change:

Initially, we thought oh great, fantastic, and then after you experience it you don't get that excited any more, You get back to work, you get an email going...great cool, I'll see if it works...It's not that you are being negative, it's just that through experience you know. You know coming to your team briefs and all that, it's great you know, arms flapping everywhere, but two weeks later it's scrapped.

The impact of past experience of change could not be understated, as it continued to punctuate the successes of the change process for the next six months. For some this retrospective caution served to highlight how far they had come with the changes, for others it acted as a barrier to embracing new processes. Many team members were not able to separate past experience of change with the current processes. This led to expressions of cynicism and disbelief about impending change processes. In some cases it affected the actions as well. After three weeks of conducting a system transaction in the 'new' way, the employee would revert to the 'old way'. When asked why she was not following the new process, she would look surprised and say, 'But

that's the way we've always done it...oh that's right, that's changed now.' The resilience of the past was countered with increased monologic communication by Jeannette, to reinforce the present. This was not as evident at a management level with the management team seemingly committed to the new processes. Whereas many advocate the importance of persistence when communicating change (Larkin and Larkin 1996), it appears that the managers were unaware of how much they would have to communicate the unilateral messages of change.

The previous section has briefly described the general process of change from a change communication perspective. Each of the three templates is now analysed separately to identify the impact of change communication on change receptivity.

Monologic change communication

As noted previously, monologic change communication was welcomed as a reprieve from a communication vacuum. Top-down communication provided direction and acknowledgement of the strain the employees were undergoing in the continued introduction of new processes:

Because I felt that I was just a little duck swimming on a pond! With my little legs working so hard to keep my head above water and I felt that no-one could pay me enough money to come in and put up with what I was putting up with, everyday, not knowing, not having any direction, not having any support.

Evidence of the vacuum was most apparent at the lower level of employees who spoke of needs for 'information downloads'. Three months into the new business unit manager's command he released a power point presentation that evaluated the change process so far and provided score out of ten on each change priority. The format of each slide was simple and clear; 'What have we done so far?' and 'What do we need to do better?' He departed from traditional monologic themes of control in the implementation of this release by letting the middle management know he was open to input from them.

-----Original Message-----
 From:
 Sent: Friday, 10 October 2003 2:04 PM
 To:
 Cc: FRAHM Jennifer
 Subject: presentation for staff team briefs

All - as discussed in our recent management meeting I have produced a presentation for delivery to all staff.
 Attached is the draft. While I am fairly comfortable with it, I would welcome any comments that you have. If there are any changes I will re-issue the presentation, otherwise I will assume that you will talk it through with your staff at the next team briefs. I would be more than happy to come along and talk to it or participate in any discussions as you wish.

An example of the power point slide is provided in Figure 2.

How are we progressing on these 6 issues?

ISSUES 2 & 6 - Gross Margin Poor, Costs Too High, Poor Sales Revenue (Score 7/10)

What have we done so far?

- Gross margin initiatives are working - % GM now exceeds our targets!
- Cost reductions are working, net contribution result is good!

What do we need to do better?

- Sales revenues are well below target. Due to warm winter and poor field conversion rates.
- We need to convert every single call we get into a sale!

Figure 2: Powerpoint slide of change review

This approach illustrates how the manager was adroit at switching from monologic to dialogic communication. His message was unequivocal, included justifications for the changes and what it meant for the employees. In so doing, he provided much needed stability and security. However, many slides of the presentation included a call for input—‘What do you think?’, ‘More ideas appreciated’—and these slides were then discussed within teams, keeping open a climate of inquiry. When one of the department managers was asked how the teams felt about the presentation, he expressed surprise at the response. ‘It was good; I used the powerpoint slides Charles provided. It was a good wake up call – I just assumed that everyone knew what we working towards, but they didn’t!’

The external change consultant also introduced monologic communication to the processes, and signified a departure from the previous ‘all talk, no action’ culture. At 26 years of age, Jeannette possessed a degree in organisational communication and had worked for five years with the change management competency of a ‘Big 5’ consulting firm. This was her first independent contract. In negotiating her role early in the process, she asked the business unit manager whether he wanted her ‘to analyse and recommend’ or ‘to do’. He was adamant she was ‘to do’. She responded with enthusiasm. As she left one meeting, one of the younger managers who had been in the unit for five years shook his head, and with a somewhat reverent tone commented, ‘You gotta watch her – she throws action items as she walks out the door.’ Clearly, times ‘were-a-changing’. Her monologic change communication reflected the traditional themes of control and unilateral management. She was more concerned with control than Charles, making it explicit in one email to managers how communication to the licensee group needed to be managed. ‘At this stage, any changes that need to be communicated to the franchisee group should be ‘held onto’.’ Her email stated: ‘I would like us to communicate any changes in a controlled way so as not to inundate them with many small changes at many different points.’ (Email 19/6/03). For many staff this was the first time that the concept of ‘controlling’ communication to the licensees had been considered, and all were impressed with the way changes rolled out in this division.

Dialogic Change Communication

Dialogic change communication has been advanced as appropriate for time of continuous change as it provides for a climate of inquiry, and reflects principles of trust, risk and mutuality. This allows the change agent to manage language, dialogue and identity (Weick & Quin, 1999). Weick (1995) contends that the role of the change agent is to make sense of change. Previous literature has cautioned against the potential to see dialogic change communication as a panacea to all change problems. There is still potential for dialogic processes to be exploited and manipulated for management control. Within three months of the introduction of employee involvement teams, one of the department managers introduced an employee involvement team to work on a new process. He freely admitted, though, that this was not so much about empowering staff and making them feel included, rather it was a safeguard against increased union power and resistance to the process. If the two relevant unions wanted to object to the new process, then the department manager could point to their own members being part of the employee involvement group and supporting the changes.

However, what the previous literature has not addressed is the difficulty in transitioning from a dialogic process to change outcomes. What does it take to move the dialogue to action? It is this area that stands out in the Kapow! case study. Both Charles and Jeannette were recognised for their ability to listen to multiple view points, synthesise the differing perspectives and then create action plans that were monitored and measured. On focus group participant commented:

He listened to what we had to say, instead of just going ‘aha aha aha’ and walking away. Like what he touched on in that meeting basically reflected what we have been saying for months and years, and things that he picked up on straight away and he knew what to focus on, so that was a breath of fresh air, seeing him, not hearing from us and ignoring us...

The transitionary competence was complemented by a culture that for the most part viewed change as a positive thing, a middle management team that supported the senior management, and a number of mechanisms to facilitate the listening and action. One also can suggest that perhaps the high monologic and dialogic expectations of the employees paved the way for the apparently effortless switching.

On his arrival Charles instated weekly management meetings. The purpose of which was to go around the table and have a quick snapshot of what was happening in each department. Dialogic principles such as risk, empathy, and inquiry (Bokeno & Gantt, 2000) dominated the sessions. The climate was collegial and humorous with much good humoured ribbing of all at the table. Managers at the table had no hesitation in saying when things were not going well within their departments. Over a period of six months, Charles never raised his voice or publicly criticised a manager. At one point the marketing department had to acknowledge a costly error in a campaign. Whilst clearly annoyed, Charles sat back from the table, breathed deeply and returned with, ‘Is there learning in this that we can harness?’ Reframing the error in terms of learning led to the development of a new process in managing print campaigns, and this highlighted the constructivist nature of dialogic change communication.

Likewise, in her first week, Jeannette went around all the departments and asked a number of open-ended questions such as, ‘So tell me what’s been going on for you.’ This led to the creation of list of issues that were then prioritized in conjunction with management team. The focus was the areas that had the most potential to impact negatively on the gross margins. Once she had the key business areas prioritized, she initiated a number of cross-functional process workshops. She commented, ‘There’s no point in writing processes if the people don’t know about them so we’ve really tried to get them involved right from the beginning.’ This approach had benefits beyond lowering resistance to the impending change. Additional benefits were recognised through the overall learning of the teams. In working through process charts with members of different departments, it became evident there were many fundamental misunderstandings about others roles and responsibilities. Typical of the exchanges were:

But you can’t do that – if you do that we are not able to bill the customer for 30 days.

What do you mean? I thought it was account’s role to bill the customer once the system register a closed action.

This exemplified how the business process reengineering forums were safe spaces to take risks in acknowledging what was not known in order to create new processes. At the same time, it assisted in diffusing knowledge formerly specific to individual departments. Both Charles and Jeannette completed the dialogic forums with action plans and schedules. These were monitored at the weekly meetings with management and measured with the monthly budget review meetings. They both had the ability to engage in a dialogic process until new understanding was constructed then switch to a more unilateral command style to embed the changes. With increased provision of information, opportunity to clarify and learn, and then move to action, employees were very receptive to change.

Sense making and management of meaning

There were three main frames of reference impacting the employee sense-making; history of redundancies, industrial relations and economic value. The prolonged implementation of the redundancies prior to Charles’ arrival left lasting impressions of secrecy. The parent company had recently received unflattering media coverage for other divisions’ redundancies and endured a protracted legal stoush with substantial union involvement. This meant that they took much longer in announcing the Kapow! redundancies, whilst they worked to ‘get it right’. This process was shrouded in silence, with no communication, either monologic or dialogic occurring. As a result a change communication vacuum was created and gossip, rumour and innuendo filled the vacuum. The main site of sense-making was the smokers’ area or the unofficial ‘Kazowie Post office’, and the employee’s knowledge of industrial relations in terms of legalities of redundancies dominated:

...So there was a lot of insecurity at the same time as the redundancies so with the full time staff being told ‘put your hand up’ if you want a redundancy. It then put the temp staff out of whack –cause they’re going, ‘Well, how am I going to get full-time if these people are going on redundancies,’ and you

know just trying to work out the logistics. Temps didn't hear anything officially at all.

This statement highlighted a divide between full-time and temporary workers, as another member of this focus group countered with:

Realistically, the temps didn't have to know anything about the redundancies as it doesn't affect them, however as soon as everyone goes out of the door the first thing everyone is talking about is the redundancies and the temps are thinking, 'Oh my god I may as well quit this job now, cause I'm never gonna get FT which is what I'm hoping to do,' and as much as you can logically say it's none of their business and it didn't affect them, it did affect them, it affected them personally

Despite the main round of redundancies being completed within four weeks of the researcher starting in the business unit, it still coloured the subsequent sense-making of staff regarding change. One of the marketing staff remarked she would like to move to a particular office that was now vacant. 'Are you sure Carol? That's a big call, it's not called the departure lounge for nothing...' It was here that the dialogic processes assisted facilitating the change processes. Rather than get distracted by fears of redundancies, the team leaders and managers were able to facilitate discussions on change initiatives, and clarify employees' interpretations of what was happening. One of the more distressing frames of reference was the economic value of employees. Staff were debating the relative value that they offered to the business. It appears that this was one of the silent conversations of change with no observable attempt made by managers to address this.

The relationships between sense-making, monologic and dialogic change communication are related to the conditions for sense-making. Sense-making occurs in times of uncertainty and ambiguity. Monologic change communication is required in order for employees to receive information so that they can then make sense of the changes. Second, dialogic processes allow for collective sense-making and opportunities to clarify meaning and consider alternate explanations to reduce ambiguity. Prior to Charles' arrival, the absence of information about the changes meant the change communication vacuum was filled with individual sense-making. Rarely did this sense-making contribute to the achievement of change goals. The subsequent use of monologic change communication for providing information assisted in the impact of historical regression, and the dialogic change communication reduced the anxiety about further redundancies without having to rely on grand statements such as 'There will be no more redundancies.'

Concluding Remarks

The use of Langley's (1999) Alternate Templates enabled three change communication theories to provide a more complex, and correspondingly advanced, representation of what occurs in continuous change. Each theoretical perspective on its own offers some insight, but the combined interplay offers a holistic interpretation of change. Monologic (M) and dialogic (D) communication present as the 'front-end' process of change, with sense-making (S) occurring in the absence of change communication. This is depicted in Figure Three with organisational change conceptualized as a pipeline.

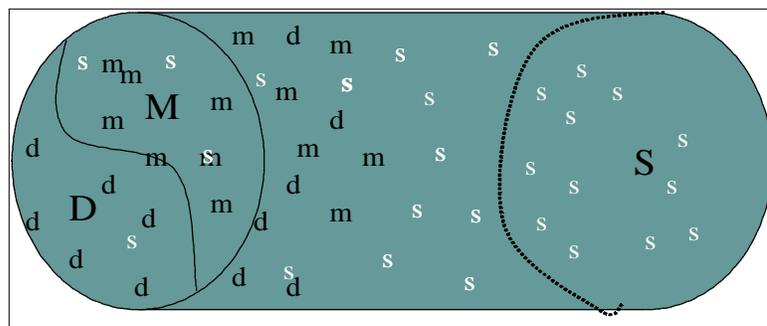


Figure 3: A pipeline view of organisational change and communication

After the change consultant and the new business unit manager began with Kapow!, there was substantial monologic change communication and dialogic change communication at the front end of change. As the monologic and dialogic change communication filled the pipeline, it left little room for the background talk of change (chinese whispers, grapevine activity) in order to make sense of the changes. Of this background talk of change, three main frames of reference were identified and two were countered with increased change communication from the front end of change. Understanding organisational change as a dynamic interplay of these three communicative approaches allows change communicators a more specific approach to tailoring change communication. It also deviates from an understanding of change communication as a function of managements, and suggests a reconceptualisation as the change communication creates the change, and shapes the change process.

Conclusion

The conclusions of this research are cautiously optimistic in regard to the change communication theory developed. In order to manage the communication well during continuous change, a mix of monologic and dialogic communication is required. This balance is determined by the existing preference and expectations of the participants of change, the existing monologic and dialogic competencies, frequency of communication, mediums used and available forums. Depending on the change context, differing emphases are required. This finding lends itself to a decision-making heuristic to determine the optimum balance throughout the process. If the organisation needs to create more change, (for example, culture change, commercialization, managing financial challenges), the change agents can introduce more dialogic processes, (for example, problem solving groups, open inquiry and discussion boards.) If at certain stages of the process, more stability and control is required, (for example, redundancies and anchoring new processes), then monologic change communication is required to provide information necessary for the employees to keep going with the change agenda. The organisational change literature acknowledges a long interest in the change/stability paradox (Greenwood & Hinings, 1988; Leana & Barry, 2000) ; this study advances the theoretical understanding within the change communication field.

Sensitivity is also required in acknowledging the interplay between the two approaches and the individual who can be responsible for making the discursive shifts from one approach to another. At some point of a dialogic exchange, closure is required and a monologic moment can take the ‘talk’ into action. Similarly, when

anchoring a new process, an engagement of dialogic processes can improve the implementation of the new process, or indeed construct new processes and understanding. Cognizance of the sense-making going on in the background talk of change is important to managing the change receptivity. It seems appropriate to address the many frames of reference that change participants use in order to manage resistance and fatigue. This study has shown the benefits of conversational shifts from monologic, to provide closure, information and stability, to dialogic in order for the employees to clarify and making meaningful sense of ongoing change processes.

References

- Baden-Fuller, C., Volberda, H. W. (1997). Strategic Renewal: How large complex organizations prepare for the future. *International Studies of Management and Organization*, 27, pp. 95-120.
- Bohm, D. (1998). On Dialogue. *Thinking*, 14.
- Bokeno, R. M., Gantt, V. W. (2000). Dialogic Mentoring. *Management Communication Quarterly : MCQ*, 14, p. 237.
- Brown, S. L., Eisenhardt, K. M. (1997). The art of continuous change: linking complexity theory and time-paced evolution in relentlessly shifting organizations. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 42, p.1.
- Cheney, G., Christensen, L., Zorn, T. E., Ganesh, S. (2003). *Organizational Communication in an age of Globalisation*. Illinois, Waveland Press.
- Dawson, P. (2003). *Reshaping Change: A processual perspective*. London, Routledge.
- Doyle, M., Claydon, T., Buchanan, D. (2000). Mixed results, lousy process: The management experience of organizational change. *British Journal of Management*, 11, p. 59.
- Eisenberg, E., Andrews, L., Murphy, A. (1999). Transforming organizations through communication. In P. Salem (Ed.), *Organisational Communication and Change* (pp. 99-147). Cresskill, NJ, Hampton Press, Inc.
- Ford, J. D. (1999). Organizational change as shifting directions. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 12, p. 480.
- Forster, N. (1999). The analysis of company documentation. In C. a. G. S. Cassell (Ed.), *Qualitative Methods in Organizational Research: A Practical Guide*. London, Sage.
- Frahm, J. A., Brown, K. A. (2003). Organizational Change Communication: Lessons from Public Relations Strategies. Paper presented at ANZCA 2003, Brisbane, Australia.
- Frahm, J. A., Brown, K. A. (2004). The use of the Alternate Template Approach to Study the Change Communication in an Australian Organization" Paper presented at the *International Communication Association*, New Orleans, USA.
- Gioia, D. A., Chittipeddi, K. (1991). Sensemaking and Sensegiving in Strategic Change Initiation. *Strategic Management Journal*, 12, p. 433.
- Greenwood, R., Hinings, C. R. (1988). Organizational Design Types, Tracks and the Dynamics of Strategic Change. *Organization Studies*, 9, p. 293.
- Hazlett, S.-A., Hill, F. (2000). Policy and Practice: An investigation of organizational change for service quality in the public sector in Northern Ireland. *Total Quality Management*, 11, 515.

- Kanter, R. M. (1999). Change is everyone's job: Managing the extended enterprise in a globally connected world. *Organizational Dynamics*, 28, p. 7.
- Kotter, J. P., Schlesinger, L. A. (1979). Choosing Strategies for Change. *Harvard Business Review*, 57, p. 106.
- Langley, A. (1999). Strategies for theorizing from process data. *Academy of Management Review*, 24, pp. 691-710.
- Larkin, T. J., Larkin, S. (1996). Reaching and changing frontline employees. *Harvard Business Review*, 74, p. 95.
- Leana, C. R., Barry, B. (2000). Stability and change as simultaneous experiences in organizational life. Academy of Management. *The Academy of Management Review*, 25, p. 753.
- Lewis, L. K. (2000). Communicating change: Four cases of quality programs. *The Journal of Business Communication*, 37, p. 128.
- Mills, C. (2000). The interfaces of communicating, sensemaking and change. *Australian Journal of Communicating*, 27, pp. 95-110.
- Mills, C. (2003). A unique angle on sensemaking about organisational communication during times of change. In ANZCA 2003, Brisbane, Australia.
- Miner, A., Bassoff, P., Moorman, C. (2001). Organizational improvisation and learning: A field study. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 46, pp. 304-337.
- Morgan, D. L. (1997). *Focus groups as qualitative research*, SAGE.
- Peters, T. (1992). *Thriving on chaos*, New York.
- Pettigrew, A. M. (1997). What is processual analysis. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 13, pp. 337-348.
- Sitkin, S. B., Sutcliffe, K. M., Weick, K. E. (1998). Organizational Learning. In R. Dorf, R. (Ed.), *The technology management handbook*. Boca Raton, FL. CRC Press.
- Van de Ven, A. H., Poole, M. S. (1995). Explaining development and change in organizations. *Academy of Management Review*, 20, pp. 510-540.
- Weber, P. S., Weber, J. E. (2001). Changes in employee perceptions during organizational change. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 22, p. 291.
- Weick, K. E. (1979). *The social psychology of organizing*. Reading, MA., Addison-Wesley.
- Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sense-making in organizations*. Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications.
- Weick, K. E., Quinn, R. E. (1999). Organizational Change and Development. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 50, p. 361.
- Zorn, T. E., Page, D. J., Cheney, G. (2000). Nuts about change: Multiple perspectives on change oriented communication in a public sector organization. *Management Communication Quarterly : MCQ*, 13, p. 515.

Address for correspondence

Jennifer Frahm
 School of Management
 Queensland University of Technology
 GPO Box 2434
 Brisbane, Q, 4001

j.frahm@qut.edu.au