

## Planning Change Management Communication

Anyone with experience in change management knows that efforts can succeed or fail based on communications. Experience consistently teaches that it's almost impossible to over-communicate when leading change. Not many sources, however, give practical advice on how to build a strategic communications plan for change management. The core message for any successful change management communications effort should contain:

- a clear, brief statement of the purpose for the change - how the change will make the organization more successful
- a clear statement of why such a change is in the interests of employees, and ideally how it will make their working lives better once completed.

Once those elements are in place, change management communication plans should be targeted to the different constituencies likely to receive the message. These are represented not only by functional units represented on the organizational chart, but also by different types of people within those functional units.

Those different types of people are captured by the categories of change adopters, first described by Everett Rogers in the book, "Diffusion of Innovations." More recently, those categories have been applied and adapted to modern marketing plans in the popular books like "The Secrets of Word of Mouth Marketing" by George Sullivan, and "The Tipping Point" by Malcolm Gladwell.

Here's how you can apply those ideas to building a successful change management communications plan. The basic idea is to build with your natural allies, wherever they may be, sell you ideas and create early buy-in with the early adopters within your organization, and let the change adoption cycle take hold even as you get started.

### 1. **Get to Know the Change Adoption Curve, and Plan Your Change Communications Strategy Accordingly**

You've probably heard the term "early adopter." It's been used a lot in marketing and in studies of market penetration during the tech boom. But the term comes from the work of Everett M. Rogers in the early 1960's, when he studied how all groups of people - countries, societies, etc. - get to the point of adopting truly or innovative practices. To build a change coalition, plan your communications campaign with the different kinds of change groups in mind. Depending on the issue, we can all be parts of any of these groups.

### 2. **Identify the Innovators**

These are the people who by nature always want to try new things. They like to be at the front of the process. They try a lot of things that never make it, but they always are up for something new. They make up, on average, just 2.5% of any group. Chances are, if you are a manager, these are the people who wanted the change to be made even before you did! You will likely already have these people on your side; they don't take much convincing. Everett Rogers

describes these people as "venturesome." Target them for communication to get the best of their ideas into practice.

### 3. **Identify the Early Adopters**

These are people who are typically opinion leaders - they naturally seem to have the respect of most others. These are the people that others want to check with to see if a change is worth doing. These influential people are not as adventurous as innovators, but will typically be keeping track of what things are new to see what might be worthwhile - they think that change can be good and sometimes should be sought out. They are like the gatekeepers for the rest of the group when it comes to trying something new.

Early adopters can be anyone, regardless of title or position - the power they hold in the group is often based on their personal character, judgment and credibility, and not based on title. If you are a manager leading initiating a change, you might be an early adopter, and any change leader should create a change management communication plan that begins by targeting these people, because their influence is essential and their resistance will make any change efforts futile. Early adopters make up about 13.5% of any population, and they should be part of the guiding coalition that sees a change process through to the end.

### 4. **Target the Early Majority**

These people are a bit more conservative than the early adopters. Everett Rogers calls these people "deliberate." They adopt new ideas just before the average member of any group does, but don't tend to keep track of things that might be new and exciting. They take longer to believe in a new change, and don't tend to hold positions of opinion leadership. They follow change with "deliberate willingness," but won't lead a change. Rogers defined this group as making up about 34% of a population, on average, and so if you add up the percentages so far, you get 50%, or half the whole group.

If you are creating a change management communications plan, your initial coalition has to include unity among your early adopters, and then target winning over the early majority. Too many change efforts fail because change leaders start out by trying to win over the most resistant elements, instead of building strategically and incrementally so that the change process can acquire momentum. The key to understanding this group is that they won't move to accept change without the encouragement and leadership of the early adopters. They will take more time and attention to win over, and this is the point where most change campaigns will stand or fall - in winning these people over.

### 5. **Accept the Late Majority - the "Skeptical Guardians"**

Late majority people go along with a change, not out of belief, but out of necessity, or because they see the change as inevitable. They are most concerned about guarding the best elements of the old way. Late majority people, or "skeptical guardians" of the old way, make up another 34% of the population, and tend to take more dim view of changes and the "woolly headed" people who try to start them (innovators can be so flaky!). They are conservative, but should not be disparaged - they can be used to help test and improve new processes when they have productive criticisms.

At the same time, change leaders should not worry too much about winning over their hearts and minds - you can get their compliance with change over time, but not their enthusiasm. But you can only get them to come along once you win over the early adopters and the early majority group members. In other words, target your change management communications plans to the other groups described above, and let the “skeptical guardians” come along in their own time.

#### 6. **Don’t Sweat the “Confirmed Traditionalists”**

Everett Rogers calls these people "laggards," but another way to think of them is to call them the “confirmed traditionalists. These people are the “foot draggers,” the ones who will always like the old way better. Some of them are even like those who want to believe the earth is flat - you can never win them over. They make up the last 16% of the population, and if you get their eventual compliance, you'll be fortunate. They may even make a show of compliance when everyone else is on board, but still resist in subtle, hidden ways.

When real change happens in an organization, there will be so-called "casualties:" people who would rather leave the organization than accept change. Change management leaders need to recognize that some extra spike in turnover during change is a good thing, because any other "confirmed traditionalists" that may come aboard board will at least become traditionalists in favor of the new way of doing things!

You may not lose all of these “confirmed traditionalists” through attrition as the change project moves to completion, but management can sometimes create graceful ways that they can exit without sabotaging change efforts. It can sometimes even be helpful to acknowledge at the beginning of a change communications campaign that there will be some people who won't want to see it through, and so they will be helped and supported in finding new places to work or contribute - if they at least step forward and decide not to stand in the way of the new organizational imperatives.

Using these strategies to create a change management communications plan can make management’s job a lot easier and more effective. Too many change management projects fail because management loses its focus and begins to focus on skeptics and critics before building momentum with more natural allies. Since change is inevitable in any successful company, market and build your change communications with the early adopters and early majority group members, and let progress unfold while the other organization members come along.

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