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Communicating Effectively within the Change Process

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“What we’ve got here is a failure to communicate.” This famous line from the 1967 movie Cool Hand Luke, starring Paul Newman, appropriately depicts the unfortunate fact that most business leaders are ineffective in their communications to stakeholders during transformational improvement initiatives like Lean, Operational Excellence or Reliability Excellence.

With the growing conveniences of modern technology, fewer people are taking the time to talk with people face-to-face, and when they do it’s in mass audience forums which are inherently designed to only pass along information – one way communication. How can we expect our employees to execute our strategies, meet our expectations, and achieve the company goals if we aren’t diligent in communicating these very things?

Understanding the need for change is the first step in creating new behaviors within your organization, behaviors that will represent business values in the future state. If we assume that business processes will change as a result of your Lean or Reliability Excellence initiative then we must assume that behaviors, driven by habits and rituals, will also need to change. To drive behavioral change you must communicate the need for change as it relates first to the overall business, and second to you and me. There is an acronym in change management circles that defines the you and me -- it’s called WIIFM and it stands for “What’s In It For Me.” If we expect our people to demonstrate the new values of our business through their own behaviors, then they must understand why. We are not talking about how, which is easier to talk about. We are talking about what is changing that will affect me, and why the change is necessary in the first place.

Communication is paramount when trying to raise the level of understanding in your organization. Many public relations consultants will tell you that the key to communicating is to use multiple platforms or media to communicate the same message. Most will tell you to
communicate the same message three to six times, and I don’t disagree. However, I think too much emphasis is put on *how* to communicate instead of talking about *what* we should communicate and *who* should deliver the communications. Countless studies indicate that when communicating the business need for change the most effective communicator in your organization is the CEO, or at a single location, the senior manager. These same studies prove that when it comes to the WIIFM, people want to hear from their direct supervisor. Makes sense, doesn’t it? I often share this saying with my students: “What interests my boss, fascinates me!” This point is very important when developing an effective communication plan. Matching the sender of your message with the receivers and what the receivers want to know, is the most successful approach to creating the level of understanding required to begin the change process.

In designing the Communication Phase you are beginning to prepare your organization for the transformation from current state, or practice, to the future state. At this time, business leaders need to prepare the messages that define the organization’s written principles and values. In doing so, leaders will begin to set the stage for behavioral and performance expectations. These core messages must identify the following:

- **The nature of the transformational change itself** – Why is my company changing the way it’s always done business, and why is the change necessary?
- **The process of changing from the current state to the future state** – The analytical and technical thinkers of our business need to understand how we plan to get from point ‘A’ to point ‘B’ so they can connect the dots in their mind’s perception of business as they know it today.
- **What role will I play in the change process?** – Many members of your organization are innovative and eager to contribute their insights and suggestions for improvement. During the communication phase of our project, we want to engage the “early adopters” to change. In change management circles, this is usually no more than 20% of your organization. These individuals are the free thinkers, the movers and shakers, and typically the resources we know we can routinely call upon to get things done. This is our first opportunity to recognize these individuals in order to begin assembling the project team.
- **Where is the resistance to change?** – Our initial communications must provide a mechanism to uncover potential paths of resistance to change. Unlike the practice of
passing on information, good communication is two-way communication. As we make others aware of our strategy and need for change we must also elicit feedback to better understand how our message was received. Resistance comes in two primary forms, passive and active, or covert and overt. People express these forms of resistance differently and it is our goal during this phase of the deployment plan to uncover the covert or passive resistance paths.

- **Displaying your commitment to change** – When I visit with implementation teams during a project I often hear comments, voices of resistance, that challenge leadership commitment. The majority of our employees are wavering between adapting to the changes and actively resisting change, so it’s our intent through communication to help them understand that this is not a “flavor of the month.” It’s not going away, as with past failed initiatives, and we, as business leaders, are committed to doing whatever it takes to be successful in growing our business. When leadership commitment is challenged, project teams become stagnant, and with good reason – they feel as if their efforts and their time are poorly valued.

- **How will the change affect me?** – This is the age old question, and one of the most important messages required to gain the desire within your organization to do something different. 52% of people engaged in the transformation effort prefer to have their direct supervisor communicate how the changes will affect them. The changes associated with the improvement process will affect people differently, whether it is changes to day-to-day practices, or, on a larger scale, a complete change to their role and its responsibilities. At all levels of the organization, the employee’s direct supervisor has the most influence over what people hear and respond to. When communicating role changes, changes to systems or tools that the employee uses day to day, or even communicating changes to pay, benefits, or time off, direct supervisors are the most effective as a result of their relationship with the individual.

It’s very important to be consistent. Craft your messages within the plant or facility leadership team. One way that people will discredit the improvement process or challenge leadership commitment is when they receive mixed messages. Make sure you and your peers are aligned, and don’t be afraid to use a script. It's not so much the presentation quality, but rather the content of the communication that is most important. People will recognize the position of the
individual within the organization, e.g. the senior manager or their direct supervisor, and they will tune into the message being delivered, not the method of delivery.

Developing the Communication Plan

Start by identifying the topics of your communication, as we’ve already discussed, then identify the target audience for each communication topic. This can be done by examining the groups of people impacted by the foreseen changes to the business. Next, identify the preferred media for each topic, keeping in mind that the top method of communication is face-to-face. 73% of people engaged in transformational change initiatives prefer to receive information face-to-face and in small groups where people can hide behind the security of their peers and first listen to the responses of the natural early adopters before making their viewpoints public. (Source: PROSCI – 2005 benchmarking study). Try to identify at least three different media per topic to ensure a higher percentage of the plant population can be reached. Next, evaluate each media based on the following characteristics which will enable your leadership team to determine communication effectiveness as prescribed:

- **Circulation** – does this media type require a high-level of circulation in order to reach at least 70% of the target audience?
- **Frequency** – based on the content and production preparation required, will this media easily allow your leadership team or sponsors to repeat the message a minimum of six times to ensure that 70% of the target audience internalizes the message?
- **Credibility** – who should deliver the message using the prescribed media in order to reach the highest level of credibility?
- **Feedback Opportunity** – is the media capable of soliciting feedback in order to effectively gauge paths of resistance or message interpretation?

Now we are ready to finalize the communication plan. Schedule the communication topics in accordance with your improvement process deployment plan. Identify the frequency of communication required for each message using the predetermined media. Finally, identify who will deliver each topic or message based on the media characteristics, and execute the plan.

Communication is one aspect of the improvement process that you can’t have too much of. However, an ineffective communication has the ability to derail any improvement process. Be
diligent in your communication planning. If necessary, engage a communications expert to help you craft your messages. Let’s prevent having another “failure to communicate”.

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