

# GS Insight

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## Avoiding “Death by Director:” Tips for Successful Change Communications

In today’s fast-paced business environment, the only certainty is change.

Consolidation is a significant trend as “brick-and-mortar” industries try to remain competitive in the highly mobile New Economy, while still finding ways to reap the benefits of their Old Economy ways. Entrepreneurial start-ups are aggressively taking on tried-and-true industry leaders and challenging market share. Given this business climate, the market is ripe for joint ventures, mergers, acquisitions and re-engineerings.

However, one of the often-overlooked items in “change” is employee communications. While most companies recognize the need to communicate with new and current employees, not enough companies focus on the “why” and “how.”

All too often, employee-focused change communications are guided more by political considerations than potential impact. Employees are inundated by communications and/or events that “parade” senior officials before them, regardless of relevance or addition to the dialogue (a.k.a., Death by Director). Of course, directors have relevance and a role to play. The key is to carefully orchestrate the flow of information to best meet employee needs and concerns.

### Staying Focused

It’s easy for communications to get sidetracked on topics such as mission, vision and synergies, rather than focusing first on the nuts-and-bolts items that employees care the most about.

Employees seek succinct, impactful information on how the change will affect them, their work companions and the future of the company. They want to feel like the company understands their needs and has their best interests in mind. This concept sounds easy, but it’s not.

### The Pressure Cooker

Change communications is difficult by its very nature. Whenever significant change is introduced to a company, there is a strong tendency to over-explain. This is often because a wide range of executives feel their information and insight is essential in all employee communications. Thus, a

great deal of content pressure is put on the individual(s) who must decide the communications strategy, making it difficult to say “no.” The result can be watered-down communications, rather than a more strategic and influential approach.

The best advice for corporate communicators is to be aware of the “pressure cooker phenomenon” and plan for it. Reinforce early and often that the ultimate goal of change communications is employee buy in, support and motivation, and that communications should be managed toward that end.

### It’s All About Me

The bottom line in how employees react to a change is how they perceive it affects them.

Think about it this way, if you went home tonight to tell family and friends that your company just became part of a new joint venture, what would they ask? The logical questions would be - Do you still have a job? Will you get a raise? How will this impact your fellow employees? What does this mean in terms of advancement? They won’t ask what the new mission statement will be.

When faced with changes at the workplace, human predisposition is to worry about themselves first. Employees have options, and most know it. If the key personnel questions are not addressed at the onset, employees will worry so much about how the change will impact them, they will tune out

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W. H. Cowley



discussions about “mission,” “vision,” and “synergies.”

However, if the “what about me” component is addressed at the onset, one can almost hear a collective sigh of relief and will likely find the audience not only receptive, but enthused about the new direction.

### **Honor the Past**

Work is often a place of friendship, support and pride. Employees want to know that what they’ve done in the past matters and their contributions will somehow shape the company’s, and their own, future.

One of the worst threats to corporate morale is the “new sheriff in town” syndrome. This can occur if employees feel the change negates, or worse, castigates, the company’s past. Communicators must be cognizant of this and make sure to give a nod to the past and respect company traditions. This sends a strong signal that management understands.

If change calls for the lay-off or transfer of individuals, it is also important to realize employees’ need to mourn. The attitude of “you should be glad you have a job” doesn’t go very far when a friend or family member is laid off. It can be difficult for those who stay, and steps should be taken to reinforce their value and place in the company’s future.

### **Light the Way**

Once initial employee concerns have been addressed and the past has been honored, it’s time to unveil the company’s future course and motivate employees to come along. This involves more than explaining the mission and vision, but creating buy-in and ownership in what the “soul” of the changed company means.

Employees should be challenged to reach new heights and be shown how change will benefit them. People want to know that there will be a positive return — personally, financially and emotionally — for their hard work and commitment. Creating buy-in up front

goes a long way in keeping a work force motivated once the change becomes standard operating procedure.

### **Secure Manager Support**

The value of educating mid-level managers and supervisors cannot be underestimated. Many of these individuals do not realize how much impact they have on employee perceptions. A misspoken word of concern about a new policy or action can have a long-term negative impact on employee morale. As Frederick Herzberg, a well-noted organizational psychologist observed, “Expect your front-line supervisors to experience some anxiety and hostility over changes you are making. The anxiety comes from their fear that the changes will result in poorer performance of their units.”

Conversely, support of the change will go a long way toward successful employee buy-in. Therefore, change communications should be heavily focused on managers and supervisors to ensure that the desired message gets conveyed.

### **Focus on the How**


W.H. Cowley said, “a leader is anyone who has two characteristics: First, he is going someplace; second, he is able to persuade other people to go with him.” Change communications should not be treated as an obligation, but an opportunity to motivate people to act. Much like the “bounce” associated with political conventions, it is one of the few times that communicators have an organization’s undivided attention.

Change is an opportunity to be creative. Communicators have a unique opportunity to introduce the new face of the company, to use non-traditional communications formats and technologies to convey the appropriate image. If a company is trying to reinvent itself as a mobile competitor, able to quickly adapt to market changes, it should not stage an event where the format is stuffy and “old companyesque.”

If the image and words don’t connect, the image is often “heard” the loudest.

For example, during Ronald Reagan’s reelection campaign, a national news show ran a scathing report of his presidency, however, they showed footage of Reagan shaking hands in front of U.S. flags. Reagan’s popularity actually increased because people thought he looked “presidential.” The image overrode the words.

### **Bottom Line**

Put people first and remember the three “C”s ... caring, concern and compassion. Know why you are communicating and how to best achieve employee buy-in. 

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