Change Management Communication: Barriers, Strategies & Messaging

Marlene S. Neill, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism
Baylor University
Marlene_Neill@baylor.edu

Abstract

In a world characterized by constant change, there has been a neglect of scholarly research on public relations' role in change management communication. Through 32 in-depth interviews with internal communicators, this study provides new insights into effective strategies, barriers and key messaging in change management communication. Change management was examined in 10 sectors representing 26 employers. Barriers included lack of a plan, changing plans, change fatigue and multiple cultures, missions and priorities. Even in organizations with strong communication leadership, senior leaders and communication employees were reluctant to abandon their previous missions, visions, and strategic priorities in support of the new parent company. In addition, public relations tended to serve more of a tactical role rather than a strategic one being brought in after key decisions had already been made. Effective communication strategies the internal communication executives reported using included recruiting employee ambassadors or identifying influencers, having senior leaders make road trips to communicate face-to-face with employees, using videos to communicate key messages, and seeking employee testimonials in support of the change. Essential messages to communicate include what the changes mean for employees and the impact on their jobs, the specific benefits of the change, and resources and alternatives for employees. Six best practices for change management communication are provided based on the study's findings.

Keywords: change management communication, organizational identity, sensemaking

Introduction

Scholars have reported that internal communication is one of the fastest growing areas of specialization in public relations, and change management communication is among one of the top three issues ranked as a priority among practitioners (Verčič, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2012). At the same time, multiple scholars have decried the lack of scholarly public relations research in this area (Luo & Jiang, 2014; Verčič et al., 2012; Welch, 2011) as most of the contributions are published in organizational communication or management journals.

Change management can encompass rebranding efforts (Finney & Scherrebeck-Hansen, 2010), a change in senior leadership (Byrne & LeMay, 2006), mergers and acquisitions (Daly, Teague & Kitchen, 2003), and downsizing (Luo & Jiang, 2014). Change is inevitable in today's

world economy, but can be costly in terms of financial resources, time and morale (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979; Lewis, 1999). Daly et al. (2003) reported that 70% of change programs fail, and the cause is often attributed to poor communication (Kitchen & Daly, 2002), which suggests there may be an opportunity for public relations to contribute.

One of the challenges in studying internal communication is that it requires cross-departmental cooperation (Kalla, 2005; Neill & Jiang, 2017; Smith, 2013) between public relations, human resources and marketing. Much of the research by public relations scholars regarding internal communication is based on quantitative research such as surveys. Some of the key findings include that transparent internal communication contributes to employee trust, commitment and satisfaction (Men & Stacks, 2014), and internal communication satisfaction can impact employee engagement (Karanges, Beatson, Johnston & Lings, 2014; Verčič & Vokić, 2017). While these studies regarding internal communication in general are insightful, public relations studies on internal communication in the context of change management are scarce.

Some scholars have provided support that public relations should have a role in change management. Choi and Choi (2009) identified change communication and communication of the organization's vision as key components of public relations leadership. Dürig and Sriramesh (2004) studied change management in the context of one multinational company and recommended that companies identify any gaps between their communication and reality and determine how to bridge any inconsistencies; and that communication efforts should involve collaboration between different internal departments such as corporate communication, marketing and human resources.

Other research examining public relations' role in change management found practitioners provided valuable contributions by training supervisors to manage employee emotions, offering communication training to middle management, and reinforcing shared visions through communication with employees (Luo & Jiang, 2014). Neill (2015) found that corporate communications was a member of the strategic decision team for a proposed merger and acquisition, and played an essential role in crafting messages. These studies' findings that public relations had an influential role in change management suggest progress. In contrast, Dolphin (2005) reported that a merger team that managed internal communication was comprised of investor relations, marketing, and human resources with no mention of public relations or corporate communications.

One limitation of Luo and Jiang's (2014) study is that it only examined three companies all located in China. Dürig and Srirmesh's (2004) study was focused on change communication in one multinational company in Germany. Additional research is needed to examine change management in other sectors and nations. Furthermore, Lewis (1999) wrote "we have little knowledge of the communicative actions taken by implementers in disseminating information about change" and "research to date provides scant insight into the patterns of use of various channels" (p. 49).

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of internal communication in change management to determine what barriers make communication more difficult and what communication strategies public relations practitioners and their internal partners perceive are most effective. To examine these issues, 32 interviews were conducted with internal communication executives working in 26 U.S. companies and organizations.

Literature Review

As a theoretical foundation for this study, a review of literature regarding strategic internal communication was examined, which highlights the importance of transparent and symmetrical communication. These concepts are consistent with social exchange theory, which has been connected to desired outcomes such as employee engagement and organization identification. Finally, an overview of recent research in change management communication is provided.

Strategic Internal Communication

Internal communication has been defined as "strategic management of interactions and relationships between stakeholders at all levels within organisations" (Welch & Jackson, 2007, p. 183). Internal communication efforts can involve routine communication with employees through a range of channels including face-to-face, company newsletters, and email to provide information about new employees, promotions, changes in benefit programs, and acknowledge employee achievements (Argenti, 1998; Cheney, 1983). More strategic initiatives may include creating a corporate identity or culture, equipping brand ambassadors, and managing organizational change (Asif & Sargeant, 2000; Mazzei, 2014).

Scholars have recommended that strategic internal communication should be both symmetrical and transparent. Symmetrical communication is characterized by ''trust, credibility, openness, relationships, reciprocity, network symmetry, horizontal communication, feedback, adequacy of information, employee-centered style, tolerance for disagreement, and negotiation'' (Grunig, 1992, p. 558). Men (2014) emphasized that in symmetrical communication systems, managers and their employees "engage in dialogue and listen to each other" (p. 260). Transparency has been defined as "having these three important elements: information that is truthful, substantial, and useful; participation of stakeholders in identifying the information they need; and objective, balanced reporting of an organization's activities and policies that holds the organization accountable" (Rawlins, 2009, p. 74). To be considered transparent, organizations should ''make available publicly all legally releasable information— whether they consider it positive or negative in nature- in a manner which is accurate, timely, balanced, and unequivocal'' (Heise, 1985, p. 209).

Social Exchange Theory

Some scholars have described internal communication in the context of social exchange theory (Karanges, Beatson, Johnson & Lings, 2014). Some of the basic assumptions of the theory are mutual dependence, meaning the various parties in the relationship have some reason to engage in exchanges to obtain resources of value; a desire to increase gain and avoid loss; and some degree of continuance of the relationship over time rather than a one-time encounter (Cook, Cheshire, & Gerbasi, 2006). A social resource in the context of internal communication would be information from the leadership of an organization, a supervisor and employees (Karanges et al., 2014). They also suggest employee engagement can be a form of reciprocation when employees are satisfied with the quality and quantity of internal communication (Karanges et al., 2014).

Consistent with social exchange theory, internal communication today is focused on achieving desired outcomes such as employee engagement and commitment. Engagement is focused on the "discretionary effort exhibited by employees," (Saks, 2006, p. 601) or the willingness to go beyond the minimal efforts required to keep a job. Scholars have conceptualized engagement as being comprised of three components: trait engagement, referring to employees with a positive view on life and work; psychological state engagement, which is associated with job satisfaction, commitment and involvement; and behavioral engagement, which includes components such as willingness to assume additional responsibilities and personal initiative (Macey & Schneider, 2008).

Related to employee engagement is organizational commitment, which refers to an employee's decision about whether or not to leave the organization (Welch, 2011). Verčič, and Vokić (2017) characterized commitment as a long-term perspective and employee engagement as a temporary attitude. Scholars have said effective internal communication can influence engagement and commitment, but poor communication can lead to disengagement (Welch, 2011). The costs associated with poor employee relations are estimated at $450 to $550 billion a year including absenteeism, labor grievances, production interruptions, repair and warranty expenses, and underperformance (Gallup, 2013; Lloyd, 2002; Saks, 2006). Keeping employees engaged is likely more difficult during times of organizational change due to the uncertainty present in the workplace as well as the range of emotions experienced by employees such as anger, resentment, and frustration (Luo & Jiang, 2014).

Organizational Identity

Organizational identity refers to "what members perceive, feel and think about their organizations"… as well as a "collective, commonly-shared understanding of the organization's distinctive values and characteristics" (Hatch & Schultz, 1997, p. 357). Communication strategies that can build identification include the common ground technique, which involves expressing concern for the employee, promoting shared values, sharing praise by outsiders or testimonials by employees (Cheney, 1983). Chreim (2002) coined the term exemplification to describe the use of employee testimonials in the context of change management, specifically recommending that companies identify employees who have successfully adopted and embraced the change. Similarly, Wines and Hamilton III (2008) stressed the power of stories to communicate the organization's values and encourage behavior, and they can be more effective than supervisor directives.

Building organization identity and helping employees understand organizational change have both been previously identified as the responsibilities of internal communication (Asif & Sargeant, 2000). However, internal communication will only be effective if employees perceive it to have integrity meaning the actions of leaders are consistent with organizational values (Harshman & Harshman, 1999). Lencioni (2002) defined core values as "deeply ingrained principles that guide all of a company's actions" and serve as "cultural cornerstones" (p. 6). Wines and Hamilton (2008) described values as "strongly held qualities, virtues, or personal characteristics that we admire, defend, and in which we are willing to invest ourselves" (p. 438). They added that how those values are lived is what makes them useful (Wines & Hamilton, 2008). Consistent with that mindset, scholars have suggested that internal communication "represents the fundamental values of an organization" and "is tangible evidence about what the

leadership believes and the values for which leadership stands" (Harshman & Harshman, 1999, p. 3).

Change Management & Change in Identity

Change management creates challenges for maintaining organizational identity and employee engagement. Chreim (2002) suggested that major changes in a company or organization may demand a transformation of organizational identity. She introduced two new concepts to describe this process: dis-identification, which involves employees divesting "themselves of old perspectives, attitudes and behaviors" and re-identification, which refers to the introduction of new attributes and employee roles (Chreim, 2002). During this process, leaders should assume the role of sensemakers by communicating to employees what the change means and attempting to gain their support for those changes (Berger & Meng, 2014; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Fairhurst (1993) said leaders can clarify the meaning "by verbally linking the new and the old by showing areas of overlap," complementary elements or even encouraging employees to reject "one set of practices for another" (p. 352). Public relations practitioners have a role in these efforts as they "write, edit, produce, and deliver a variety of sensemaking scripts" (Berger & Meng, 2014, p. 8) or key messages about the change. At the same time, employees will have their own interpretations of the changes and will determine which messages to accept or reject, a process referred to as sensenegotiating (Berger & Meng, 2014).

Research specifically in the area of change management communication can provide additional insight into the importance of organizational identity and the communication strategies that are effective to reinforce and transform it.

Previous Research on Change Communication

Scholars have provided insight into who oversees internal communication generally and more specifically change management communication. One survey found that corporate communications was the most common place for internal communication to be placed at 44%, followed by human resources at 18%, and public relations or public affairs at 8% (Dewhurst, 2006). However, Johnson (2001) reported that a U.S. merger team that managed employee communication was comprised of investor relations, marketing, and human resources with no mention of public relations or corporate communications. More recently, Neill (2015) found the leadership team for a proposed merger and acquisition included roughly a dozen people including the chairman, chief financial officer, legal, corporate communications, investor relations and government relations.

Scholars also have provided insights into the strengths and weakness of change management communication practices. Luo and Jiang (2014) found some best practices in change management included providing training for supervisors in the areas of managing employee emotions and communication, and reinforcing the company's vision through communication. Lewis (2000) suggested the keys to achieving commitment to change programs include creating and communicating the vision, providing opportunities for feedback, and communicating goal achievement.

In contrast, Lewis (1999) found employers were not actively engaging line supervisors to implement change, but suggested they are "best suited to translate and interpret abstract organizational policy and goals to make them relevant to daily work tasks" (p. 66), a

responsibility that is consistent with sensemaking (Berger & Meng, 2014; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). She also found employers were not soliciting feedback from employees regarding the change (Lewis, 1999). Proctor and Doukakis (2003) studied change in a public organization and found several problems among middle and front -line managers including "information was being withheld, changed, manipulated, delivered unreasonably late" (p. 271). For these reasons, they recommended additional training for managers, and that top management bypass middle managers to deliver communication messages directly to employees through the intranet and email (Proctor & Doukakis, 2003).

Several scholars also examined best-selling books on change management to determine how the advice compared to scholarly research (Lewis, Schmisseur, Stephens & Weir, 2006). They found much of the advice was "directive (e.g., communicate often) without providing much guidance on channels, frequency, mix of types, or specific message strategies" (Lewis et al., 2006, p. 123). Some of the more specific guidelines included asking employees for feedback, reaching out to opinion leaders, providing as much information as early as possible, communicating the vision, and even using threats and intimidation by firing those who are not on board with the change (Lewis et al., 2006).

This review of the literature indicates several issues related to change management communication merit more attention. Specific questions that should be addressed include:

RQ1: What types of communication strategies are internal communicators using in the context of change management?

RQ2: What are some of the barriers to change management communication?

RQ3: Are transparent and symmetrical communication priorities in change management communication plans?

Method

Based on the research questions and the limited research related to public relations' role in change communication, qualitative research is appropriate. Personal interviews have previously been used to study public relations' leadership in organizational change (Luo & Jiang, 2014), an integrated approach to internal communication (Kalla, 2005), and the role of communication during organizational change (Daly et al., 2003). Interviews are considered appropriate when the subject matter is highly confidential, when group pressure is likely to alter or discourage honesty, and when there is a need to probe attitudes, behaviors and motivations (Davis, 2012).

Sampling
To answer the research questions, change management was studied in 26 companies and organizations representing 11 states and the District of Columbia (Appendix A). Because previous researchers have suggested that companies listed among the best places to work tend to invest more financial resources in internal communication (Johnson, 2001), several of these

employers were contacted, and two companies/organizations featured among Fortune's "100 Best Companies to Work For" did participate. Others were recruited through messages posted on LinkedIn group pages for the Public Relations Society of America and several alumni associations. As an indication of their standing, seven of the companies are featured among the Fortune 500 and three among the Global 500.

The participants were selected using purposive sampling (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006) based on their specialized knowledge and involvement in internal communication initiatives at their companies or organizations. The sample size was 32 internal communication executives. Sixteen participants (50%) were in manager or director level positions, five were vice presidents, five were coordinators/specialists, and six were external consultants. Those selected for the sample participated in interviews, which averaged 39 minutes. The interviews were conducted between August of 2013 and February of 2014. Three of the interviews were conducted in person and the remaining 29 by phone using the same interview protocol. As part of a larger study, participants were first asked questions regarding the role of internal communication in their organization, followed by questions about communication programs to build organizational identity or to communicate their core values. Participants were then asked specific questions about change management such as "What types of special challenges does this present in the realm of employee communication," "Who would be responsible for this type of communication," and "Would these types of issues require any collaboration when developing communication programs or messages? If so, who would likely be involved?"

Most of the executives worked in public relations with 20 (62.5%) participants, five (16%) in human resources, one (3%) in marketing, and the remaining six (12.5%) were external consultants in marketing, human resources, and public relations. The sample included 23 (72%) women and nine (28%) men, and four minority participants (12.5%): three African-American women and one Hispanic man. The participants worked in the following sectors: corporate 12 (37.5%), government/military four (12.5%), education/nonprofit 10 (31%), and agencies six (19%). All participants signed consent forms, which detailed actions to be taken to preserve anonymity and confidentiality. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis producing 305 pages of typed, singled-spaced text, representing almost 21 hours of interviews.

Data Analysis

The transcripts were analyzed using the methods described by Miles and Huberman (1994). First, the researcher assigned codes to words, phrases, sentences or full paragraphs based on the research questions, key variables that were being studied, and reoccurring phrases (Appendix B). Next composite code sheets were created using qualitative research software reflecting all the respondents' comments for each code. Then the researcher wrote memos and analyzed the data further to identify additional insights, followed by negative or discrepant case analysis to identify any examples disconfirming or challenging emerging findings (Merriam, 2002). To establish intercoder reliability, a sample of 25% of the transcripts was independently coded by a graduate student, who was trained using a code book. Both coders used the same qualitative research software for coding, which calculated the inter-rater reliability as 89.8% using percent agreement, .606 Scott's Pi and .608 Krippendorff's Alpha.

Findings

The internal communication executives provided insights regarding specific communication strategies, communication barriers, the role of direct supervisors, key messages, and the need for symmetrical and transparent communication. Seventeen of the executives discussed these issues in the context of specific organizational changes they were undergoing or had recently faced (Appendix C), and the remaining 15 executives discussed change management more generally, such as who would typically be responsible for this type of communication and which departments serve as collaborators.

Public Relations' Role in Change Management
While most of the companies and organizations that participated in the study reported that internal communication was led by a communications or public relations department ($n = 17$) that was not the case for change management initiatives, which typically were led by a specialized team with ties to human resources called organizational development, organizational effectiveness or simply change management team. This team typically collaborated with corporate communications or marketing as well as legal, human resources, and senior executives. The role of public relations tended to be primarily focused on developing communication messages, a more tactical role. As a regional director of public relations said, "We try to be very communicative about the changes and what they mean and how they affect the employee…but it's very natural part of our business (P20)." In contrast, a human resources manager provided insight into the more strategic role of internal communication during change management:

> Within our internal communications team … it would start with the senior director of internal communications and then she would work with her team and that would include managers and specialists, but they would really…work with the business leaders to understand the changes and…go through those questions: what's happening, what are the reasons for it, how are employees affected, what can we tell them? And then they would provide some counsel on what local managers' roles need to be in terms of their part in the communication process (P18).

In this particular organization, internal communication and corporate communication both reported to the senior vice president of human resources. Likewise, an internal communications adviser for an energy company, who also reports into human resources, provided insight into her role during organizational change:

> So how we break it up, our O.E. (Organizational Effectiveness) professionals that really specialize in change really support with that change communication. So specific to those real estate projects that I mentioned earlier, how we divide it out is I support the communications and the broader kind of employee base, right. And so if we've got any milestone updates that are coming up that we need to share, it's kind of looking at the entire location as a whole and anything that would be interesting to them, that's what I'm supporting…so I'm writing those broader milestone communications. That said, there's certainly kind of a rolling communications that needs to happen with the departments

themselves as they're getting ready to move in, etc. And that's managed through the change person on site (P15).

Communication Strategies

The first research question asked what types of communication strategies are internal communicators using in the context of change management? Some common strategies involved recruiting employee ambassadors ($n = 5$) or identifying influencers ($n = 3$). The influence of author and scholar Kotter (1995) was readily apparent as one vice president of corporate communications said his eight-step process was posted prominently in the office near their computers. The key ingredient the executives had adopted was identifying influencers and creating a coalition to drive the change. One consultant recommended recruiting a challenge team:

> Find some of these influencers and bring them in and tell them about something early and have them challenge you. So you'll say, "Here's what we're planning to do, what do you think?" And they'll give you that sort of perspective that represents what their peers are likely to think and you might change course because of that…We've often found…bringing those people in early, giving them a preview, trusting them, they tend to then become believers in what it is you're trying to do and then they go back and talk to their peers and say, "You know, this is actually a really good idea" (P3).

In times of major change, some of communication professionals ($n = 6$) urged their leaders to take road trips to meet face to face with employees both formally and informally. Government public affairs officers reported that military leaders routinely use this approach. As a director of public affairs said:

> When they're not in the Pentagon, they're traveling and so much of their time is spent meeting one-on-one with (servicemen/women) across the planet since we're an international organization, so they can hear first and foremost from (them) on the ground and they can speak directly unfiltered…and their job usually when they're doing that type of information is vision casting. It's reinforcing mission; it's focused on morale building…or communicating important changes (P28).

When road trips were not feasible, the executives suggested that video was a good alternative. As a vice president of communication said, "We have found that video is very powerful because it can help convey tone and passion…in such a way where the leadership voice is very crisp and clear (P32)." One of the consultants also recommended using storytelling and testimonials from employees to support change, "People love reading about people like them, and there's this tendency of 'Oh, wow if they can do it, I guess I could (P3).'"

Barriers to Effective Change Management Communication

The second research question addressed what are some of the barriers to change management communication? Because communication professionals often were not in charge of organizational change initiatives, one of the challenges they faced was lack of a plan. For

example, one healthcare organization had recently merged with another hospital and the director of internal communication said:

> Honestly, it's very piecemealed, and I don't know if it's again because it's a not-for-profit… So the leaders …wanted to announce the merger. And that's it…we don't have any logo; we don't know who's in leadership roles. There are a number of things in internal comms that you would like to see happen before you announce this to your staff, so that there's some answers… But those things didn't happen…our collaboration on how we're going to make this integration go well is very fly by night (P16).

Even if they had a plan in place, others complained of constant changes to the plan or the existence of multiple plans. A public affairs specialist working in a government agency used a musical metaphor to describe their approach:

> You had two or three different versions of how we're going to do change management … I was…pushing it from the we need to set a vision approach…you really need to have the reason why we're doing this and then get everybody behind that, because it's just a lot easier to get things done. But they were taking it more from an organizational structure approach, how do we push everything together. So I would say that the initial challenge …the people who were doing the planning weren't even on the same sheet of music (P30).

Another barrier was lack of a leader or champion for a re-organization in a government agency. As a public affairs specialist said, "We didn't have a leader; they hadn't selected him (P30)."

In one Fortune 500 company, employees were experiencing change fatigue and lacked core values and strategic priorities, the result of having three different CEOs in 10 years. As the communication director said:

> You tend to see a shift in direction. So this is our focus, this is what we're going after and then a year later, it's well actually now this is what it is, and it starts to feel very flavor of the month for people. And I think it creates this environment with employees where it's like well, I don't know if this strategy really means anything, it's going to change anyway and I'll just ride it out until the next one comes around (P8).

In fact, several executives ($n = 5$) specifically mentioned change fatigue as a challenge in change communication. In recognition of the emotional impact of change on employees, an internal communications adviser stressed the need for patience:

> So you go through that big dip, right, where people are kind of this disbelief, despair, and then they have to go to acceptance, and then curve on up…and that change curve looks different on timing for everybody and so it's making sure that you are allowing them to express that change (P15).

Some of the other challenges associated with mergers included technology issues such as integrating email and intranets, and the existence of multiple cultures, missions and priorities. Embedded in these changes is a re-definition or modification of the mission and vision (n=5), which can create an identity conflict for employees. An internal communications manager at a healthcare organization described this issue in more complex organizations:

> We added maybe three hospitals in the last maybe five years…and they have their own communications offices… so to have the communicators at these other hospitals and organizations align their communications with the institutional initiatives has been a challenge…They have their own strategic plan, they have their own mission, but we're asking them to communicate to their employees the institution mission, so there's a conflict. "Why do we have to do that? We have our own"…They feel they are losing their identity (P6).

A public affairs specialist faced a similar challenge when a government agency merged three separate agencies:

> We're trying to help them rid themselves of the legacy organization cultures that they had, and many of them have worked for the government for 30 years… they're sitting in the same cubicles, but they have a different name tag on, and we need them to buy into the cultural focus. So that's really huge effort is to try to get the internal audience… behind the leadership's vision (P3).

Role of Direct Supervisors in Change Communication

Several executives ($n = 5$) identified direct supervisors as a key collaborator in change management communication, and some ($n = 7$) said they routinely provided direct supervisors with communication resources such as talking points, dialogue guides, and common question and answer fact sheets. As a manager director at a public relations agency explained:

> Put those managers in a place where they can succeed. You've given them the information that they need. You've helped them anticipate the questions that they're going to get from their team. They're in a position to say, "Yeah, we're doing this and it's a good idea" (P3).

In contrast, a change communication consultant discussed the negative potential among supervisors opposed to the change:

> When you see a piece of information and you go ask the team manager, "What does this mean? I don't really get it; help me understand it," and they have no idea either and they roll their eyes. It's the rolling of the eyes that's the most important piece of communication you got (P21).

A consultant described her experiences with that kind of resistance due to new leaders who had not yet built relationships with managers:

> The senior person that was trying to do change, they were fighting not only the masses, but those middle managers and that's a lot to tackle to bring like the middlemen into your group. In 20 years, they've been able to…do their own thing and then you're trying to turn them around and the masses (P29).

This account reinforces the need for leaders to build support among direct supervisors to ensure success for change initiatives.

Several executives ($n = 8$) also discussed how they also were providing leadership and communication training for supervisors to address deficiencies. A human resources consultant described her former experience in this area working in a corporate communications division of a financial institution:

> We partnered with them (training division) to brainstorm about how best to do that, but ultimately that responsibility fell in the hands of corporate communications, so we were even experimenting with doing some one-on-one coaching with the leaders who consistently had low scores in their leadership survey (P29).

Key Messages

In addition to identifying effective communication strategies and the role of direct supervisors during change management initiatives, the internal communication executives provided specific guidelines regarding key messages to communicate to employees. A consultant provided this advice:

> As you go through change, you should reinforce your values and talk about how the change is consistent with your values and also articulate the end state. So why are you changing?…Articulate the end game, so that they understand why do we need to change, what are we trying to accomplish, and how are we going to get there? So that people think it's worth their while to go along and to embrace the change that's desired (P30).

A senior manager working in higher education agreed and said her employer has adopted that practice:

> When we have to announce a change or something that's maybe harder to communicate, we tie it back to our values to use as a foundation.…any major initiative that's rolled out for the organization whether it deals with communications or it's just some other feature, there's always a tie to our values and that I think makes them a stronger story as a whole (P7).

At a minimum, change communication should address what the changes mean for employees and the impact on their jobs. A managing director at a public relations agency said

this information was especially needed when they reorganized the reporting structure:

> Lots of people, say, "What does this mean for me? Why did we do this? And I thought I was on a path and I'd reached the middle rung and now where's the rung?"… But you can't diminish the fact that people are saying, "Wait a second, my job is changing." And so, I picked up the phone and called him (CEO) and I'm sure maybe others did too and I said, "You've got to go on the road and we need you here and we need you in other offices and you need to have some fireside chats and really spend a lot of time talking to people (P3)."

Other executives ($n = 4$) said it is critical to communicate the specific benefits of the change and offer resources and alternatives for employees to assist them in times of change ($n = 2$), particularly in times of a reduction in employee benefit packages or layoffs. A human resources consultant tied offering alternatives as consistent with the client's values:

> We wanted to show the people … affected that there is a solution. There is an alternative. And I really worked with the client to let them know. Because if they were to issue it, we made this decision, we're so sorry. End of story. And if I ended right there, I'm not going to work on this, because we do not have an alternative; this is not reflective of our values… We need to give them a next step, a resolution and we ended up doing that… Each employee had an opportunity to…restore what was going to be lost, because of the cost cutting decision (P13).

Symmetrical & Transparent Communication

The third research question asked are transparent and symmetrical communication priorities in change management communication plans?

Several executives ($n = 8$) discussed the need for honesty and transparency in the context of change management communication. More specifically, a communications director said that was especially crucial in a situation that involved relocating employees to another state:

> I think from an ethical standpoint, a lot of the conversation there was about being transparent, being open and honest with people even if you don't have the answers, at least being able to share here's what we know now, here's what we're going to communicate when we know it, and giving people the time to kind of digest these things before it starts showing up in the news (P8).

A human resources manager also discussed the importance of transparency in the context of layoffs:

> What I've come to see as we go through is how you treat people and how you communicate with them and how open you are with employees as the changes are happening is really what matters the most…When we have had to make changes that have resulted in people either being reorganized or even laid off, we always start with an approach, have a communications plan in which the employee is first to be notified in the

communication plan and so really make sure that we take care of the person, each person affected, help them understand what's happening and what the next steps are, offer them support, resources where we can (P18).

A communications specialist spoke from personal experience about how important transparency was to her:

When we had our layoffs in 2010, you know the person that laid me off was laid off. And so, it was a difficult time for all of us. It was also …the shock, but also they communicated so well that most of us understood the reasons behind it (P27).

Commitment to transparency can result in employee trust. As a consultant said:

If you've done the hard work and consistent work of being candid, being transparent, as best you can, consistently communicating with your folks, so that they see - you have some historical pattern of – not held things from your folks, then you ….would have some… critical mass of folks who for the most part want to believe in the company, want to believe you (P29).

At the same time, a human resources manager questioned what exactly to disclose, "I would say it really challenges your authenticity and your integrity, because how much is too much and how much is not enough" (P26).

While transparency in communication was considered the ideal, a consultant described an example when that did not happen when working for a previous employer:

The CEO was eventually fired while I was there, and of course, you communicate that as he retired. And so…you kind of lose a little credibility there when people know that it wasn't – communicating in a way so that someone can save face (P29).

The internal communication professionals also discussed the importance of symmetrical communication. A manager of employee programs for an automotive company said opportunities for employee feedback are typically part of their communication plan.

It's really important to be as forthcoming as possible with here's what happening and why and here's how this impacts you directly and then giving people an opportunity to ask questions, to discuss, to share feedback. So really trying to set the stage for some good dialogue to help employees buy into changes and then be more willing to support them (P18).

Some organizations ($n = 5$) already had formal feedback mechanisms in place through employee ambassador programs or culture committees, which could be consulted in times of change.

Another method of symmetrical communication was skip-level meetings ($n = 4$), which involve more senior executives meeting with employees who did not report directly to them, but

were lower in the hierarchy. As a chief marketing officer said:

> In many of the divisions, we do skip level meetings, coffee with the boss where people have a skip level. We do skip level regularly, where that's a forum where people can ask questions. And…just because there is so much uncertainty and nervousness. I just don't think you can underscore enough the need for us to be as transparent as we can be with employees…Obviously, there's situations where legally, you shouldn't share the information or we can't. But as much information as we can provide into why we're doing a decision, I think helps people feel secure in their position and place (P10).

Other more informal methods the communicators reported using to receive routine employee feedback included monthly brown bag luncheons, "Mix and Mingle" breakfasts, and coffee and desserts. While it is beneficial to have both formal and informal channels in place for symmetrical communication, more intentional efforts may be needed during times of organizational change. In one company, that came in the form of a global town hall meeting. As the corporate communications senior advisor described, "It was webcast around the world and everybody got to watch it and get their questions asked at the end" (P23).

In contrast to this ideal scenario, a public affairs specialist working in a government agency said that didn't happen in his organization:

> The person who was doing it deferred; he wouldn't answer questions. He would defer it to his senior leader, who wasn't even here. That person was in Washington and wasn't answering the questions because they didn't know; they weren't on the ground here. So I think you've got to have that central person who can answer questions and it's not (just) a person; you need to have people (P30).

Discussion & Implications

This study provides evidence that internal communication professionals have some understanding of recommended practices in change management such as communicating how the change is aligned with their core values (Chreim, 2002; Fairhurst, 1993) and recruiting internal champions to support the change (Lewis et al., 2006). At the same time, some executives reported that their organizations did not have a change management plan or were not united due to the existence of multiple plans, suggesting there is still room for improvement.

One area of concern was the more tactical role public relations was fulfilling as they typically did not lead organizational change initiatives and at times were only brought in at the communication phase rather than when strategic plans were being developed. This finding conflicts with earlier studies (Luo & Jiang, 2014; Neill, 2015), which suggests that public relations practitioners "need to build internal relationships so that colleagues in other departments know when to seek their counsel" (Neill, 2014, p. 604). In contrast, when internal communication reported to human resources, they tended to have a more strategic role as change management initiatives tended to be led by a specialized human resources team.

Some of the other barriers included lack of a leader or champion to oversee the change

initiative, change fatigue, lack of core values and strategic priorities, technology issues and an identity conflict. The lack of core values and strategic priorities particularly pose a challenge for communicators in their sensemaking roles (Berger & Meng, 2014; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Kraft, Sparr & Peus, 2018) as values are foundational for framing and maintaining organization identity during times of change. Even in organizations with strong communication leadership, they faced challenges in the areas of dis-identification and re-identification (Chreim, 2002), particularly in the case of mergers when even the senior leaders and communication employees were reluctant to abandon their previous missions, visions, and strategic priorities in support of the new parent company. These leaders were reluctant to assume sensemaking roles as they were still engaged in the sensenegotiating (Berger & Meng, 2014) process themselves in determining what changes to accept or reject.

When discussing the management of multiple organizational identities, scholars previously have identified four possibilities: deletion, when former identities are removed; integration, when identities are merged; compartmentalization, when multiple identities are maintained, but separate; and aggregation, when previous identities are maintained, but linked in some way (De Bernardis & Giustiniano, 2015; Pratt & Corley, 2007). What appeared to be occurring in some of these companies and organizations was compartmentalization rather than integration or even aggregation as even communication leaders continued to hold on to previous organizational identities after mergers. These findings demonstrate the importance of building support for the change among mid-level managers and direct supervisors first who can then fulfill sensemaking roles for their employees during times in change.

Despite these challenges, the communication executives identified effective communication strategies such as recruiting employee ambassadors or identifying influencers, road trips by senior leaders, and use of videos and employee testimonials. They also provided specific guidance on key messages to communicate during times of change such as reinforcing core values, explaining what the changes mean for employees, the benefits of the change, end goals, as well as alternatives and resources for employees. Adopting these strategies and key messages can reduce identity conflict (Miles & Perreault, 1976) and improve employee engagement and commitment (Welch, 2011).

Kraft et al. (2018) described leaders' sensegiving roles at different phases in the change process. They emphasized how during the beginning or exploratory phase, leaders should attempt to address rumors and demonstrate their availability (Kraft et al., 2018). Then during later stages, leaders need to create opportunities for symmetrical communication, develop an atmosphere of trust, give room for employee emotional responses, balance positive and negative aspects of the change and serve as a role model (Kraft et al., 2018). Consistent with these recommendations, the internal communicators in this study discussed the importance of availability and a history of transparency, which can result in employee trust. Other potential outcomes can include employee engagement and commitment (Men & Stacks, 2014). The internal communicators also discussed the availability of formal channels for employee feedback such as committees, town halls, skip-level meetings, and informal channels such as breakfasts, coffees and lunch meetings with employees. These programs should be readily adopted by organizations to receive routine feedback from employees. However, it was discouraging to hear the story of one communication executive working in a government agency who described a supervisor who refused to respond to employee questions.

Consistent with previous research, internal communicators identified direct supervisors as a bridge and essential collaborator in change management communication (Kalla, 2005; Lewis, 1999). However, they said that some supervisors needed additional communication training (Luo & Jiang, 2014; Proctor & Doukakis, 2003), which is being provided by human resources or public relations. Some communication executives also provided direct supervisors with resources such as talking points and dialogue guides, which may help to reduce identity conflict (Miles & Perreault, 1976), so that messages from direct supervisors are consistent with the rest of management.

Based on the findings, the following best practices are recommended:

1. Internal communication should work with senior leadership to develop information guides and talking points for mid-level and direct supervisors that explain the reasons for the change, how the change is consistent with the organization's values and how employees will be impacted.
2. Mid-level managers and direct supervisors should be available and offer opportunities for employees to share their concerns and any problems they are encountering during implementation of the changes.
3. Internal communicators should help develop opportunities and encourage leadership to engage in symmetrical communication during times of change such as town halls, site visits, and skip-level meetings.
4. Internal communicators should share employee stories that demonstrate support for the change and how the change is consistent with the organization's identity and values.
5. Public relations should be included in the decision-making team when change management plans are being developed as well as assist with communication strategies and tactics.
6. Public relations, human resources and marketing need to collaborate when developing and implementing change management communication initiatives.

Limitations and Direction for Future Research

While this study provided new insights into change management communication, the sample was limited to 32 employees working in 26 companies or organizations, so the results cannot be generalized. However, the sample did vary on key dimensions such as organizational size, sector and geography, which is consistent with the goals of qualitative research in portraying the range of depth of the phenomena to develop theory (Bonoma, 1985; Drumwright & Murphy, 2004). Additional research should be conducted using surveys to allow for generalization and ethnography to provide organizational context. Specific issues that merit additional study include sensemaking (Berger & Meng, 2014; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) and the process of dis-identification and re-identification (Chreim, 2002) in the context of mergers and acquisitions, which appeared to be areas of weakness even in organizations with robust communication departments. In addition, while this study did include some multinational companies, it would be valuable to study change management in multiple countries and identify issues associated with managing change on a global scale.

Conclusion

This study has provided new insights into how public relations practitioners collaborate with other internal departments in times of organizational change as well as some of the limitations they face. It also identified some of the most effective communication strategies and ways to provide opportunities for employee feedback. An area of concern for public relations practice is the more tactical rather than strategic role that internal communication executives described. If public relations practitioners are not in the board room when change management strategies are being discussed, they will not be able to provide counsel regarding the potential impact of business decisions among internal and external stakeholders and fulfill their primary role of reputation management.

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Appendix A

Sample Profile

Participant #	Company/Sector	Gender	Position	Geography
1	Healthcare	Female	Senior Director of Strategic Communication	Maryland
2	PR Agency	Female	Managing Director	Texas
3	PR Agency	Female	Managing Director	Illinois
4	Technology	Female	Corporate Communications	Texas
5	Healthcare	Male	Director of Communications Design	Maryland
6	Healthcare	Female	Internal Communications Manager	Maryland
7	Higher Education	Female	Senior Manager	Arizona
8	Insurance	Male	Communications Director	New York
9	Healthcare	Female	Internal Communications Coordinator	Maryland
10	Healthcare/Nonprofit	Female	Chief Marketing Officer	Tennessee
11	Healthcare/Nonprofit	Female	VP of Executive Communications	Tennessee
12	Healthcare/Nonprofit	Female	Internal Communications Manager	Tennessee
13	Human Resources Consultancy	Male	Communications Specialist	Texas
14	Human Resources Consultancy	Female	CEO	Texas
15	Energy	Female	Internal Communications Adviser	Texas
16	Healthcare/Nonprofit	Female	Director of Internal Communications & Brand	Texas
17	Technology	Male	VP Communications	California

Participant #	Company/Sector	Gender	Position	Geography
18	Automotive	Female	Manager of Employee Programs (HR)	Georgia
19	Insurance/Financial Services	Male	VP of Brand & Strategy	Texas
20	Tourism/Hospitality	Female	Regional Director, Public Relations	Mississippi
21	Communications Consultant	Male	Strategy Execution Consultant	Illinois
22	Telecommunications	Female	Director of Employee Communications	Texas
23	Technology	Female	Corporate Communications Senior Adviser	Texas
24	Government	Male	Marketing & Communications Director	Missouri
25	Technology	Female	Senior Director	California
26	Technology	Female	Human Resources Manager	Texas
27	Healthcare	Female	Communications Specialist/PIO (now unemployed)	California
28	Government/Military	Male	Director of Public Affairs	Washington, D.C.
29	HR Consultant/Banking	Female	Account Executive/Trainer	Tennessee
30	Government/Military	Male	Public Affairs Specialist	Texas
31	Government	Female	Writer/Editor	Massachusetts
32	Transportation	Female	Vice President – Communication and Outreach	Texas

Appendix B Code Book

Code	# of Mentions	% of Codes	# of Participants Discussing Code	% of Cases
Ambassadors	12	1.0%	6	18.8%
Change Management	95	8.2%	32	100%
Collaboration	98	8.5%	32	100%
Supervisor Communication	48	4.1%	21	65.6%
Symmetrical Communication	43	3.7%	25	78.1%
Values Communication	49	4.2%	23	71.9%

Appendix C

Sector & Organizational Change Discussed

Sector	Type of Change
1) Healthcare (3 informants)	Mergers
2) PR Agency	Major reorganization
3) Insurance	Layoffs, change in leadership & strategy
4) Energy	New CEO & other key leaders, building renovations, workplace changes
5) Healthcare	Mergers, cuts in employee benefits
6) Automotive	Reorganization, layoffs
7) Telecommunication	Mergers
8) Technology	Reorganization
9) Technology	Ownership change & layoffs
10) Government	Multiple leadership changes (government appointees), new direction/vision, realignment/reorganization
11) Healthcare	Layoffs
12) Government	Reorganization
13) Banking	CEO fired
14) Government	Reorganization
15) Transportation	Merger