

“COMMUNICATIONS GUIDELINES DURING TIMES OF TRANSITION”



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Building trust and gaining acceptance of changes during transition requires thoughtful planning and sensitivity to those who are impacted. One critical component that frequently falls short is effective communication to employees.

William Bridges, an international consultant who specializes in transitional issues for individuals and organizations, has written extensively about the process, with an emphasis on effective communications during times of change and transition. One of his works, *Leading Organizational Transition*, offers guidelines for effective communications that should be adapted to maximize leadership trust and minimize confusion, conjecture and rumors that perpetuate during uncertain times.

Bridges makes the following recommendations for leaders who want their change initiatives to be successful for the long-term:

- 1) Recognize that under “normal” circumstances, people are required to process and digest vast amounts of information each day: email, voicemail, traditional mail, interdepartmental mail, in addition to direct personal communications. Given this information glut, it is said that we need to hear a message 3 to 4 times before we begin to pay attention. It is recommended that in times of transition leaders present an important message or concept at least 6 times in order for people to start taking it seriously and integrating it into their mindset.
- 2) Vary the media that are used for the layered communications. All employees have preferred modes of receiving and processing information. Some like to see things in writing so that they can review it more than once or because they relate better to visuals for learning. Others prefer audio or in-person information where the tone, reflections, or body language of the person delivering the message can also be experienced. A good communications program combines plenty of both.
- 3) Allow a genuine opportunity for two- way communication. Both executives and management should be very accessible during times of transition, so that they can listen to the questions, concerns and issues of employees. Hotlines and special message centers are additional ways to give people ample opportunity to express themselves.
- 4) Be sure communications are timely and appropriate. Often too much detail is given too early in the process. When management assumes that employees “got it” the first time, they refrain from repeating important information needed to reinforce and follow-up. Rather than to give all the information up front, it is better to release more details as they are appropriate in the time line.
- 5) Ensure consistency of message throughout the business. When information has to go down through several layers in an organization, there are many opportunities for it to get filtered or distorted. Two ways to ensure consistency of communication are to have a written set of notes that everyone works from and /or have a key leader present in all announcement meetings.
- 6) Remember that people trust behavior over words. People will trust what their leader’s actions are telling them *more* than what their words are saying. More than anything else, lack of genuineness and consistency of behavior by the leadership will sabotage the change effort and the employees’ willingness to embrace the new way.
- 7) Be open and truthful about both good and bad news. If the situation changes, say so. Communicate frequently and truthfully. Nothing will destroy trust faster than not being told the truth.