CES Guide to

Communicating Change in Organisations

CES

Contents

In the 'CES Guide to...' series, we lift the lid on some of the approaches we use for the work we do with agencies, services, and government departments. In this guide, we look at communicating change in organisations.

How you communicate can make or break a new initiative – but there are things you can do to engage hearts and minds in your organisation.

It is often said that:

> *"The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place".*

When things go wrong in organisations, all fingers point to a failure to communicate. Given that we have so many sophisticated communications channels and tools at our fingertips, why do we often overlook this essential part of implementing change?

Communications is a recurring theme in CES's work with service providers and government bodies– from helping funders and services prepare to introduce a new initiative, through to evaluating and capturing learning about what has gone well. Research literature from the disciplines of implementation science, change management and programme management which inform our work, **all acknowledge the importance of communications in enabling large-scale change.**

We need to resist the temptation to assume that it will happen organically and put processes in place so that it happens in a planned way.

Communicating with purpose

Mass dissemination activities, such as email broadcasts and internal newsletters are widely used to quickly share information across teams, units and systems. They simply will not be enough if behaviour change or new work practices are required. The sheer volume of information which circulates through email can mean that an important message is overlooked or misinterpreted. Purposeful approaches such as **knowledge translation** and knowledge transfer can help to support new ways of working and embed skills and expertise within organisations.
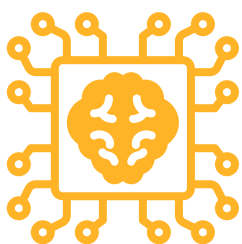
What are we learning about effective communications?

We now have a growing number of real-world examples from health and social services which generate useful learning from experience. Implementation or process evaluations focus on how an initiative was implemented and tell us a lot about effective – and ineffective - communications approaches.

For example, **a process evaluation of CES's work to improve the use of evidence amongst professional social workers** in Ireland found that engaging staff during design and rollout helped to encourage its adoption.

Similarly, **a key lesson learned from the implementation of a recent child health programme** by the Irish Health Service Executive (HSE) was the importance of building credibility when introducing a new initiative. This evaluation report recommended that up to 25% of programme time should be spent on communications, given its importance in successful implementation.

Here are four things we have learned from our work about communicating change:

1. **Start by making the case:** You need to be able to articulate the rationale behind the change to internal stakeholders. Why is the change being introduced and who will benefit? The initiative must be credible to those involved in implementing it. Help people to see the benefits, which may include better outcomes for service users, to more efficient use of time and resources. How will it be better than before? How does it connect with your mission and values? How compatible is it with the organisational infrastructure that's in place already?

2. **Be clear on what it means for those implementing the change:** All good communications start with an audience. In this instance, your audience is internal but has very different needs and will have questions about the implications for their role and day to day work. Does the new initiative involve introducing new roles, responsibilities or reporting procedures? Will new tasks or skills be required – and what resources are there to support them? Filter the essential information about the change specific to roles and teams. Anticipate and plan for any critical or sensitive employment issues before you engage and practice transparent and open communications.

3. **Use many channels but be consistent with your message:** Map out how and when information is shared in your organisation, for example team meetings, newsletters and email broadcasts, and use these channels to reach out and amplify your message. **This tool from the HSE Change Guide** can be used to plan communications with both internal and external stakeholders. Informal and peer networks will come into play, but people will expect to receive information from the proper channels. Equip leaders at all levels with the knowledge and tools to engage with teams and staff about change, rather than enforcing a message. The use of virtual meeting platforms was adopted widely and quickly during the pandemic and can facilitate convening large teams across many locations in an efficient way.

4. **Communication is a two-way process:** Communication is happening within the context of relationships at many different levels – teams, line management and peers. Listening and responding to feedback is as important as sharing information. Email and newsletters are useful ways of sharing information in a democratic, timely way, but must be accompanied by opportunities for people to engage, ask questions and provide feedback. Practice open communications across all activities – from the tone of voice in an email, to building interaction into a meeting or information session. Offer clear mechanisms for questions and follow up. Think of it as an ongoing process, rather than a once off activity, which offers opportunities for learning, empowerment and improvement. Traditional communications functions tend to focus on how a change will be perceived externally, but there is a strong case to be made for getting your own house in order first. Resistance and change fatigue may be the first hurdles you encounter when introducing something new. When change is communicated badly, or not at all, it can lead to misunderstandings, anxiety and frustration, all of which can distract from – and potentially derail an initiative. Investing time in internal communications can generate buy in and yield longer term benefits to your organisation– from increased trust to a culture of innovation and good working relationships.
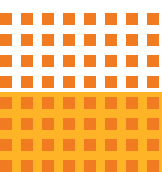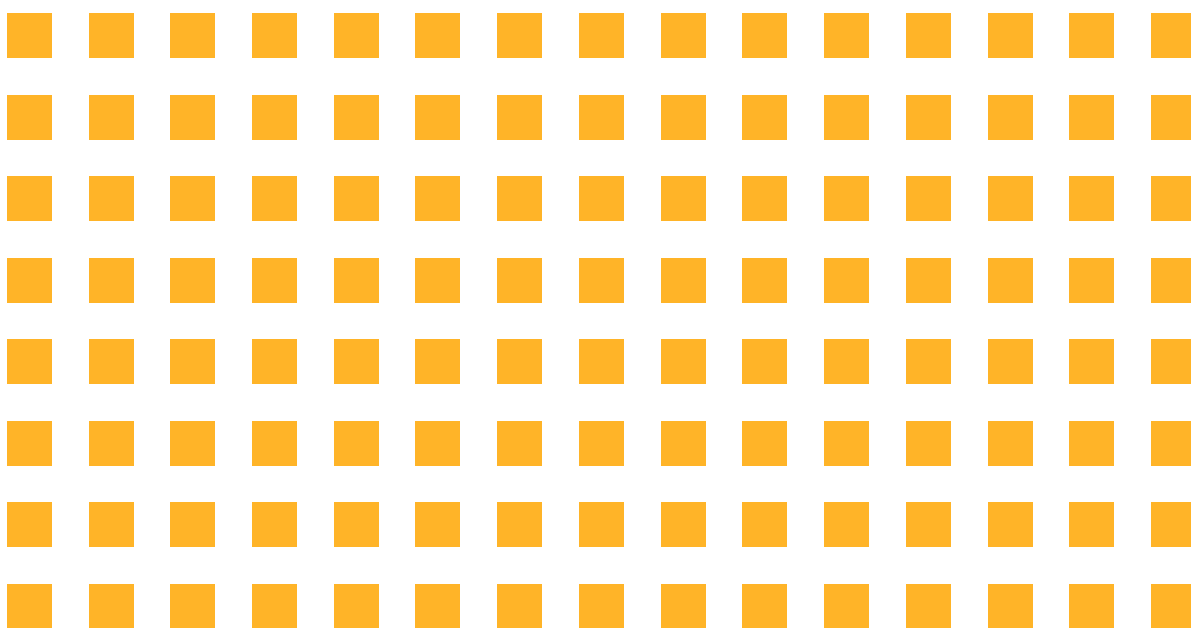
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