When it comes to culture change, the communicator's dilemma is a thorny one. Organizational communication is first and foremost a reflection of culture. But without communication, there's no hope of culture change. To get the process in motion, Roger D'Aprix and Cheryl Fields Tyler suggest communicators start by teaching their organizations to communicate more effectively. Here, they share four crucial areas for practitioners to focus on.

Four essential ingredients for transforming culture

What communicators can do to support culture change

By Roger D'Aprix and Cheryl Fields Tyler

Let's say that as the head of the communication department, you've been asked to help change company culture in the face of do-or-die market realities. We'll make you vice president of communications of the mythical Ajax Automotive Company, a leading builder of quality automobile components in North America. Ajax has its roots in the old automotive industry culture. Which means that your company has been surpassed by Asian parts-makers offering a competitive product at a superior price.

Your company has been saddled with exorbitant health care and pension costs that have made Ajax non-competitive against other global car manufacturers whose nations pay the bill for such things or ignore them all together. Yet because of past agreements with your bargaining unit, you have no room to maneuver. The union is sympathetic, but sees no practical way to give up its entitlements.

The writing is on the wall. The culture has to change and change fast if the company is to survive. Your job is to get that message across emphatically and quickly so you design the "Winning Together" campaign and immediately order the glossy new vision and values posters.

Winning Together wallet cards are distributed with the new values. The company website is redesigned around the Winning Together theme, driving home key messages like the need to cut costs, increase teamwork, accept sacrifice. Articles proliferate on the company intranet and in the plant newsletters.

But a series of employee pulse survey results on the intranet show little change and a lot of skepticism. Employees report that this is just another "flavor of the month" meant to prepare them for the inevitable deductions planned in the upcoming negotiations. They point to exorbitant executive bonuses and several mention how offended they are by the request for "mutual sacrifice" in the context of such largess. Many employees working in a plant slated for closure comment emotionally that true teamwork already exists at their Ajax factory where their under-resourced team has kept the line running with

six-sigma quality for the last year with no unscheduled downtime. One even has the temerity to send you an electronic copy of a recent news magazine article on the dilemmas facing US manufacturers as they compete with the lower-cost providers in China with a note saying "Treat us like adults. Do you think we don't read or watch the news?"

What went wrong?

The short answer is that culture-change communication strategies that are based on a series of programs and media-styled entreaties is bound to fail. That style of communication, typically geared to get us to vote for a candidate or buy a breakfast cereal, cannot change organizational culture. Rather, too often, these kinds of campaigns inadvertently reinforce the existing beliefs, values and behaviors in a culture.

To change culture, our communication strategy has to be first and foremost about the actual day-to-day process of *communicating*. In short, a communication strategy designed to create culture change has to make communication happen – more frequently and more effectively. Listening, building understanding, creating new insights, exploring implications, reaching agreements, getting feedback, raising contentious issues, resolving disagreements, recognizing contribution. Culture change is built on this kind of communication, not websites and wallet cards.

So how do you do that? While we cannot give you a fail-safe, one-size-fits-all recipe, we can tell you four of the essential ingredients – and give you some examples of how others have used these ingredients to change their cultures.

1. Explain why change is necessary

The driving force of culture change is the marketplace. Its urgencies represent the only compelling rationale for organizational change. Leaders may want to discuss what actions they've decided on, but employees want to know why the change is necessary in the first place.

Too many culture change initiatives focus exclusively on the internal aspects of the company – its mission statement, a new set of values, a company purpose statement. While it's true that culture change requires us to be explicit about who we want to be, for the vast majority of the workforce, clarity about our aspiration is necessary but rarely sufficient for broad-scale culture change. We have to be specific – and persistent – in explaining why the culture of our past is no longer viable or relevant given the external market context.

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Too often, senior executives resist communicating openly to employees about marketplace realities. Sometimes this resistance is founded on reasonable concerns about inadvertently broadcasting incendiary messages to investors and analysts. But more often than not, this resistance is based on an underlying belief that employees are not capable of fully understanding the external market realities or that an honest disclosure of the full case for change would cause undue panic, the loss of key talent, or loss in productivity. Typically, such organizations are already suffering from all these symptoms, not because the external case for change is known, but because it is not fully acknowledged and explained by leadership.

One way we can support senior leaders to tell the whole truth about the external case for change is to gather the data that shows that employees know more than senior executives realize, and that senior executive credibility is in doubt due to the lack of open communication.

For example, a communications organization we worked with instituted a monthly pulse survey that asked a representative sample of employees around the world about their understanding of the case for change. The survey also provided a means for employees to identify rumors or fears circulating in their work environment. The senior executives were astounded at the depth of understanding

↓ KEY POINTS:

- Culture-change communication strategies that are based on a series of programs and media-styled entreaties are bound to fail.
- Rather, communication strategies should focus on making day-to-day communication more frequent and more effective.
- Crucial areas to focus on include: clarifying why change is necessary; creating a compelling change plot line; gaining a real understanding of those involved; and engaging employees in the process.
- Engagement is invariably a challenge as both employees and leaders often start from a skeptical, cynical, distracted and distrustful place.

exhibited by employees at every level. Equally surprising was the draconian nature of the rumors circulating in the organization and the high levels of fear and cynicism in the employee ranks because of these rumors.

Needless to say, this data has contributed to a significant shift in the candor and courage of senior leader communication. As this new style of communication becomes the norm, the desired culture change is now decisively under way.

2. Create a clear and compelling plot line

The second essential ingredient to successful culture change is a clear, simple and compelling "plot line" for the change story. What is the business strategy and how will it make us a winner in the marketplace? How will we need to change to execute this strategy successfully? What will we need to change in the way we do business? What will these changes require of our leaders and employees? What will need to change in our culture – and specifically in our understanding and behavior – to accomplish this change?

It sounds simple, but too often the change plot line is not clearly stated. The root causes are many. Sometimes the changes are coming so fast and furious that these questions are being answered as we go. Occasionally the lack of a clearly articulated plot line is really due to unresolved disagreements in the executive suite. And it may be that the executive team has been dealing with the issues prompting the change so much longer than the rest of the organization, they've forgotten all the questions, issues and concerns that others will have at an earlier stage in the change process.

Regardless of the root cause, communication

professionals can be – and often must be – the catalyst that clearly articulates the change plot line. By asking the right questions and garnering the right data, communication leaders can play a crucial role in helping their organizations clarify their strategic thinking and their communication messages.

One example from our recent experience was at a *Fortune* 500 company that was in the midst of unprecedented change. Several months into the transformation, it was obvious that there was a lack of clarity, detailed understanding and alignment about the transformation. By asking the right questions and being persistent and creative, the communication team created a "transformation journey map" that provided a clear and compelling picture of the future through numerous business scenarios.

This tool gave leaders a non-threatening way to learn about the transformation and discuss the implications for their personal leadership. Over 90 percent of the 2,000 leaders attending these sessions reported an increase in their understanding of the changes underway and left the session with a renewed personal commitment to making the transformation of the business and culture successful.

3. Understand those involved in the process

Creating a successful communication strategy to change culture starts with understanding who needs to be communicating with one another and the current mindset, experience and expectations of these individuals and audiences.

Begin with employees and an understanding of their experience given the turbulent change environment. (Figure One illustrates the many factors that shape employee experience). How does the employee currently understand the situation? What is the credibility of leadership in addressing business challenges? What are his or her fears and insecurities as the waves of change roll through the organization?

While understanding employee experience is crucial, it's also essential to understand the leadership experience in such change environments. We often forget that many leaders trying to change cultures are concurrently going through some of the toughest challenges of their careers. Investors are not happy. The boardroom is anxious. The executive team may be unaligned, insecure or second-guessing. Middle management may be questioning their job security and feeling the race that will pick the winners and losers picking up steam. Front-line managers, caught between the anxiety of middle management and

Figure One: Factors that shape employee experience
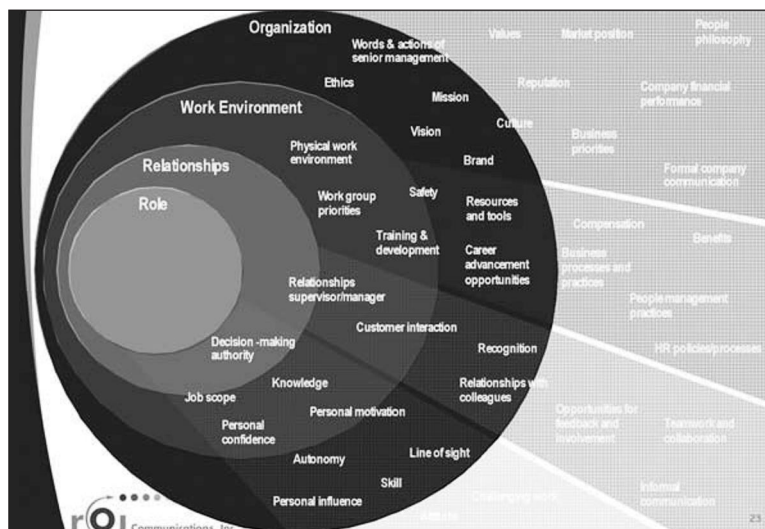
the fear and frustration of employees, ride the rumor mill roller coaster and wonder why no one is telling them what the future holds.

4. Aim to engage

The fourth ingredient for successful culture change is engagement. But by that we do not mean high scores on an annual survey tool. Nor do we mean a permanent state of employee satisfaction and motivation.

The simple truth is that most companies that have cause for major culture transformation are on the negative end of the engagement continuum. Neither employees nor leaders demonstrate a proclivity for engagement. Most are starting from a skeptical, cynical, distracted, distrustful place.

Communication strategy that supports engagement in this context must be understood as a sophisticated process that creates the situations and understandings that lead people to literally choose to engage with one another, learn from one another, and through that engagement, to change their behavior. It is based on a larger understanding of the key drivers of engagement for the employee and leader population. And it is designed to provide the time and venues needed for real two-way communication and learning.

One way to accomplish such engagement is through intensive problem solving or innovation sessions that bring together employees and leaders in a truly collaborative work environment.

One of our experiences was with a *Fortune* 500 manufacturer. The culture change initiative was focused on fostering an environment of personal contribution and accountability while process reengineering focused on taking huge costs out of the supply chain. The effort was stalled and seriously at risk. A quick assessment indicated that the organization's leadership team was not in alignment and that middle managers and employees really did not understand the business case for change and were actively resisting all change efforts.

Over the course of two three-day sessions, the leadership and middle management of this organization worked together to rapidly assess their current supply-chain strategy and to develop an enhanced strategy that was much more inspirational, visionary and tied to the larger business vision and not just their own financial objectives. Current initiatives were assessed in light of this new strategy and teams worked late into the evening to revise the plans and report back the next day.

The team left with a clear strategy, revised work plans and a set of key messages each

⬇ UNDERSTAND THE EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

To support culture change, your communication process must be grounded in a deep understanding of the day-to-day experience of your employees. For employees, the choice to engage comes out of their experience in the workplace. Is their experience consistent and positive? Or does it feel arbitrary and anxious? Is it rich with explanation and information? Or is it tinged with secrecy and mistrust? Does it provide a context for hope and personal contribution? Or does it cause cynicism and resignation? Are words and actions of senior leadership consistent with the stated intent? Or does senior leadership appear out of touch and ill-informed? Is the strategy to deal with the marketplace realities workable and realistic? Or does the strategy seem naive or unrealistic?

Leaders are also affected by their experiences as employees. But their choice to engage or not is often influenced by other factors too. Leaders are often much more concerned with personal risk, reward and accountability. Are leaders rewarded for engaging with employees? Or are they punished if they miss-step? Are leaders provided with incentives and recognition? Or are they rewarded for not engaging directly with employees?

By gathering irrefutable data through a variety of techniques from surveys to focus groups to interviews, communication staff can recommend a responsive communication strategy and process that speaks to employee experience and concerns and leverages their hopes and motivations.

manager agreed to take back to his or her team. Before leaving, each team member signed their name on the strategy and plan document, adding a personal accountability they committed to keep. Within weeks, the scorecard for the supply-chain project went from red to yellow to green. Pulse surveys over the following months indicated that managers and employees were working together to change behaviors and that the new cultural norms around personal accountability were beginning to take hold.

The communicator's dilemma

Organizational communication is first and foremost a reflection of culture. On the other hand, we know that without communication there is no hope of culture change.

The way out of this dilemma is leadership. We can use the tools of our trade to stimulate effective communication – but it takes real business acumen, diagnostic thinking and personal courage to do so, particularly if the CEO would really be happy with posters and wallet cards. But, by helping our organizations learn to communicate more effectively, we do so much more than our jobs. We build a strategic business capability in our company that strengthens our organizations in innumerable ways. We could have no higher calling. scm

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