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### Leading organizational change; The role of top management and supervisors in communicating organizational change

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*Leading organizational change;  
The role of top management and supervisors in communicating  
organizational change*

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*Keywords: communication, communicating change, information, line communication, leadership, organizational change*

*Leading organizational change;*

*The role of top management and supervisors in communicating organizational change*

***Abstract***

*In this paper two studies on the role of top management and direct supervisors on communicating organizational change are presented. The importance of leadership at all organizational levels is demonstrated and published in numerous studies, but empirically hardly tested. In this paper we will present two studies, in which we made a distinction between information and communication. Both concepts were measured, along with trust in top management, role of direct supervisors, support for change and contribution to change.*

*Results showed that trust in top management significantly influenced employees' support for the change, and that the role of direct supervisors had a significant influence on the contribution to the change of the employees.*

*From the first study we concluded that particularly interactions between management and employees during organizational change were troublesome in the participating organizations. To test these interactions more thoroughly we held a total of 37 interviews on line communication in two organizations. The overall conclusion is that the success of organizational change largely depends on the informative and communicative skills of managers at all levels.*

***Introduction***

When organizations have to change, internal communication is of utmost importance.

During organizational change an organization has to communicate to its employees what exactly will change, how these changes will take place and how the changed organization will face the future. The model of the dynamics of planned organizational change shows that the success of any change in organizations largely depends on the capabilities of the organization in making its workforce capable of implementing the change (Robertson, Roberts and Porras 1993). If organizational change involves changing the tasks of individual employees,

communication and information about the change to these employees are vital. This communication is the responsibility of managers at all hierarchical levels of the organization.

Following Bolden and Gosling (2006), it seems that leaders are already aware of the rapid changing nature of organizations as one of the main issues around leadership today. Despite numerous efforts of translating this awareness into effective policy, the majority of these efforts do not result in an effective change (e.g. Burnes 2003).

In this paper we will present two studies, conducted in four different organizations. We will present quantitative and qualitative data on the role of top management and direct supervisors in creating readiness for change and how to communicate effectively about the change. In the next section the theoretical background of communicating organizational change, and the role of leadership within communicating change are described.

#### *Information versus communication*

According to Francis (1989), organizational communication commonly has two goals. The first goal is to inform employees about issues such as their tasks and organizational policy. The second goal is communication as a means to create a community within the organization. Therefore, a distinction can be made between organizational communication with a purpose to provide information and organizational communication as a means to create a community spirit (Francis 1989; Postmes, Tanis and de Wit 2001; De Ridder 2005).

In line with these goals, a distinction can be made between the information given about the change, and the sense of a community within the organization before, during and after the change. The information should address the reasons to change, and the worries employees initially will have (Elving 2005). This information is usually provided by management as the sender, with employees as receivers of the information. Between these

ends, middle managers and direct supervisors are partly responsible for communicating this information to the employees.

According to the media richness theory (Daft and Lengel 1986) there is a fit between a communication task and a medium used to communicate that task. The higher the level of equivocality and uncertainty of the communication task, the richer a medium should be matched to that task. 'This richness is based on a couple criteria, like the capacity of the medium for the number of cues via tone of voice or body language, the degree to which the message can be expressed in natural language, and the number of cues and channels utilized, personalization, and language variety' (, 560). Based on these criteria face-to-face communication is perceived as the richest medium. The poorest media are written and formalized such as databases or formal reports (Daft and Lengel 986). A parallel can be drawn for information and communication.

Although the media richness theory has received some critique (e.g. Sheer and Chen 2004) and is not suited for some of the new media we have today (Dennis and Kinney 1998; El-Shinnawy and Markus 1997), it is still relevant during organizational change. This relevance is twofold: (1) characteristics of a change period and (2) the possibility to utilize the capacities of the medium to channel trust. The first element can be traced to the stress for the use of rich media to reduce equivocality, and what period is more equivocal to the members of an organization than organizational change? Several writings have addressed the effects of uncertainty and equivocality during organizational change (e.g. Doyle et al. 2000; Bordia et al. 2004; Herzig and Jimmieson 2006; Tourish et al. 2004). Frequently, the seemingly inevitable occurrence of uncertainty during organizational change is spotlighted. In several studies on organizational change, the construct uncertainty is used to address both uncertainty and equivocality. Daft and Lengel (1986) however, distinguish between these two concepts. In accordance with the media richness theory, this implies that it is wise to use rich

media, like face-to-face communication, to communicate about the change to employees in combination with information, provided through poor media (Daft and Lengel 1986).

Second, the media richness theory can channel trust. Research has shown the relevance of trust in management and middle management during organizational change (Dirks and Ferrin 2001). Applying the media richness theory, rich media seem more suited to channel and evoke trust. Since all available cues can be used with rich media, trust is more properly channeled by face-to-face communication than by for instance, a memo or an article in a bulletin.

Similarly, Heracleous (2002) stresses the framework of a discursive view regarding organizational change. When referring to organizational change, information alone is not sufficient for managing organizational change. Through social interaction, seen as communication, the construction of meaning takes place.

So communication has to be considered as distinctive from information. However, communication about organizational change is never enough and not efficient. Information about for instance goals, timeline, and implications of the change is also necessary. In the effort of saving money and time, information can be the best way of sending a message across the organization and some messages are simply best communicated by giving information. It has to be acknowledged though, that just simply providing information without communication has its pitfalls.

#### *Communication needs during organizational change*

Communication is vital to the effective implementation of organizational change (Schweiger and Denisi 1991; DiFonzo and Bordia 1998; Lewis and Seibold 1998). Poorly managed change communication results in rumors and resistance to change and enlarging the negative aspects of the change (DiFonzo et al. 1994; Smelzer and Zener 1992).

Although the general conclusion about the importance of communication in

organizational change is demonstrated and agreed on, specific communicative actions, approaches, and effects are still left unexplained (Lewis 1999). In order to have an effective change, it is necessary to first define effective change. When do organizations evaluate a change effort as effective? Although managers do examine their performance, little or no empirical research is available on effective change. Nevertheless, there is an immense amount of practitioner-oriented literature on how to effectively manage change (e.g. Champy and Nohria 1996; Kotter 1996). Common prescriptions include encouraging participation from as many employees as possible, addressing their concerns in the change program, or ensuring that leaders act as role models for the changes (Heracleous 2002).

### *Sensemaking*

Based on the work of Weick (1995), Bolden and Gosling (2006) perceive aspects of effective leadership as sense making. Although different terms are used, such as framing, or the management of meaning, these terms all address the same process (Fairhurst 2005). Bolden and Gosling (2006) define this sense making role of a leader as: "The leader makes sense of complexity and uncertainty on the basis of strong moral beliefs and an emotional engagement of others" (p. 156). This definition implies two related themes regarding communicating organizational change. First, this definition involves complexity and uncertainty, which makes it particularly useful for the situation of organizational change. Secondly, since the leader bases his way of sense making on the beliefs and engagement of others, communication as opposed to information is essential. While information is merely sending information to, sometimes large group of receivers, actual communication has the possibility to tailor the information on a single person or small group of persons tasks and responsibilities. Without the workforce being able to send messages on their strong moral beliefs, the leader can not base his sense making on these moral beliefs. The last notion concerns emotional engagement of others. Emotional engagement implies a need for



workforce involvement in decision-making, since participative decision-making is positively related to engagement in the organization (Miller 2003). Moreover, involving the workforce in decision-making requires communication. Although leaders concur with this notion, research has shown that this approach to decision-making in organizational change is rare and success and process are poorly evaluated (Doyle et al. 2000). In the literature (Boonstra, 2004) the developmental approach to organizational change is superior to the top down planned approaches, but in practice, more than 90% of the changes in Dutch organizations use a top down planned approach (Werkman, 2006).

#### *Line communication and the role of leaders*

Line communication is a concept that stems from practice (Elving 2007). Line communication is the communication flow from the top to the hierarchical lower levels of the organization. These lower levels are in charge of passing on this information and communicating this to management levels below them and to the workforce.

Line communication has, to our knowledge, not yet been a topic of research in organizational communication. This blind spot is especially remarkable, since this process seems to be of central importance to the communication in large complex organizations. Although line communication is not mentioned as a concept, in related areas there are some general some interesting findings which can be related to line communication and worth discussing here.

Goldhaber (1993) mentioned the so-called 'whisper play' to exemplify the process of communication. A message whispered from one person to person in the end is distorted in a complete different message from the original. The message that gets communicated to the lower layers in the organization should either be a replication of the original message or an intended and thought through alteration of this message.

The function line managers have in the process of informing and communicating is unfortunately in many organizations implicit (Goldhaber 1993; Elving 2005), let aside the way this function should be fulfilled by these managers. This leads to further modification of the original message. The receiver interprets this modified message, which in itself can lead to alteration. Diminishing the first form of alteration can be achieved by (1) formulating rules and guidelines with regards to communicating the original message and (2) communication with the possibility to ask questions and give feedback. The reduction of the alteration by the receiver can be addressed by asking feedback from the workforce and resending the message, based on this feedback (Hall 1973). This should be performed as a cycle until the meaning several parties give to the message isn't perceived as conflicting anymore.

Postmes et al. (2001) stress the superiority of what they call 'vertical communication' in relation to 'horizontal communication' in pursuit of commitment to the organization and the unit. They define vertical communication as 'work-related communications up and down the hierarchy' (, 227). This underlines the important role leaders have as communicators of organizational change. Leaders are the gatekeepers and translators of messages up and down the hierarchy of an organization. Therefore, leaders have a key role in vertical communication.

#### *Specific role middle management/ direct supervisors*

Research has shown that the perceived level of feedback is positively related to high performance. Since the direct supervisor logically is the one to provide this feedback in comparison with higher management, this supports the idea that the direct supervisor influences the contribution that the workforce is willing to make (Michael et al. 2006). Next to the possibility of providing feedback by middle managers, these managers are closer related to the workforce and therefore know probably more about the needs of the workforce than strategic management is (Nguyen Huy 2002).

Pye (2005) describes leaders to have a dual role: ‘in part, helping to extract appropriate cues (i.e. shaping key sense making reference points) and in part, providing a crucial cue (i.e. being a key referent point) for others to extract’. (, 45). This duality lies in the shaping and being of key reference point in sense making. The question remains, who or what functions as the key reference point for the leader? On what grounds can the leader shape his sense making reference point? The answer should be by top management, because top management is the key reference point for the rest of the organization.

Aside from the whole sense-making and translating element a leader has in organizational change, there is the envisioning and energizing element a leader can add into communicating that change. Since not every change is immediately inspirational to the workforce, the leader should endorse this change (Nadler and Tushman 1990). Problematic is the fact that a large proportion of the change is forced on the leaders themselves and it needs no explaining that it is a tough mission to envision and inspire people on implementing a change that you don’t approve of (Kavanagh and Ashkanasy 2006).

In order to address the effects on communication during organizational change, and the role of top management, middle management and direct supervisors in this communication we will present two studies. The first study is a quantitative study among three organizations that are all undergoing a change. In this study we have focused on the effects of leadership in general on the readiness to change of the workforce. The second study was conducted in two organizations. We will present interview results on line communication processes during organizational change. The main research question was what exactly the effect was of the communicative efforts of leaders during organizational change on the employees within these changing organization.

## ***Study 1***

### ***Introduction***

In order to test the influence of internal communication during organizational change we developed a model (Elving 2005; Bennebroek Gravenhorst et al. 2005). First of all, as stated before, we had to define what exactly an effective organizational change would mean. In literature on organizational change, resistance to change (Coch and French 1948; Dent and Goldberg 1999; Piderit 2000) is a central topic. For our model (Elving 2005; Bennebroek Gravenhorst et al. 2005) we operationalized readiness to change, as the positive end of a continuum with resistance to change at the other end, in the passive *support for the change*, and the more active *contribution to the change*.

The model, designed for the study of communication and organizational change, incorporates several communication and information variables in order to explain readiness for change. For this first study two variables were included to test the influence of leadership on the readiness for change: trust in top management and the role of direct supervisors.

Trust can be seen as the basis for interpersonal relationships, cooperation, and stability in social institutions (Lewicki et al. 1998). De Ridder (2004) states that 'trust is an important generator of social capital in organizations, and for supportive attitudes' (, 21). Since readiness to change is a special supportive attitude of employees during organizational change, one could argue that organizational trust is an important antecedent for readiness to change. Conditions that lead to trust have been reported frequently in literature, some authors came up with more than ten factors influencing organizational trust (see Mayer et al. 1995). Among these factors are openness and reliability of the leader to be trustworthy as an informational source. Openness relates to communication climate, and reliability as an informational source has links with the information provided about the change.

Additionally, the role of direct supervisors is measured, especially their communicative actions in creating support for and willingness to change. As stated above, it is assumed that information alone is not sufficient for managing organizational change. Through social interaction, as communication, the construction of meaning takes place, and

can the change be adopted by the individual employees. Top management but also direct supervisors should function as a role model during the change, and be supportive for this change.

### *Hypotheses*

In sum, we tested the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1: The information provided to the organizational members will particularly be of influence on the support for the change by the organizational members.*

*Hypothesis 2: The communication processes during the change will influence on the contribution for the change.*

*Hypothesis 3: Trust in top management will influence support for the change.*

*Hypothesis 4: The role of direct supervisors will influence contribution for the change.*

*Hypothesis 5: Uncertainty will decrease support for the change and contribution for the change*

### **Method**

#### *Participating organizations*

The study was conducted in three different organizations. The first is one of the regional governing bodies in the Netherlands, called province (Organization 1). This organization desired a more effective organization and desired to behave more as a service organization. The organization labeled the change as a culture change. The second organization is one of the ministries in the Netherlands (Organization 2). This change program can also be labeled as a cultural change. The ministry suffered from a bad reputation, ineffective working processes and ineffective ways of handling requests from the general public and the organizations that dealt with this ministry. The third organization is a commercial insurance company (Organization 3). This organization was undergoing downsizing of approximately

1000 employees (20%) in order to be more cost-efficient and striving to have more customer satisfaction.

#### *Variables included*

The variables included in our study, the number of items and an explanation of the variables initially used are listed in Table 1. The used questionnaire is validated in several organizations (Bennebroek Gravenhorst et al. 2005).

#### ***Insert Table 1 here***

#### *Procedure*

Employees of all three organizations were asked to fill in an online questionnaire, which was located on a server at our university. A member of top management send an email to the employees, inviting and persuading them to participate in our study. This email included a link to the online questionnaire. At all three organizations, not all employees who opened the questionnaire responded on all questions. All respondents with more than half missing values on the items were removed. In the first organization, 176 employees opened the questionnaire, which led to 93 valid responses. In the second organization, 210 employees opened the questionnaire, which resulted in 156 valid responses. In the third organization, 395 employees opened the questionnaire, resulting in 194 valid responses. Total sample size was 443, response rates varied from 10% in Organization 1, 14% in Organization 2, to 17% in Organization 3.

#### ***Results***

Although the variables listed in Table 1 all have satisfactory reliabilities (Cronbach's alpha's > .65) we conducted Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to test possible overlap between the various variables. Four CFA's were carried out, one on the information variables (which included items from the *information about the necessity of the change*, *information about the goals of the*

*change* and the *information about the change*), one on the communication variables (which included all items from the original *communication about the change*, *communication climate* and *room for differences in opinion* variables), one on the role of leadership during change (which included items from the *trust in top management* and *role of direct supervisors* variables) and one on the outcome variables (*uncertainty*, *support for the change* and *contribution to the change*).

The CFA on the information variables showed that initial differences between the variable information about *the necessity of the change* and *information about the goals of the change* were not found in the factor analysis. All necessity and goals items loaded on the same factor, with loadings all above .60. The *information about the change* items loaded on a different factor. Overall, the solution explained .57 of the variance. The interpretation of the first factor is '*information about the goals and necessity of the change*', the second variable, which had the original three items of the information about the change, will be labeled accordingly the initial name.

The CFA on the communication variables showed three factors, but contrary to what we expected. The three items from the *communication climate* scale all loaded on one factor, with loadings above .60. The original *communication* variable and the *room for differences in opinion*, however, loaded on two factors. The first of these two factors indicate negative communication practices, with items such as '*it is hard to have conversations about the change*', '*departments have insufficient influence on the changes*' and '*critical remarks on the change are not appreciated*' (factor loadings all above .65; .51 explained variance). We labeled this variable as negative interaction. The second factor showed the positive items. It consists of 5 items, including that *strains because of the change are communicated*, *that the organization is listening to the opinion of the co-workers*, and *that everybody is invited to give his or her opinion about the change*. We labeled this as *positive interaction about the change*.

The third CFA we conducted was on the leadership variables. The original items loaded both on separate factors, *trust in top management* and *role of direct supervisor* (loadings all above .75; explained variance .80).

The fourth CFA we computed was on the outcome variables, including uncertainty. The CFA showed that all *support for the change* items loaded on one factor, with loadings all above .65. Also *the contribution to the change* items loaded on one factor (loadings > .70) as well as the *uncertainty* items (factor loadings > .45). We listed the new variables, based on the factor analysis in Table 2.

In Table 3 we present the means, standard deviations and correlations of all variables. Additionally, we calculated differences between the three participating organizations. When the three organizations differed on one of the variables, it is indicated in Table 3 with an asterisk. The differences between the three organizations are not the topic of this paper.

***Insert Table 2 here***

***Insert Table 3 here***

To test the four hypotheses we analyzed the data using linear regression. In the next two tables the results of these regression analyses are presented: support for the change (Table 4); and contribution to the change (Table 5).

***Insert Table 4 here***

***Insert Table 5 here***

Based on the linear regression analyses, we found support for Hypothesis 1. As can be seen from Table 4, information on the necessity and goals of the change has a significant influence on support for the change. Information about the change in general, however did not have a significant influence on support for the change.



Hypothesis 2 has to be rejected. Although positive interaction about the change has a significant influence on contribution to the change, negative interaction and communication climate both do not have a significant influence on support for the change.

We found support for Hypothesis 3. Trust in top management does have a significant influence on the support for the change, but not on the contribution to the change.

Hypothesis 4 can also be accepted. The role of the direct supervisor does not have a significant influence on the support for the change, but does have a significant influence on contribution to the change.

As stated before, uncertainty is central in every change process. In our regression analyses we found a significant influence of uncertainty on support for the change, as well on contribution to the change. So we can accept Hypothesis 5.

### ***Discussion Study 1***

The first part of the study clearly shows the important role of leaders during organizational change, and the important distinction between information and communication in the creation of readiness for change. All change programs were accompanied by websites on the intranet, special brochures and other information, in all three cases designed by the central communication department of these organizations. Opposite to the professional communication managers are the lower level managers or supervisors, whose roles are evaluated as more negative. The results are an indication of problematic interaction of employees with their direct supervisors about the change.

To further analyze the process of communication about the change we decided that we needed to deepen our understanding of the process of communication and information within the hierarchical lines of the organization. What elements in this communication could be supportive for the change program, which elements are problematic?

## STUDY 2

### *Introduction*

From the first study we learned that top management and direct supervisors have an important role in creating readiness for change. The aim of the second study was to gain further insight in the communication process in organizations during change. We were especially interested in the following questions; ‘How does the process of line communication actually take place?’ and ‘What constraints are present in the line communication in organizations especially in change-related communication?’ The process of line communication is as far as we know not described in the literature. There are a large number of publications on leader – subordinate relationships (Pye 2005; Jablin 1979) but the actual information sharing and communication practices of leaders are not present.

In general, four key competencies are described for managers (Bennis and Nanus 2003); (1) attention for the organizations vision, (2) creating meaning through communication, (3) creating trust by positioning, and (4) creating possibilities for self-actualization of the employees. To be truly effective as a manager or as a leader, one has to develop self-reflexivity, must be able to act as a role model for subordinates, should learn to encourage differences in opinions, and make these controllable (Bennis and Nanus 2003). Jablin (1979) states that an open relation between superior and subordinate is characterized by the fact that both parties see the other as a willing and receptive listener and prevent giving each other negative or incomprehensible relational responds. *Supportiveness* of the subordinates refers to the friendliness of the manager and the extend to which managers give attention to the employees. But what do we actually know about the communicative proficiency within large organizations? In the second study we will go deeper into the effectiveness of line communication.

## ***Method***

This research on the effectiveness of line communication was carried out in two different organizations, one of them being the ministry (Organization 2) which also participated in the first study. Chronologically this was the first organization we studied. Based on the results of this study we conducted a second study within an organization (Organization 4), part of the police force in the Netherlands. Two business units, concerned with special areas of police protection were involved in the study. In total we interviewed 36 persons from Organization 2 (ministry), and 11 persons working in Organization 4. The interviews were recorded on tape and transcribed. The need for a structured approach in the analysis of qualitative data was met by adopting the content analysis approach, which involved reading of the transcripts for several times in order to identify themes and statements related to line communication. The effectiveness of line communication, the process of line communication and possible problems that might occur in this line communication. We will present general findings, which occurred in both organizations, in order not to present outcomes, which are related to one of the single cases.

## ***Results***

In this section several findings are discussed on line communication. Findings are illustrated with quotes and citations of respondents. How the process of line communication takes place will be discussed by several issues surrounding line communication in the following section.

Interviews held at the ministry (Organization 2) show that there are no explicit rules or agreements made to communicate with their team. Middle managers and line managers acknowledge the fact that their own role in change communication is not explicit and is in fact very much open to their own interpretation:

*Interviewer: "And are there between you and your manager explicit rules about how to communicate certain things?"*

*Respondent: "Well no, that is to say, I actually do not understand what you mean by that exactly."*

*Interviewer: "For instance, I can imagine that in the case of a downsizing, about disclosing the one thing and not disclosing the other, or try to estimate the opinion of your workforce, in that manner."*

*Respondent: "O right, sometimes it happens that some information is marked as only meant for the managers."*

Practically every manager interviewed expresses the lack of procedures and guidance regarding how to communicate certain issues in the organization.

The next quote not only shows the lack of guidance leaders get in communicating to the workforce, but also shows another element. This element is the statement from leaders that one of the causes for not passing through information to the workforce is time or the deficiency in putting effort in freeing that time. This quote is from a leader working at Organization 4:

*"Whether information is passed through in the line often depends on the person passing through that information. Sometimes information isn't passed through to the workforce due to lack of time or due to too little effort freeing time for that."*

During an organizational change there should be a central role for leaders in communication concerning the change (see Study 1). Findings show that these leaders who should perform a key role in the sense-making of the change have to base this sense-making on their own interpretation of the change. Thus resulting in conflicting interpretations. It needs no further explanation in what kind of chaos these conflicting interpretations can hypothetically result. These citations show the ambiguity of the organizational change in the

ministry (Organization 2). Each quote from these leader states a different view on the same change:

*Respondent A: "It is a complete downsizing."*

*Respondent B: "... it does not necessarily lead to reorganizing the structure of the divisions..."*

*Respondent C: "...I intentionally don't see this as a downsizing..."*

Half of respondents perceived the change as a downsizing, a third perceived the change different from downsizing and the rest was in doubt about the nature of the change. The low levels of support for the change and willing to contribute to make the change a success which we found in this organization in Study 1, might be a result of the different ways the workforce is informed by these leaders. The conditions to make the change a success seem to be lowered by the different labels the managers in Organization 2 gave to this change.

Bottom-up communication is an area that could use improvement in both studied organizations. Remarkable is the difference in perception between those who lead and those who are lead by them with regards to participation in decision making and planning of the organizational change. This quote from a manager working at the ministry illustrates the ambiguity that surrounds this process. The other element that is striking about this quote is that managers do have some intentions on developing activities concerning incorporating suggestions and ideas from the workforce. A third of the managers in Organization 2 expressed the same discrepancy between the ideal situation and the current situation.

*Respondent: "We could give some more attention to that subject."*

*Interviewer: "In what manner?"*

*Respondent: By asking the workforce this more direct. It happens now a little informal, in meetings, in informal inquiry constructed, and uh, I would like to get a more representative image of that process."*

Or this quote from Organization 2 of an employee when asked a question about the effect of expressed feedback:

*“Often things still get called over people’s heads.”*

This employee indicates that there is room for feedback, but the result of the feedback given by employees is evaluated poorly and management undertakes no communication about the consequences of the given feedback. This is reported as a reoccurring problem by ten of the employees interviewed; once the feedback is expressed it sometimes does get used in decision making, however this is not communicated. Therefore the workforce who gave the feedback or the suggestion doesn’t know that he really is getting heard. This way, besides the absence of the notion of being heard, this employee doesn’t get the appreciation for this idea or feedback that he deserves.

A repeated finding has to do with the issues around the process of feedback as mentioned above on the suggestions from employees. In Organization 4 the following quote from an employee resembles one of the main issues:

*“I have the idea there is some listening to what happens at the operating core. Besides to that I do have the idea that something is done with that, but there is no feedback on these ideas suggested by the workforce. So, in the end the workforce doesn’t know whether something is done with their remarks and ideas.”*

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<sup>1</sup> This is a Dutch frame [vaak worden dingen over de hoofden van mensen heen besloten], we gave the exact translation, which can be interpreted as, *decisions are made for the workforce without a say in it.*

A leader of one of the divisions in the department of Organization 4 made the following comment about media used to communicate issues through the line:

*“The biggest problem in the line communication lies in the accessibility of the media. There should be clear channels through which information can be spread. It is one thing to personally bring information across, but the workforce should be able to reread it in order to better understanding things.”*

The members of the workforce and other manager interviewees made similar remarks.

### ***Discussion study 2***

The line communication in both organizations can be characterized as open for interpretation and informal by nature. Leaders themselves are uncertain about their role in line communication and what exactly the content of the communication should be. We might expect a major role of top managers to guide them and play their own essential sense-making role towards the leaders who in turn have to make sense of this message towards the workforce. A call for formalization and guidance should be recognized in this.

The time, wasted with trying to interpret messages from senior management by middle management and direct-supervisors can be put better to use when the message is clear to them and if they have the possibility to ask questions and give feedback on that message to the message. Strategic management has their own essential sense-making responsibility.

In turn, the possibility to pose questions and give feedback should be given to the workforce. The leader should take the lead in handling this feedback and questions, the message should get reformulated if possible and the leader to the strategic management should communicate the relevant questions and feedback. One of the reoccurring reasons for not doing this was lack of time.

In both organizations feedback procedures should be more facilitated, and used in a way that employees who gave feedback are recognized. When put into use or when decided not to use, this and the motives perhaps, should be communicated to the workforce. From the interviews we learned that also in the cases where feedback led to an adjustment this is not or hardly ever made apparent to the workforce. Thus giving the wrong idea that there is not being listened to the workforce and depriving the person who gave the feedback of his rightful recognition.

The notion that communication and information or poor and rich media should be used combined seems supported by the leaders in this investigation. This should alarm organizations for not resting with just sending a memo or just organizing a meeting. Being able to read what you heard and discussed about in that meeting is essential for the success of the change.

The proved relevance of middle managers or direct supervisors calls for a heightened attention to the terms under which they can perform their relevant role in organizational change. These leaders hold a difficult position between the strategic management, which regularly envisions the change, and the workforce, that implements this change. Their function is in translating the envisioned change, making sense of this change towards the workforce, translating this for the workforce in actual tasks and different kinds of behaviors, and communicating the feedback of the workforce to strategic management. Besides that leaders have to perform the envisioning and energizing function middle managers and direct supervisors have to perform. In a more participative approach towards change development the scheme is even more complicated. Especially the communicative skills of lower level managers seemed to be ignored at both organizations.

### ***General discussion and conclusions***



In this paper we examined the role of organizational leaders at two different levels in organizational change. We paid special attention on their role on information provision and in communication. We conducted research in four different organizations. Three of them participated in the first study in which the influence of information and communication on readiness for change was tested, with the inclusion of trust in top management, and the role of direct supervisors in that research. In the second study we further deepened the exact role of management in change processes. In the second study we held interviews with managers and employees at all hierarchical levels of two different organizations (one organization also participated in the first study). The results of both studies show the important role managers have in the success of change processes. From the first study we learned that top management has an influence on the support for the change. Support is of course essential, but it is attitudinal of nature, in that sense that this attitude is important, but not necessarily will be followed by the proper actions. Support for the change could be viewed as similar to an intention, as proposed in the classical social psychological models such as the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen 1991). On the contrary, direct supervisors had an influence on the willingness of employees to make an contribution to make the change a result, willing to make the change a success and put effort in it to make it an success.

In our second study we tried to deepen the role of leadership during organizational change by conducting several interviews at two organizations on the effectiveness of line communication. The effectiveness of communication in the hierarchical lines of the organization was in both organizations troublesome. The main reason for this troubled communication maybe the lack of policies and guidelines, or a set of appointments within the organizations about these processes of communication.

### *Conclusions*

The main conclusion from this study shows that information and communication during organizational change are crucial, however in many organizations there is a misbalance between information and communication. In the studied organizations there was a strong emphasis on information and hardly any emphasis on communication. This conclusion is rather remarkable, given the huge amount of practitioner oriented literature on this subject, and also given the insights scientific literature provided during the last decades. It seems that in practice communication during organizational change stops at the moment that the information materials are in print, or placed on a website. Top management and staff units like the communication department and the HR department seem to have little interests in the results of the change at the lower hierarchical levels. Within the organizations that participated in this research, top management seems to be more interested in the next change, than in getting feedback on the success and process of the current change. This is in line with one of the conclusions of Lewis (1999): 'One of the implications of this usage pattern is the surprisingly little use that is made of line supervisors in implementing planned change. One might expect these lower level management personnel to play a critical role in communicating the desires and rationale of top management regarding new initiatives. Line supervisors may be best suited to translate and interpret abstract organizational policies and goals and make them relevant to daily work tasks' (Lewis 1999, 66).

The effectiveness of line communication within the organizations seems to be very low. When lower level managers have to decide for themselves what messages will be forwarded to their employees and what messages are not forwarded, top management can not be sure that the right messages are communicated. In all participating organizations, there were no policies, or a set of rules applied on these communication. The importance of sense making, which has been stated before, seemed not to be in practice in all four organizations we studied.

### *Limitations*

Although we used almost the same variables and items in previous studies (Bennebroek Gravenhorst et al. 2005), but these variables were adjusted on the basis of the factor analysis. Developing a good questionnaire proved to be dependent on various elements, even when you have good results from other organizations, there still is a need to conduct a series of analysis to test the value of the questionnaire in a new setting. We had to alter the variables on the basis of the Confirmative Factor Analysis.

Another limitation might be the fact that we had a majority of non – profit organizations (three of the four participating organizations were non – profit, only Organization 3 from Study 1 was a profit organization). The main limitation might lay in the differences in communication management within these kinds of organizations, compared to profit organizations.

Maybe a last limitation might be that the organizations studied are all Dutch organizations. It seems that in Dutch organizations, and especially in governmental and non – profit sectors, a more democratic way of management and decision making is in place, instead of a more autocratic way in for instance in US organizations. But the results of our study also show that these democratic or participative management style should be improved in the organizations we studied.

### *Future research*

The problems concerning line communication within the organizations under research should be addressed furthermore. We found it surprising that there is very limited research on the topic of hierarchical communication within large organizations, what we labeled as line communication. This label was actual in use in the participating organizations. The study of organizational communication is partly based upon how communication in organizations is organized. Deepening the aspect of communication in various hierarchical lines should

receive much more attention in research of the organizational communication research community.

The low level of rules and guidelines appeared to be a normative problem in these cases. That is to say, no exact example of this leading to problems could be mentioned by the respondents. It is possible that within other organizations there are exact examples of problems that can be traced to the lack of guidelines and rules provided by the top management on how to communicate to the workforce by direct supervisors and middle management.

The role trust plays in the acquiring of support or contribution to the change should be further investigated. Especially with top – down, planned approaches to change, which seem to be the case in 90% of the change efforts in Dutch organizations (Werkman 2006). We think that trust could be very central in the success of these changes. Trust in top management probably would lead to a trust in the supposed change, originating from this top management, whereas low levels of trust probably would lead to distrust of the changes proposed by top management.

Research has shown that contagion of opinions and rumors within organization can play a negative role in implementing change (DiFonzo and Bordia 1998; Schweiger and Denisi 1991). Future research can address the different roles top management and direct supervisors play in this contagion and the rise of rumors concerning the change. Based on research and common sense one could imagine that both top management and lower management can have a positive or negative influence on the rise and extension of rumors. The relative influence is more mystified. How these diverse influences of different levels of management affect the support and contribution to the change should be taken into analysis.

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**Table 1: The variables included in our study**

<b>Name of variable</b>	<b>Number of items</b>	<b>Explanation</b>	<b>Example*</b>
Information about the change	3	This is an evaluation of the information provided by the organization	I can find information about the change when I need that information
Information about the necessity of the change	2	Has the organization provided information about the need and necessity of the change?	I know why it is necessary to change
Information about the goals of the change	3	Has the organization provided information about the goals and directions of the change?	I know the goals of the change program
Communication about the change	4	Communication about the change refers to the interaction which takes place (or not takes place) about the change program	Everyone can freely give his or her opinion about the change
Communication climate	3	Refers to the central way how communication takes place in the organization.	Me and my co-workers should be more involved in decisions regarding our own work (reverse scoring) <i>Constructive criticism about the change is valued</i>
Room for differences in opinion	4	Indicates how employees assess the opportunities for having a different opinion	
Role of line-managers	4	Indicates how employees assess the communicative behavior of line managers.	<i>Example: I can discuss the changes with my manager to my satisfaction</i>
Trust in top management	2	Indicates how employees assess the communicative behavior and decisions of top management.	<i>Top management is exemplary in their behavior with regard to the change</i>
Uncertainty as a result of change	3	Indicates to what extent the change causes uncertainty	<i>The changes makes me feel insecure about my future in the organization</i>
Support for the change	5	Indicates to what extent employees support the change.	<i>I believe the changes are necessary</i>
Contribution to the change	5	Indicates to what extent employees contribute to the change	<i>I make a noticeable contribution to the change</i>

\*Since the research was conducted in three Dutch organizations, the items were originally in Dutch. This example is a translation of the authors.



**Table 2: The new variables based on the Confirmative Factor Analysis**

<b>Name of variable</b>	<b>Number of items</b>	<b>Explanation</b>	<b>Example*</b>
Information about the change	3	This is an evaluation of the information provided by the organization	<i>I can find information about the change when I need that information</i>
Information about the necessity and goals about the change	5	Has the organization provided information about the need and necessity of the change?	<i>I know why it is necessary to change</i>
Positive interaction about the change	5	Positive interaction/communication about the change refers to the interaction which takes place (or not takes place) about the change program	<i>Everyone can freely give his or her opinion about the change</i>
Negative interaction about the change	3	Negative interaction/communication about the change refers to insufficient interaction about the change	<i>Critical thinking and critical remarks about the change are not appreciated</i>
Communication climate	3	Refers to the central way how communication takes place in the organization.	<i>Me and my co-workers should be more involved in decisions regarding our own work (reverse scoring)</i>
Role of line-managers	4	Indicates how employees assess the communicative behavior of line managers.	<i>Example: I can discuss the changes with my manager to my satisfaction</i>
Trust in top management	2	Indicates how employees assess the communicative behavior of top management.	<i>Top management is exemplary in their behavior with regard to the change</i>
Uncertainty as a result of change	3	Indicates to what extent the change causes uncertainty	<i>The changes makes me feel insecure about my future in the organization</i>
Support for the change	5	Indicates to what extent employees support the change.	<i>I believe the changes are necessary</i>
Contribution to the change	5	Indicates to what extent employees contribute to the change	<i>I make a noticeable contribution to the change</i>



**Table 3: Means, standard deviances, and correlations between all variables in this study.**

	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>
1. Goals and necessity	3,47 <sup>1</sup>	,67	<i>.86</i>	.52 <sup>1</sup>	.53 <sup>1</sup>	.12 <sup>2</sup>	.09	.42 <sup>1</sup>	.51 <sup>1</sup>	.57 <sup>1</sup>	.58 <sup>1</sup>	.53 <sup>1</sup>
2. Information	3,08	,72		<i>.67</i>	.44 <sup>1</sup>	.12 <sup>1</sup>	-.07	.31 <sup>1</sup>	.38 <sup>1</sup>	.44 <sup>1</sup>	.46 <sup>1</sup>	.45 <sup>1</sup>
3. Positive interaction about change	3,03 <sup>1</sup>	,58			<i>.62</i>	.21 <sup>1</sup>	-.02	.45 <sup>1</sup>	.58 <sup>1</sup>	.48 <sup>1</sup>	.55 <sup>1</sup>	.46 <sup>1</sup>
4. Negative interaction about the change	2,90 <sup>2</sup>	,71				<i>.61</i>	-.11 <sup>2</sup>	0	.11 <sup>2</sup>	.41 <sup>1</sup>	.17 <sup>1</sup>	.21 <sup>1</sup>
5. Communication climate	3,21 <sup>1</sup>	,63					<i>.66</i>	-.03	.00	-.08	-.05	-.08
6. Direct supervisor	2,88 <sup>1</sup>	,85						<i>.89</i>	.45 <sup>1</sup>	.30 <sup>1</sup>	.54 <sup>1</sup>	.41 <sup>1</sup>
7. Trust in top management	2,87 <sup>1</sup>	,82							<i>.87</i>	.45 <sup>1</sup>	.49 <sup>1</sup>	.39 <sup>1</sup>
8. Support for the change	3,23	,64								<i>.68</i>	.55 <sup>1</sup>	.56 <sup>1</sup>
9. Contribution to the change	2,99 <sup>1</sup>	,62									<i>.86</i>	.56 <sup>1</sup>
10. Uncertainty as a result of the change	3,12 <sup>1</sup>	,67										<i>.87</i>

<sup>1</sup>p < .001; <sup>2</sup>p < .01

*Note: Cronbach's alpha's are listed in italics on the diagonal*



**Table 4: regression analysis with support of the change as dependent variable, and information, positive interaction about the change, negative interaction about the change, communication climate, direct supervisor, trust in top management, and uncertainty as predictors**

	Beta	t	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>
Information about goals and necessity of change	,28	5,80 <sup>1</sup>	
Information	,07	1,80	
Positive interaction about change	,07	1,39	
Negative interaction about the change	,27	7,33 <sup>1</sup>	
Communication climate	-,04	-1,20	
Direct supervisor	-,03	-,78	
Trust in top management	,14	3,11 <sup>2</sup>	
Uncertainty as a result of the change	,24	5,40 <sup>1</sup>	
			.52

<sup>1</sup>p<.001; <sup>2</sup>p<.01

**Table 5: regression analysis with contribution to the change as dependent variable, and information, positive interaction about the change, negative interaction about the change, communication climate, direct supervisor, trust in top management, and uncertainty as predictors**

	Beta	t	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>
Information about goals and necessity of change	,21	4,38 <sup>1</sup>	
Information	,08	1,94	
Positive interaction about change	,14	2,96 <sup>2</sup>	
Negative interaction about the change	,04	1,19	
Communication climate	-,07	-,74	
Direct supervisor	,22	5,15 <sup>1</sup>	
Trust in top management	,09	1,89	
Uncertainty as a result of the change	,21	4,63 <sup>1</sup>	
			.52

<sup>1</sup>p<.001; <sup>2</sup>p<.01