

*An Experimental Study
of Organisational Change
and Communication Management*

by

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For my Parents

Declaration

I declare that this thesis, submitted to the University of Pretoria in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Communication Management), is my own work and has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of the requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

Ursula M. Ströh

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Preface

My father used to be a game ranger in Africa. When he got married and had children, he moved into the corporate arena and eventually had a top executive position in a large corporation. He was a very successful senior manager and a wise and loving father. When we were little, he used to tell us about his experiences in Africa, and would use stories as analogies to teach us about life, work and ethics. One of his stories stuck with me when I entered the corporate world as a young student. It went like this:

Imagine a scene in the beautiful wilderness of the Kalahari Desert. The sun bakes down on this barren landscape with a vengeance, and all the animals depend on their survival skills to make it through each blistering day. Under a thorn tree vaguely seen through the mirages, an anthill sticks out like a finger pointing to the blue skies. There are thousands of little ants scurrying around all over the anthill gathering food and taking it back up to their hill. Up in the thorn tree, a few ants are sitting around shouting down commands to the ants working below: "Move the food stuff to the left of the anthill!... Gather all the eggs and move them to the right corner!... Every ant, hurry and hide inside the anthill!". So, the ants all follow the commands in a well-engineered fashion. But one day a feisty, little ant gets a bit fed up, puts down the heavy morsel of food he has been carrying, and shouts up to the ants at the top, "Why do we all have to listen to you shouting down commands at us all the time?". The ants at the top answered, "Well, we know when a big antbear or a pangolin is on its way with powerful claws with which they could dig open our anthill ... we can warn you all to hide from their sticky ribbon-like tongues. We can hear a big tourist truck coming that could ride over our anthill ... we then know from which side it might come and tell you where to move all the food to. You see, because we are very high up, we can see much further than you can from where you are."

When I first heard this little story, it made me feel confident about the work of top management structures of organisations. But one day, I wondered again about the story, and thought what if the little ant had answered back to the top ants with these words: "We have to live with all the different nooks and crannies of this anthill every day; we know it as well, if not better, than you sitting high up there in the tree. Don't you think that we might be able to tell you what would work best down here, or help you make decisions while you inform us what you see and hear from up there?"

Many years have passed, and sometimes I forget how these questions have shaped the beginnings of this thesis and the motivation for my ongoing quest in relationship management and public relations. I'm grateful that my dad made me ask questions and that he made me think!

Executive Summary

More than ever, organisations are recognising that they need to build and sustain healthy relationships with stakeholders in order to survive, grow and be successful. When an organisation is threatened by *environmental* changes – such as a crisis or competition as a result of information technology developments, increased customer demands, new legislations, even the threat of AIDS – the need for better communication increases. Successful organisations use the potential of *communication management*, not only to ease the transformation process, but also to improve their relationships with key stakeholders and the environment, and uphold their reputation. In this sense, communication practitioners are playing managerial, ethical and strategic roles during times of instability because change complexities involve having to deal with stakeholders' trust and commitment. This thesis attempts to clarify the growing importance of *communication management*, particularly the role of *relationship management*. Proposed here is a different way of thinking about change communication strategies and building healthy relationships when organisations and their stakeholders have to make or adjust to change.

Existing literature shows that most organisations tend to take a planned approach to change which is structured, consists of specific goals and objectives, and tightly controlled by management. Management sees its role within this paradigm as reducing conflict, creating order, controlling chaos and simplifying all the complexities created by the environment. Possible outcomes are predicted and alternatives for action are planned. Structures determine the information needed, and perceptions are managed by feeding the 'right' information or withholding information that might give rise to disorder and chaos.

An alternative paradigm is the *postmodern* perspective, drawing specifically from *chaos* and *complexity* theories. These 'emergent' approaches to management consider organisations as living and holistic systems, more organic and ecological, seeking less control and more freedom. Organisations that operate like living systems are open, flexible, creative, caring and willing to adjust their strategies to adapt to the environment. While *strategic planning* is still considered important within the positivistic paradigms of management, it is nevertheless moving from

the basic premise of control and prediction to scenario planning and processes of open communication, facilitation and networking. The emphasis is on relationship building via the full participation of the stakeholders involved. This two-way, symmetrical approach is also considered the more ethical.

When an organisation is confronted by a problem, and if the constraints on communication are low, the organisation's publics (employees/stakeholders) tend to feel connected to the problem and want to do something about it. Their need to actively seek information about the problem opens up many communication potentialities, including a willingness to change their attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. The result is a culture of shared responsibility, participation in decision-making, open and honest communication, which leads to a positive working climate and higher productivity. So an important assumption that can be made here is that an empowered public will strive for a positive relationship with the organisation. It can further be derived that a positive relationship between an organisation and its publics, particularly its internal stakeholders (employees), will lead to greater communication and a greater willingness to change. These assumptions were tested in this study.

The **research questions** were:

- (1) What is the **connection** between the communication management strategy followed during change in organisations and the relationship and behavioural effects on internal stakeholders (employees)?
- (2) What are the **effects** of the communication management strategy followed during high change on relationships and behaviours with internal stakeholders (employees)?

The **methodology** was an experimental approach which allows for the manipulation of independent variables and measurement of influences thereof on dependent variables. The *independent variables* were the communication and change strategies followed in organisations; the *dependent variables* were the *relationship characteristics* (trust, control mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction). The use of *scenarios* was most effective in this experimental context because different scenarios can project different outcomes. The researcher,

therefore, had the opportunity to analyse the effects of the change strategies, as well as the changes that would take place.

Data collection from 9 different organisations resulted in, more or less, 10–40 employees from different levels of management and non-management of each organisation. Each respondent evaluated 2 different scenarios, which resulted in 372 evaluations in total (186 for each scenario). The scenarios addressed changes in general and were about various issues. Basic descriptive statistics, as well as hypotheses testing using MANOVA (to test for meaningful differences between groups), were conducted. Other data analyses included testing for *validity* and *reliability*, *analysis of variance* and the *Scheffe's Test* for significance of correlations.

The **findings** showed significant proof of the internal validity of the experimental design used, indicating that:

- (a) the experimental manipulation (the two different change management strategies) had a definite effect on the relationship that internal stakeholders would have with organisations, and that except for the size of the organisation and the educational level of the employees, no other variables had an influence;
- (b) strong correlations exist between the strategy followed during change and the resulting projected relationships with internal stakeholders of the organisation;
- (c) high participation during high change led to significantly more positive overall relationships between an organisation and its internal stakeholders, as compared to low participation with a planned approach.

In brief, the findings support a strong participative, two-way public relations strategy to be followed when organisations go through major change processes. The significance of these findings calls for a new paradigm in *strategic communication* and *relationship management*. Change cannot be solely based on plans and projections, but rather on understanding the complexities of situations and weighing different options available. Well-developed organisational change,

therefore, is a strategically managed process that takes into consideration all the possibilities of change in the environment. Traditional studies and models of change management have either ignored the importance of strategic communication as a contribution to successful change, or saw communication as only a tool in the first stages of *transformation*. However, to facilitate successful *strategic change management* is to recognise communication management as contributing significantly to guiding the complete transformation process in building important relationships internally and externally.

Alternative emergent approaches to change recognise that change and, more specifically, transformation should be viewed as a continuous process linking to the complexities of the changing market, nature of work environments, new management approaches, organisational boundaries and relationships. *Chaos* and *complexity* theories, in particular, stress the importance of interconnectivity between subsystems of societies and organisations. Central to these theories is the observation that relationships built on open communication have the potential of producing something greater for an organisation. The complex and dynamic nature of the environment, structural alteration, and the need for employee flexibility are all recognised. Another important insight is the view that organisations can create visions and perform strategic planning around scenarios that guide actions. Another way of adapting to change is to influence back on change, that is, steer change through relationship building and participative decision-making.

To become a true learning organisation requires the building of knowledge architecture with a strong supporting technical infrastructure. The main function of the communication manager, therefore, is to establish networks and structures for the collection and dissemination of information, and ultimately, the translation to knowledge. Communication leaders can connect teams and workgroups by driving communication and building trust. Involving staff in change management decision-making stimulates debate and criticisms, thus creates opportunities for innovation and revolutionary change. These are some of the main preconditions for sustainable change, and all can be achieved through sound communication management and the building of relationships with stakeholders.

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