

The Bedrock of Organization Transformation:
Examining the Relationship Between Leadership, Culture, and Communication in
Successful Change Management

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Abstract

The need for strategic change management that engages stakeholders is ever present as organizations frequently realign priorities to match the current zeitgeist. This research paper examined how and to what extent an effective communication function determines change management success through the lens of organizational culture, communication barriers, and leadership support. Research considered internal communication best practices for engagement, relationship management, and the role of leadership alongside change management frameworks. Thirty-four participants completed an online survey from February 10 to May 4, 2023. Additionally, 10 interviews were conducted with participants who identified as mid or senior level communicators/public relations professionals with Canadian experience planning or implementing organizational change management initiatives within the past five years. Findings demonstrate a relationship between leadership support, organizational culture, and symmetrical communication that determines change management success. The value of communication is further emphasized by the study's results as a key element that supports change management planning, implementation, and postmortem.

Keywords: public relations, communications, change management, culture, leadership, engagement, relationship management

Background

Organizations operate in a constant state of transformation, adapting to everchanging environmental factors. In the year 2020 the world responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, supply chain shortages, and racism that altered the way business was conducted. PwC's annual CEO survey found that, "40% of global CEOs think their organization will no longer be economically viable in 10 years' time, if it continues on its current course," (2023, p. 2). In 2023, companies are responding to climate change, innovations in technology, geopolitics (Russia-Ukraine war), economics (inflation), and the workforce (skills shortage), particularly in Canada (PwC, 2023). Based on the annual global CEO survey results, PwC recommends that "a special kind of leadership will be required because deep change is possible only when individuals at all levels adapt and grow. CEOs need to double down on setting a shared vision, empowering people to make decisions, and being visible champions for change," (2023, p. 18).

Similarly, Edelman's annual trust barometer found that Canadians are looking to organizations to solve societal problems such as economic inequality, workforce reskilling, and climate change (2023). Not only are businesses required to understand and navigate the changing environment, but they are also expected to respond for the betterment of society because "business is now the sole institution seen as competent and ethical" (Edelman, 2023, p. 9).

This fluid assessment and acknowledgement of change drivers provides the foundation for long-term organizational viability. In a business context, change may be instigated by fluctuating client preferences, competitors, technology, social behaviour, politics, or internal factors (Saladis, 2017). The ability to foresee indicators of change allows for necessary preparation to properly manage the change. Yet, it is commonly acknowledged that people struggle to adopt and adapt to change (Saladis, 2017).

Change is perceived to fail most often due to a lack of clearly defined and measured variables including the problem, current and future states of operation, barriers, and stakeholders (Ferraro, 2017). There is a “void in project communications and voids tend to fill with negative innuendos and half-truths” (Ferraro, 2017, p. 218). Critical to change management is the alignment of leadership and stakeholders with the mission, vision, and most importantly, the definition of what constitutes a successful change (Saladis, 2017).

With varying interpretations of projected change outcomes, The Association of Change Management Professionals (2019) states effective communication determines positive results through increased stakeholder adoption. This is achieved through an understanding of why the change is occurring along with its value and benefits. Harmony among these elements is facilitated through leadership communication and interaction with organizational stakeholders (Harikkala-Laihininen, 2022).

If communication is a foundational element for success, then leadership at both the senior and middle manager levels are the vessels that create a culture of change. When executed properly, “the environment actually becomes a culture where change is not only expected, but embraced and initiated with passion” (Saladis, 2017, p. 261). Leadership shares information, offers support, and engages with stakeholders throughout the entire change process. Doing so reduces the risks associated with change allowing the benefits to be realized (The Association of Change Management Professionals, 2019).

Change management depends on three organizational factors working in tandem: communication, leadership, and culture. Two-way communication enables stronger organizational-employee relationships that builds resilience and openness to change (Kim, 2021). Similarly, Walker (2021) indicated communication is the method that “creates, maintains, and

changes organizations” (p. 148). While effective leadership implements strategic communication practices that affects employee-organization relationships (Men & Stacks, 2014). In turn, organizational culture is shaped positively or negatively impacting the percentage of change engagement and adoption (Men & Yue, 2019; Lemon, 2019).

Therefore, this research paper analyzes how and to what extent an effective communication function determines change management success with consideration to the following key elements: communications best practices, engagement and advocacy, relationship management and the role of leadership, and change management frameworks. Through an online survey in combination with in-depth interviews methodology, it examines the junction of communication with organizational culture and leadership support.

Literature Review

Research to support this study explored four main themes: internal communication, engagement and advocacy, relationship management and the role of leadership, and change management. Within each group a subset of topics was considered including the role of communication during change management, communication styles, the influence of culture, and leadership’s effects at different levels in an organization. The outcome produced insight into the importance of communication working alongside strong leaders and best practices to be employed by both communicators and leaders.

Internal Communication

Applying internal communication that is open, honest, and ethical can provide employees a sense of trust that allows them to have a voice and feel in control of organizational changes (Yue et al., 2019). This ownership reduces information gaps, strangles rumours, and lowers

stress levels (Yue et al., 2019). Organizations that demonstrate transparency regarding change seek employee participation, listen to concerns, and look for understanding. Ultimately, transparency means taking accountability for the change, including benefits and threats to the organization and its employees (Yue et al., 2019). As agents of information flow in an organization, communicators must take the responsibility of ensuring stakeholders have all critical information to make an informed choice to fully support a change, such as why the change is necessary and its impact. Li et al. (2020) agrees that internal communication techniques build employee-organization relationships that help to weather the change by reducing ambiguity.

Internal communication techniques may follow a dialogic or formal method. Dialogue can be defined as a style of communication based on five principles: mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk, and commitment with a goal of savouring the relationship (Kent & Taylor, 2002). According to Kent and Taylor (2002), dialogic exchanges are unplanned and organic in nature, relying on vulnerability, collaboration, and empathy; whereas formal, two-way communication is structured (as cited in Lemon, 2019a). Both methods are necessary for a successful communication strategy. Dialogic communication creates employee engagement by fostering connections between employees and with the organization's mission (Lemon, 2019a). While dialogue creates meaning, formal internal communication is strategic in determining who needs to partake in the conversation (Lemon, 2019a).

Grouping organizational stakeholders as solely management and employees is a common segmentation technique. However, this fails to consider the diversity within stakeholders that may be used to cultivate relationships and build communities (Shen & Jiang, 2022). By stripping management and employee labels, communicators may see groups based on risk and need

(Horlait & Lambotte, 2021). Beyond risk and need, each group has their own preferences that can be managed by asking for feedback on what the groups feel or think about different communication methods. According to Verčič and Špoljarić (2020), communication satisfaction “is a result of intricate combinations of media, content, situational and personality factors” (p. 6). Using both dialogic and formal methods, communicators can spur engagement between segmented groups to create vertical and horizontal benefits (Lee, 2018).

One of the benefits of symmetrical communication is building an organization’s cognitive and emotional culture (Men & Yue, 2019). “When employees’ desire to be heard, valued, and empowered is satisfied, and when they feel the care, respect, and mutual reliance from engaging in open and equal communication with their organization, they can be happy, proud, appreciative, and affectionate” (Men & Yue, 2019, p. 8). Similarly, Men and Sung (2022) indicated that when employees are engaged in organizational ongoings, it creates confidence, trust, and a sense of ownership that strengthens employee-organization relationships. Further, symmetrical communication creates connection with an organization’s mission that changes employee perspectives from job tasks to career experiences (Lemon, 2019b).

Engagement and Advocacy

Creating career experiences can be a tough feat when an organization has a poor culture. Organizations who infuse joy, love, pride, and gratitude into their culture generate employee support and goodwill that creates a sense of reciprocity (Men & Yue, 2019). Employees working in positive emotional cultures want to thank their organization by performing tasks that are not outlined on their job description (Men & Yue, 2019). Reciprocity is built upon transparency by communicating timely information, listening to employees, and inviting positive and negative comments through participation (Jiang & Men, 2016). Transparent communication requires

working in partnership with organizational leaders across departments to empower employees and build organizational trust (Jiang & Luo, 2017).

Employees will be more willing to embrace and support the change when there is a high level of organizational trust (Yue et al., 2019). Lemon and Palenchar (2018) contributed six ideas that defined employee engagement:

1. The work must create value;
2. build connection;
3. contribute beyond basic job responsibilities;
4. and the employee must be given freedom;
5. to work at their vocation;
6. with the opportunity for experiences beyond strictly work within the organization.

Employees may feel connections with co-workers, senior management, job responsibilities, or the organization. The perfect ratio of connection types resulting in engagement is dependant on employee choice (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018).

Levels of engagement increase with an emotional connection combined with clear expectations, tools to do the job, and opportunities for growth (Verčič, 2021). When there is positive engagement, Verčič (2021) found that it is a precursor to employee satisfaction with organizational communication efforts. Like a crisis, listening, collaborating, and being responsive to employee needs builds organization-employee relationships that increase communication engagement during job demands (Lee, 2020). Einwiller et al. (2021) found that employee appreciation is the top contributor to engagement during challenging times.

Appreciation may be demonstrated by leaders through empowerment, involving employees in decisions and information sharing (Jiang & Men, 2016). However, leaders must convey these actions with authenticity by engaging in trusting, transparent, and consistent behaviour (Lee & Kim, 2017). Doing so shares leaders' values and expectations while encouraging employee participation and enhancing the overall work experience. "Without a transparent organizational communication system or authentic leaders utilizing open communication to promote the positive exchange between work and life, employee engagement may be difficult to achieve" (Jiang & Men, 2016, p. 239).

Leader support is important in developing organizational commitment, along with ensuring communication channels deliver the right information to employees (Walden & Kingsley Westerman, 2018). Commitment creates reciprocity, where employees wish to advocate for and support their organization. Despite this desire, employees who are emotionally tired are more likely to have a combative relationship with their organization (Kim & Lee, 2021). Transparent communication can be used as a counteractive measure to change employee attitudes back in favour of organizational support (Kim & Lee, 2021). Therefore, two-way symmetrical communication that is transparent and encourages employee dialogue helps an organization to communicate information employees need at the right frequency (Kim, 2018).

Relationship Management and the Role of Leadership

A basic exchange relationship is developed when organizations communicate information employees need. Yet, if consideration is given to "information quality and access, they are building relational capital" (Walden & Kingsley Westerman, 2018, p. 605). Going one step further, authentic actions create communal relationships where employees perceive their organization cares about them (Lee & Kim, 2017). This produces an effect where employees are

more likely to respond by amplifying positive organizational communication and quieting negative comments (Lee & Kim, 2017).

Listening to amplified messages at both the leadership and organizational levels helps build relationships. According to Qin and Men (2021), when employees perceive that someone is listening it fills their psychological needs, which in turn creates the perception of a positive relationship. Therefore, facilitating more opportunities for two-way communication about organizational initiatives and challenges satiates employees' psychological needs and builds quality organization-employee relationships (Kim, 2021). By taking part in issues that affect the organization it offers "the feeling of being valued/trusted as an important contributor to the organization [and] enhances workers' organizational identification and willingness to reciprocate" (Atouba, 2018, p. 184). Sharing information also brings with it the ability to hold employees accountable and develop ownership with the organization and its mission (Men & Stacks, 2014). Two-way communication builds "employee trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality," which are hallmarks of a good relationship (Men & Stacks, 2014, p. 316).

Relationships can be fostered or hindered based on leadership styles. Transformational leaders who meet employee needs, customize approaches to each person, push employees with stretch assignments, and demonstrate emotional support forge organizational trust (Yue et al., 2019). These leaders form emotional bonds with employees that assist with accepting and committing to organizational changes, including overcoming challenges (Yue et al., 2019). On the other hand, servant leaders build quality relationships with employees, generating a team who is willing to perform beyond job descriptions and advocate for the organization (Thelen, 2021). Servant leaders are characterized by three traits: offering direction, creating safe spaces, and employee achievement (Thelen, 2021). Thelen (2021) suggests that because servant leaders

encourage employee contribution and discussion, they truly grasp the benefit of communication. Strong organization-employee relationships are built upon leaders who are “authentic, ethical, balanced, fair, transparent, and consistent in what they say and do” (Men & Stacks, 2014, p. 318). As a result, if organizations wish to build trust and engagement with employees they must use the principles of authentic leadership in hiring, coaching, and promoting leaders (Jiang & Luo, 2017). Organizations must also offer development sessions that discuss transparent communication and create opportunities for feedback that hold leaders accountable (Jiang & Luo, 2017).

Men and Stacks (2014) also believe that organizations have an obligation to help leaders evolve their authentic communication skills. Strong leaders produce quality organization-employee relationships “by influencing the organization’s communication system” (Men & Stacks, 2014, p. 319). Organizations that prioritize open communication among supervisors and senior management enhance the likelihood that employees will take responsibility for communication (Andersson, 2019).

Leaders have a duty to communicate an organization’s vision and culture as a connecting force that aligns employees at all levels to work towards the same goals (Yue et al., 2021). A positive emotional culture is facilitated by leaders employing internal communication as a tool to respond to employees’ needs with empathy (Men & Yue, 2019). Communicators therefore have a dual role. First, communicators must coach leaders on best communication practices that identify and respond to employees’ concerns. Secondly, communicators should “be involved in organizational decision-making to ensure that an employee-centered symmetrical communication system exists, in which trust, reciprocity, employee feedback, and voice are highly valued” (Men & Yue, 2019, p. 9). Organizations also have a duty to share both positive and negative

information in the interest of transparency, building organization-employee relationships through the communication skills of their leaders (Kim & Lee, 2021). Transparency reduces emotional fatigue by falling back on organization-employee relationships and acting through advocacy (Kim & Lee, 2021).

Management levels have a similar goal of ensuring employees feel valued, but different approaches when practicing employee communication. Middle managers should help and encourage employees with empathy by listening and providing feedback (Lee & Kim, 2020). Whereas senior management must show sincere goodwill towards employees on an individual level and focus on building relationships (Lee & Kim, 2020). This means communicators can offer support to organizational leaders by highlighting employee traits and organizational areas of concern in a prompt manner (Lee & Kim, 2020). Support is not solely informative, but emotional as well through leadership coaching. Einwiller et al. (2021) found that “reliance on merely an informational communication strategy can help create acceptance of decisions, but it cannot support employees on an emotional level” (p. 249). Offering gratitude and an engaging leadership style are key to garner employee support during challenging situations (Einwiller et al., 2021).

Change Management

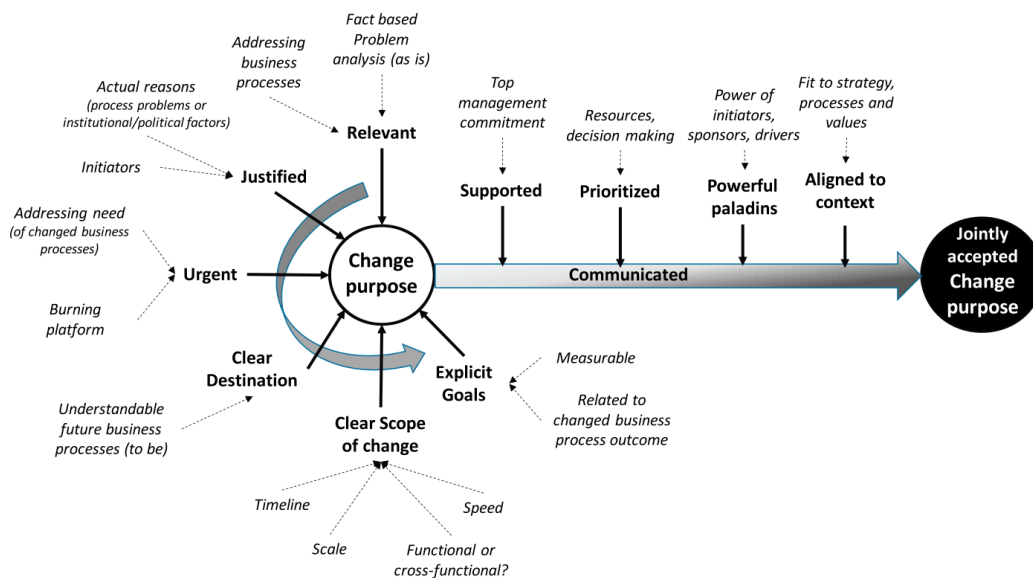
Successful changes have support from senior leadership, an acknowledgement of employee needs, and project management practices (Ferraro, 2017). Leadership must create a "culture where change is not only expected, but embraced and initiated with passion" (Saladis, 2017, p. 261). Employees should understand what is expected of them and the project must have a manager who assesses planning and progress of the change (Ferraro, 2017). This includes creating the change's mission and vision along with a clear definition of what success looks like

to ensure stakeholder alignment (Ferraro, 2017). Communication on why the change is required must be transparent and future focused while identifying risks and stakeholder sacrifices (Ferraro, 2017).

Naslund and Norrman (2022) created a framework (Figure 1) for identifying, communicating, and accepting a change's purpose within an organization. They indicate that a change's purpose must be relevant, justified, urgent, have a clear understanding of future business processes, a clear scope, and measurable goals. Once the prep work is completed, communication should be supported by senior leadership, prioritized, driven, and aligned to the organization (Naslund & Norrman, 2022).

Figure 1

Framework for Understanding Change Purpose



(Naslund & Norrman, 2022, p. 311)

However, change isn't always adopted. According to Ferraro (2017), employees may resist change for eight reasons. Firstly, employees may not understand why the change is

necessary or the future vision. Variables that may stop or propel the change may not have been considered. The right stakeholders may not have been part of the discussion early enough and therefore their concerns weren't heard. Benefits of the change may not have been communicated and an overall lack of communication surrounding the change's progress may have existed. Lastly, appropriate measurement wasn't introduced to track the change and determine its overall success (Ferraro, 2017).

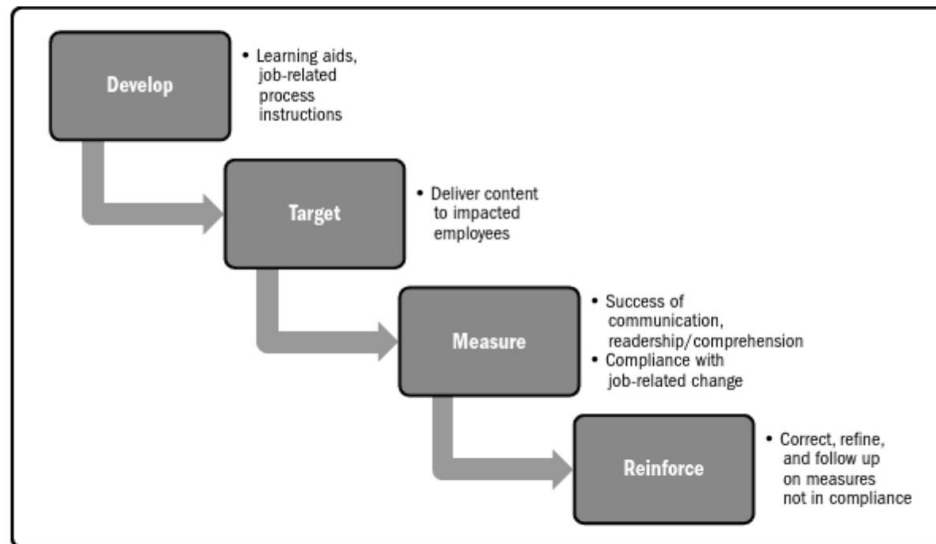
Instead of developing enterprise-wide communication, segmented groups based on preference, relationships, and culture should drive change communication efforts (Brandes & Lai, 2022). By finding the struggle points, communication can be pointed in its approach. One area employees often struggle with is fear of the unknown. Communicators can reduce anxiety by involving employees in the change management process and sharing reasons behind the change (Katsaros & Tsirikas, 2022). Complementing general information about a change with employee participation lessens fears and creates a more positive environment within the organization (Harikkala-Laihininen, 2022).

Ferraro (2017) created the change management communication model (Figure 2) that outlines steps necessary for successful change understanding and adoption. The first action is developing the communication strategy to establish alignment among stakeholders on why the change is necessary and its significance to the organization (The Association of Change Management Professionals, 2019). This strategy also includes stakeholder segmentation, messaging, communication channels, frequency, and mechanisms for evaluation. Communicators know their efforts at establishing change rationales are successful when "each type and level of stakeholder can clearly articulate what is changing, how the change benefits or affects the organization, and how the change affects him or her individually" (The Association of

Change Management Professionals, 2019, p. 25). Once employees understand the evolution, they are more interested in supporting change developments.

Figure 2

Change Management Communication Model



(Ferraro, 2017, p. 222)

Following the communication strategy, a stakeholder engagement plan is needed. The plan should map out two-way symmetrical communication methods that are both official and spontaneous, incorporate learning opportunities, offer stakeholder appreciation, and have defined metrics (The Association of Change Management Professionals, 2019). It's also important to recognize what factors may be taking stakeholders away from change efforts, what stakeholders need to support the change, and the effects of organizational culture (The Association of Change Management Professionals, 2019). Change management is successful when carefully constructed communication and stakeholder engagement plans are harnessed. Stakeholders will feel positively towards the change when they understand its benefits, promoting fewer obstructions

and higher adoption. Stakeholders who believe in the change can cultivate visibility, comprehension, and role implementation (The Association of Change Management Professionals, 2019).

Leadership is an essential role in delivering a successful communication strategy and change adoption. A leader's responsibilities include promoting innovation, procedure development, relationship management and stakeholder engagement (Saladis, 2017). However, Saladis (2017) believes the overarching mission for leaders "is to convince everyone that becoming change-ready is a strategic necessity" (p. 272). Beyond often communicating the benefits, need and vision of the change in a way employees will be receptive to, leaders must create moments of connection and participation for employees to feel heard and valued. They should also generate trust through consistency and action, while using tried and true processes. Lastly, leaders should promote risk management behaviours in the effort of mitigating exposure that comes with change management (Saladis, 2017).

This style of captaincy is referred to as transformational leadership, where managers lead with expectations, encouragement, spirit, and confidence in their team's abilities (Saladis, 2017). It thrives on the relationships leaders have with employees and the creation of an "individual sense of value and importance to the change initiative" (Saladis, 2017, p. 275). Only leaders can assign and encourage employees to offer their individual skill set to the change initiative. When employees feel they are making a difference it increases their interest in working towards the change initiative while motivating other employees to join (Saladis, 2017). Creativity, adaptability, and ownership are built whilst leaders align employees' individual tasks towards the overall objective (Saladis, 2017).

Middle managers must also manage job responsibilities to avoid overwhelming employees. High workloads may lead to disengagement and resistance to change initiatives (O'Connor et al., 2017). Middle managers take a transformative role by helping their teams to cope with change, guiding employees, and knowledge sharing. This role extends “from being a change agent or champion, to that of an active participant in change creation” (van Niekerk & van Rensburg, 2022, p. 280). Middle managers must have visibility to assemble teams and work between departments, while putting out conflicts that inevitably arise (van Niekerk & van Rensburg, 2022). It must be acknowledged that within an organization there are different change awareness levels that may result in varying degrees of adoption. Middle managers must facilitate multiple opportunities for discussion to increase the percentage of team members who comprehend the change enough to express it to other team members (Blackman et al., 2022). It is a complex position to be in, one that requires strategy and strong communication skills to be both a leader and contributor.

Strong leadership must be complemented with a reasonable timeline to allow team members time to process the change and commit to a course of action (The Association of Change Management Professionals, 2019). Adoption is a result of persuasive change ambassadors who share benefits, a practical period allotted, frequent assessments, and leader support, all working in tandem and to similar degrees of effectiveness (Maali et al., 2022). Stakeholders must be engaged at all phases of change management and coupled with education, repetition, and appreciation. In the end, “effective change management results when the perceived negative impacts and risks of the change are minimized and the overall expected benefits are achieved, ideally within the budget and schedule (The Association of Change Management Professionals, 2019).

Research Problem

Of the many factors that determine successful change management, this study sought to examine how and to what extent an effective communication function contributed to positive outcomes. Prior literature suggested the power of two-way symmetrical communication in engaging employees to work towards and advocate for a change's mission and purpose (Men & Stacks, 2014). Scholars also mentioned the need for leadership support at the senior and middle manager levels along with an organizational culture that favoured change (Men & Yue, 2019; Saladis, 2017; Yue et al., 2021). The degree of communication required and by whom is important to understand how to implement successful change management in an organization. The research conducted in this study hunted for practical applications of communications in change management to demonstrate its significance to organizations.

Research Questions

RQ1: How and to what extent can communicators foster an organizational culture of change?

Saladis (2017) described culture as a precursor to successful change management indicating its importance in preparing employees for a constant state of churn. While Men and Yue (2019) referenced the need for a positive emotional culture that allows employees to participate in discussions about change, expressing their needs and desires. Leaders build culture with every word, action, or inaction, but this research question aims to identify how communicators can support leadership in building an organizational culture of change. It looks at communications as a foundational and necessary step that orients stakeholders for change. Sub

questions examine the effects of culture on engagement levels and strategies to increase advocacy.

RQ2: What barriers do communicators encounter and how do they navigate success when preparing and implementing change management?

Many frameworks exist to assist communicators in understanding what should be implemented for successful change management, including Ferraro's (2017) change management communication model. However, most times competing factors intervene and throw a carefully constructed plan off course. The second research question seeks to understand what barriers exist in practical applications and how communicators push through for change management success.

RQ3: How and to what extent should communicators support leadership's change management communication?

Leaders have a strong impact on the strength of stakeholder relationships and the ability for employees to cope with change (Yue et al., 2019). Many tenets of a successful relationship are grounded in communication theory, including listening, authenticity, and transparency (Jiang & Luo, 2017). The final research question aims to understand how communicators can assist and train leaders to enhance their communication skills for better organizational alignment, stakeholder relationships, and ultimately positive change management. Sub questions uncover change indicators communicators should highlight to leadership as well as support mechanisms at both the senior and middle manager levels.

Methodology

The literature review identified that communications should be both formal and informal, sharing needed organizational information about change and capturing emotional connections. Thus, the study lends itself to two research methodologies: a survey to identify primarily formal, informational results, and interviews to understand the psychological nature of interpretation and perspective around change management.

The research methodology is based on public relations best practices as defined by Stacks (2017); namely, that research should have clear goals, a meticulous design, and supporting documentation. To answer RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3, two methods were used to provide “multiple sources of evidence” (Yin, 2018, p. 126). The first method is an online survey to gather participants’ thoughts and feelings on change management communication practices, challenges, and successes. Surveys offer quantitative insight into perception and opinion, while reaching a larger subset of the population in a reasonable timeframe with limited resources (Stacks, 2017). Despite concerns with response rates and connection issues, the survey was conducted online for ease of accessibility, speed, and analysis (Stacks, 2017).

The second method involved in-depth interviews, no more than 30 minutes in length. Qualitative research complements quantitative results with the ability to answer, “‘why’ and ‘how’ questions” through experience (Stacks, 2017, p. 193). In-depth interviews provide insight and context to the survey data, focusing on participant specifics to build a better picture of the research while allowing the researcher a great deal of control (Stacks, 2017). Disadvantages of interviews include extensive researcher time, access to willing participants and higher-level communicators, plus an inability to generalize results (Stacks, 2017). Despite these drawbacks, interviews offer invaluable colour commentary to corroborate mixed-method research designs.

To triangulate the data, survey and interview results were compared against communications and change management literature to evaluate different theoretical approaches. Multiple data collection methods were designed to “develop converging lines of inquiry” through data triangulation (Yin, 2018, p. 127). Therefore, construct validity is strengthened when the same finding is presented across multiple sources of data (Yin, 2018).

Data Collection

Research was conducted online from February to May 2023. Participants were recruited using non-probability sampling methods, including a mix of purposive, volunteer, and snowball sampling (Stacks, 2017). Research participants were recruited if they identified as mid or senior level communicators/public relations professionals with Canadian experience planning or implementing organizational change management initiatives within the past five years. Notification to participate in the study was circulated through social media using LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Additionally, professional networks were leveraged by social media and email notification through the International Association of Business Communicators, Canadian Public Relations Society, and Association of Change Management Professionals Canadian chapters.

A cross-sectional survey design was used to collect data that represents participants’ beliefs at a given time (Stacks, 2017). The survey was disseminated online using McMaster’s LimeSurvey software from February 10 to May 4, 2023. While 71 individuals accessed the survey, the use of screening questions resulted in 34 respondents. The survey consisted of nominal and ordinal Likert-type questions with unipolar and bipolar scales (Dillman et al., 2014). Survey data was anonymous from the point of data collection and participants had the option to exit the survey at any time.

Interviews took place virtually via Microsoft Teams and were recorded through the platform with permission. Recordings were transcribed and anonymized before analysis. Thirty-minute interviews were conducted with 10 research participants who met the screening question criteria. Participants were asked to think of one organizational change initiative that they planned or implemented when answering each question. Interview questions examined organizational culture, what information was communicated, how it was communicated, stakeholder engagement, leadership support, and elements of successful change management. Participants had the option to skip questions at their choosing.

Data Analysis Techniques

Survey results were reviewed using a categorical data analysis with descriptive statistics and univariate or bivariate variables (Stacks, 2017). This method analyzes outputs using frequencies and percentages to describe trends across single or multiple variables (Stacks, 2017). Quantitative results provide researchers with the opportunity for data correlation that produces possible relationships between variables (Stacks, 2017).

Interview transcripts were examined using a qualitative textual analysis that seeks patterns or connections between words and ideas (Stacks, 2017). These patterns formed groups that encapsulated the overall themes as research conclusions. Verbatims were also used to capture colour commentary that highlighted strategic insight (Stacks, 2017). It is important to note that qualitative analysis is subjective and relies on the researcher's interpretation of both verbal and nonverbal cues (Stacks, 2017).

In addition to teasing the data in a way that develops patterns, this study was analyzed using the “working your data from the ground up” theory as described by Yin (2018, p. 169). By

starting with the data rather than theoretical propositions, patterns emerged in a manner that had potential to reduce bias and reflexivity, therefore increasing the study's internal and external validity (Yin, 2018). Once this analysis was completed, evidence was compared to survey results and theoretical propositions.

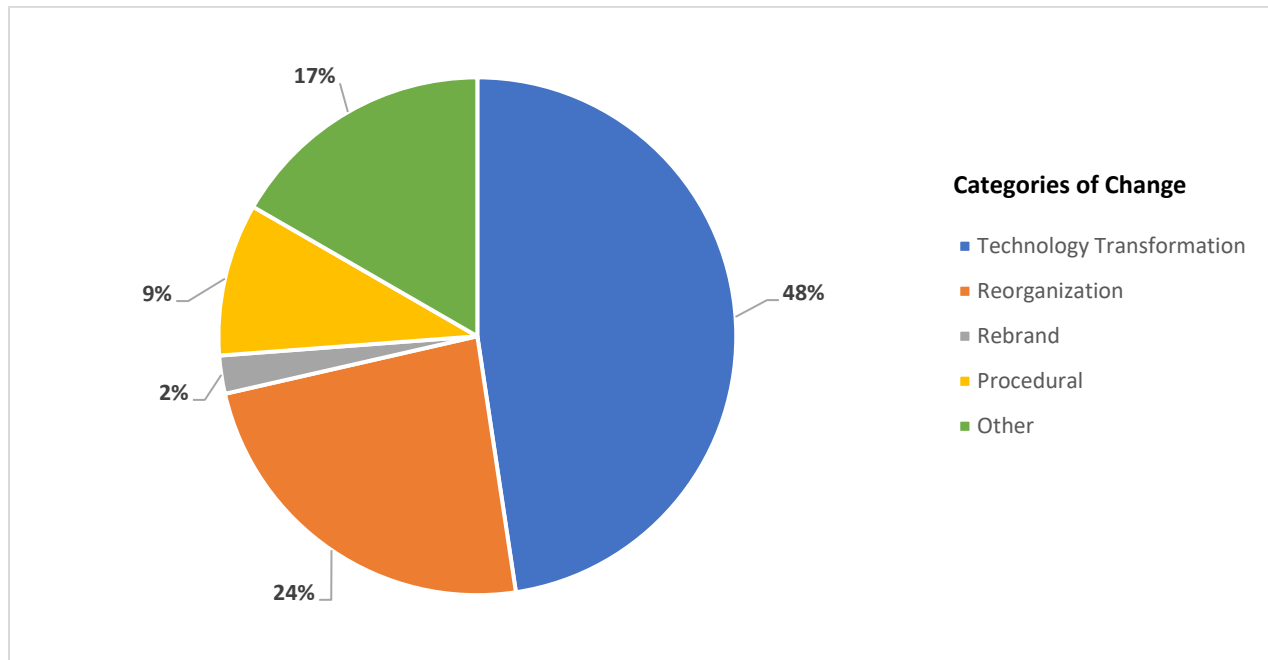
Results

Success is different for each organization, group, and leader. The study's results suggest that tactical metrics (on time, on budget, milestones met) are often achieved, but true behaviour change is observed over many years and may not look successful right away. It takes consistency to cultivate behaviour and culture change; furthermore, only 70% of respondents (n=23) classified their organizational change as somewhat successful. Survey respondents ranked leadership as the primary indicator of change management success (n=22), followed by communications (n=14), and finally culture (n=18). Yet, most respondents (n=18) believe that effective communication makes up 75% of the elements required for successful change management.

The top value communicators offer change management as represented by the interview participants (n=6), is their connection and relationship with senior leaders. Communicators were referenced as trusted advisors who are influential and respected by leaders to shape mindset and behaviour. Secondly, communicators understand their audiences' needs and the most effective methods for positive reception. Thirdly, communicators are strategic in their actions resulting from boundless access situated at the organizational epicenter. Other terms used to describe communications value include bridge builder/advocate, researcher, analyzer, and message focuser.

While the survey results were anonymous, it is known that most respondents (n=24) are classified as senior communicators with more than 10 years of experience. These demographics mirrored the interview participants, where 80% (n=8) were senior professionals who either led change communications (n=5), sponsored the change project (n=2), or led project implementation for the change (n=3).

Figure 3 presents the types of organizational changes referenced by both the survey and interview data. The most common type of change among survey respondents included technological transformations (n=14), such as implementing new enterprise resource planning, information technology, or SAP (systems, applications, and products) software, followed by organizational restructuring (n=8). Like the online survey results, the most common type of organizational change among interview participants was technological (n=6), implementing security, human resources, or communications software. Fifty percent of the changes interviewees discussed (n=5), took two to three years to implement and involved multiple stakeholders, with an average of six stakeholders per project. The interview portion of the study included organizational representation from agriculture, education, energy, government, healthcare, and retail industries.

Figure 3*Types of Organizational Change (n=42)*

RQ1: How and to what extent can communicators foster an organizational culture of change?

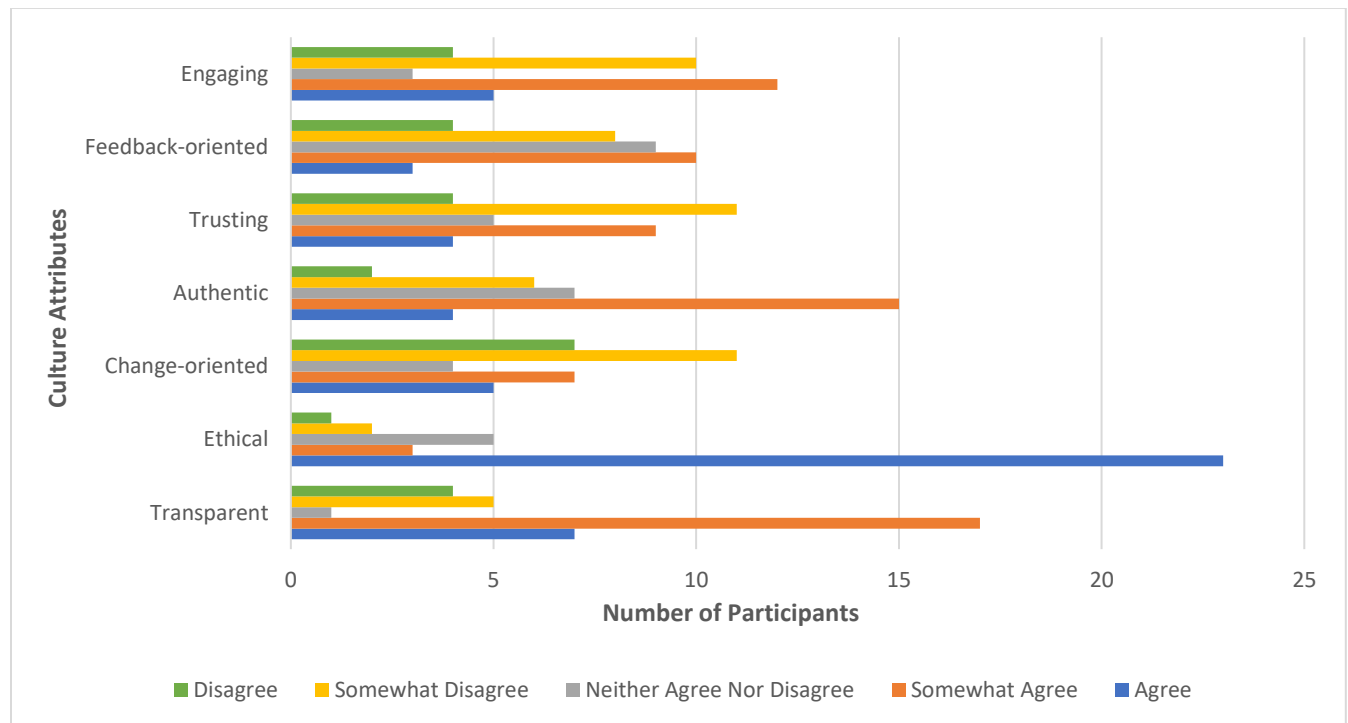
As noted in Figure 4, participants' descriptions of organizational culture in this study demonstrated alignment with positive attributes such as transparency, authenticity, ethics, engagement, and the importance of feedback. The research indicated that a change culture built on trust is important to the success of an organization, while a resistant culture was the number one barrier to success among interview participants. Culture is a work in progress, and there is a trend towards organizations striving for one cultural mindset. However, it needs time and attention from senior leaders to grow. One interview participant said:

Leadership often knows about changes so much before everybody else. So, they have time to wrap their heads around it and then they introduce it and they're like, well, why

aren't you guys getting it? But they don't realize they've had lots of time to absorb it and then expect people just to keep changing. And sometimes they haven't even gotten through the last change because of course, we're just rolling changes on top of changes. That's why it's so important to have a change culture.

Figure 4

Participants' Descriptions of Organizational Culture

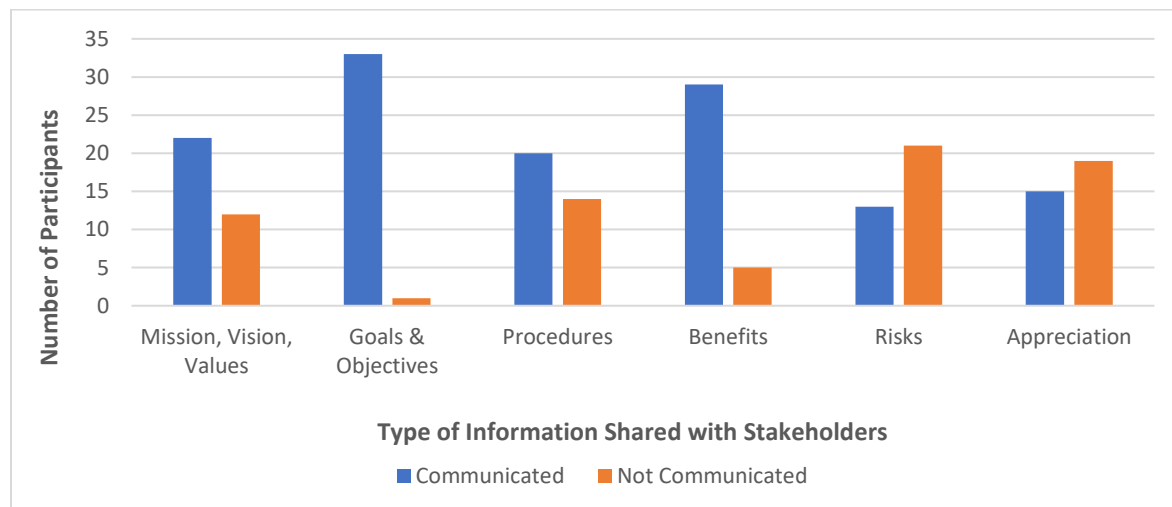


Despite the significance of organizations employing a culture of change, most respondents did not characterize their organizations as change-oriented. Half of interview participants (n=5) described organizational culture as change resistant and lacking trust, with an absence of stakeholder understanding about why changes were happening. While 30% (n=3) indicated there were multiple subcultures within a siloed organization. Other terms to describe culture included hierarchical, immature, top-down, and collaborative.

Two interview participants said nothing was being done to build culture due to lack of resources, lack of leader support, or it was an out-of-scope responsibility. Another two participants indicated the organization already had a culture of continuous change due to rapid growth and personnel changes, which made stakeholders more accepting of change and willing to help. Plus, one of the organization's customers was open to change, which increased internal change acceptance. However, it also showed there is a fine balance between a change culture and stakeholders experiencing change fatigue. The remaining participants focused efforts on constructing trust, consistency, transparency, and executive sponsorship through humanizing and building leadership skills and a better understanding of stakeholder needs.

Figure 5

Communicated Information to Stakeholders About the Change



One way to create trust is through transparency, which organizations in the study are demonstrating by communicating the mission, vision, and values, goals and objectives, procedures, and benefits of the change. Figure 5 demonstrates that there is an opportunity to increase communication on risks and stakeholder appreciation. Organizations are communicating

through both general and segmented stakeholder communication methods (n=23). However, 62% of respondents (n=21) do not communicate risks of the change, despite 47% (n=15) who agree and somewhat agree that the organization has an enterprise-wide focus on risk management. Nor do 56% of respondents (n=19) show appreciation to stakeholders during the change.

Generally, most respondents (those who agree and somewhat agree) believed change management frameworks were followed when implementing organizational changes (as shown in Table 1). This suggests knowledgeable and skilled professionals who adapt best practices to each organization.

Table 1

Alignment with Standard Change Management Process

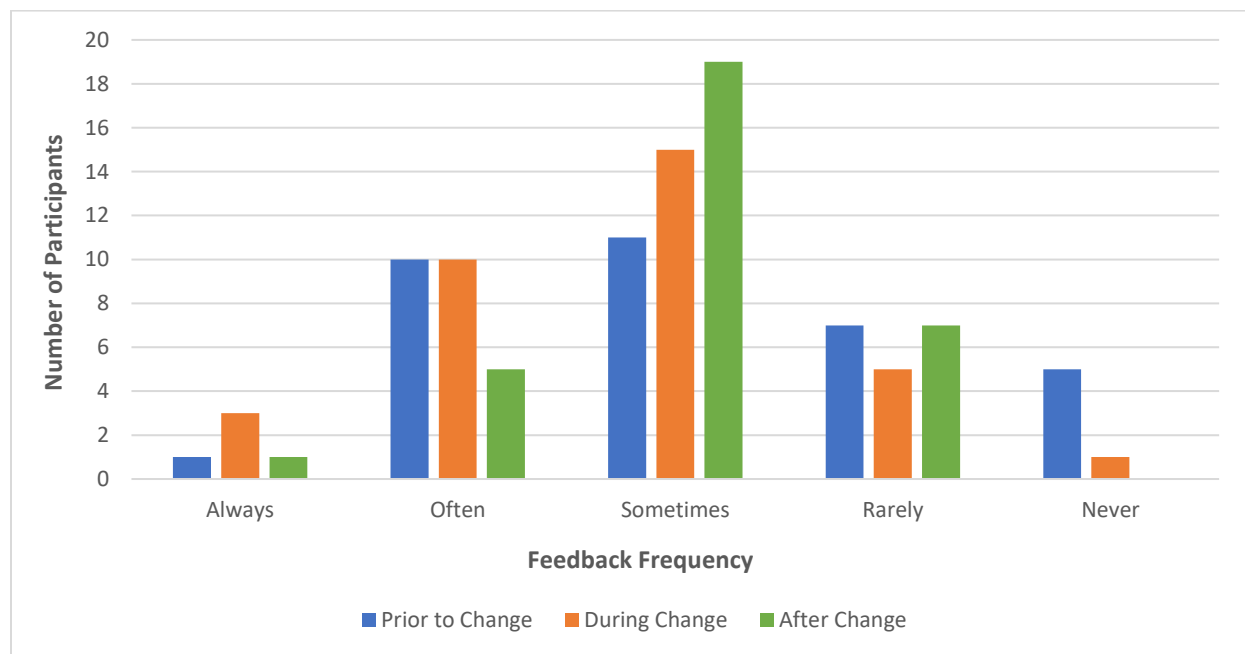
Standard Best Practice	Agree or Somewhat Agree (N=34)	Neither Agree nor Disagree (N=34)	Somewhat Disagree or Disagree (N=34)	Not Sure or Prefer Not to Answer (N=34)
Communicated the reasons and benefits of the change clearly, effectively, and often	76%	6%	18%	0%
Carefully phrased a vision to describe the desired future state	59%	9%	32%	0%
Provided an opportunity for those affected by the change to provide input	56%	6%	38%	0%
Established trust by following through on commitments and displaying consistent leadership behaviour	59%	15%	24%	3%
Matched the vision with reality	47%	18%	32%	3%
Insisted on an enterprise-wide focus on risk management	44%	18%	32%	6%
Implemented standard project management processes	74%	0%	26%	0%
Communicated a need for the change	85%	6%	9%	0%
Packaged the change in a way that stakeholders embraced the solution being offered	50%	9%	38%	3%

Organization-stakeholder relationships are 43% (n=13) both exchange and communal, and 33% (n=10) strictly exchange. Figure 6 shows that stakeholders were rarely and never asked for feedback prior to the change, yet most respondents believe that stakeholder input is extremely

and very valuable in determining what information is needed (n=22), how much information is needed (n=21), and how well the organization is fulfilling the need for information (n=22). Prior to the change, stakeholder engagement (engaged and somewhat engaged) was 47% (n=16). Engagement jumped to 76% (n=26) during the change and fell to 56% (n=18) after the change.

Figure 6

Stakeholder Feedback Frequency



RQ2: What barriers do communicators encounter and how do they navigate success when preparing and implementing change management?

The top barrier among interview participants is a resistant culture (n=4), followed by a tie for leadership support (n=2), communication (n=2), time (n=2), and individual resisters (n=2). However, when you compare that to the survey results displayed in Table 2, barriers include failing to engage stakeholders early, followed by failing to act on stakeholder concerns. Both the survey and interview participants noted a lack of leader support. One participant said, “They

were willing to let the project struggle which makes their own managers crazy. To them they felt it was a burden.”

This in turn created conflict among middle managers who “felt they had no control and no recourse. They tend to have a lot of influence and power and over this they didn't have much.”

Table 2

Barriers to Successful Change Management

Statement	Yes (N=34)	No (N=34)
Failure to understand the business problem	53%	47%
Proper stakeholders were not engaged early in the project lifecycle	74%	26%
No one listened to or validated stakeholder concerns	68%	32%
Void in project communications	53%	47%
Inability to properly track and measure the change	71%	29%
Lack of leadership commitment	68%	32%

Taken together, these barriers have created a resistant culture. By not actively addressing concerns that contribute to poor cultures in an organization, stakeholders are resistant to changes they don't understand.

One interview participant said, “That's the toughest kind of changes when staff are just being told something and they weren't part of the whole conversation and then they're having to carry it forwards. I think creating understanding is really important.” Another participant said, “The business reasons for change were sound. And they didn't argue with that. They just didn't like that we did it to them, not with them.” When stakeholders are engaged, there is a way of “letting them be involved in their own ways, not just in a way that we were telling them.”

Yet, the results suggest that most respondents understand the importance of requesting feedback during and after a change. Therefore, gathering feedback prior to the change occurring could be improved. It suggests higher importance on the pre-change conversation to create understanding and set stakeholders up for how the change will take place both in physical action and emotional support. Each change project used a wide array of tactics, often similar ones. This suggests that perhaps the execution is less important than the setup – the backbone the project sits on – culture, leadership, and organizational history as precedent. To illustrate this, one interview participant said:

They had done all the right things where they had identified change management as important and useful for their business. They had brought in professionals that were there permanently and they were including it as part of their project management. So, it seems like all the right things are there, but the championing by leadership, which is hugely important in change management, that part was missing.

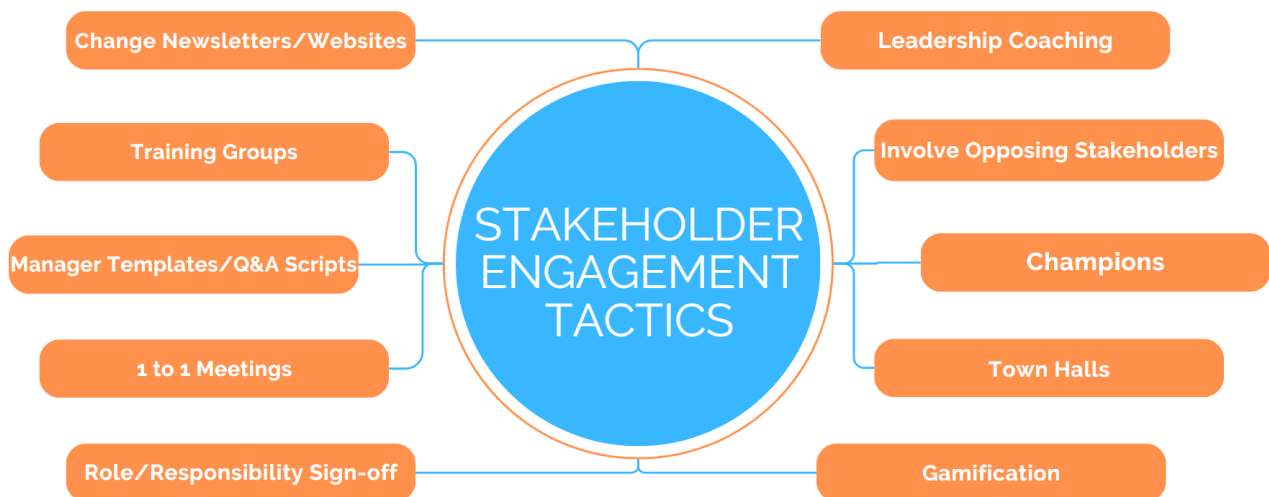
Communication played a role in overcoming barriers by coaching leaders how to have conversations with those who were struggling, creating Q&A scripts, and sharing results with those who hadn't yet gone through the change. Resistance was met with a humanizing approach that simplified informal information sharing in a way that reflected stakeholder values and concerns. Peers reached out to the strongest opposing parties and accommodations were made where possible along with local training groups who created relationships that eased implementation. Organizations without an established communications infrastructure to support direct supervisors struggled to bring people along without a personal touch point. In these cases, champions were used to offer one-on-one support. Another issue arose with the structure of the communications team within one organization, who didn't have enough senior resources to

properly execute the change. Resources required very specific instruction and responsibilities to support the project.

Each barrier was never 100% overcome, but various engagement strategies and tactics summarized in Figure 7 were used to mitigate their effects. Most organizations in the study retained a higher percentage of engaged individuals after the change than prior to the change, suggesting change management is one method of increasing engagement in an organization both in the short and long-term.

Figure 7

Stakeholder Engagement Tactics



A common stakeholder engagement method among participants included the use of one-to-one meetings with executives to ascertain project support, understand pain points and strategize approach, but also to meet one-on-one with stakeholders who were struggling to adopt the change. As well, the use of internal ambassadors, champions, super users, or influencers assisted in cascading the message and supporting change uptake. Other communication and

engagement tactics included signing off on roles and responsibilities, online gamification strategies, and publishing change newsletters or websites where stakeholders could retrieve important information without relying on the organizational cascade.

One interview participant used a three-step stakeholder engagement method: firstly, people need to hear about the change, secondly, people need to be able to find more information about the change on their own, and thirdly, people need to have someone they can talk to about the change. The first step coincided with a template for managers to use at their monthly meetings that outlined what the change was, why the change was occurring, who was affected by the change, and what the outcome was. Next, an intranet site was developed with videos and information about the change. Lastly, change champions were used alongside town halls with executive sponsors to discuss the change. It's worth noting that multiple participants mentioned the importance of offering specific and clear methods to get more information, help, and ask questions.

A by-product result surfaced from the research, which suggests that communicators and change management professionals must collaborate and strategize together throughout the lifecycle of a project. In two instances with interview participants, communications and change management teams were brought under the same leader to encourage collaboration and strategy development. There were also antagonistic comments shared from both groups towards each other about the struggles of working together on change projects. One interview participant said:

Each group might feel threatened by the other because there are so many cross-collaboration points. From the very beginning of a change, when you're in exploration phase, communications and change management should be working together and strategizing along the way.

RQ3: How and to what extent should communicators support leadership's change management communication?

It's clear that change will not be successful without the full support of senior leadership actively involved in moving the change forwards. One research participant said:

It's really necessary for leadership to have that connection with staff and be in tune with what their barriers and pain points actually are. And sometimes it feels like they're disconnected. So yeah, I think to see change you kind of have to know the business and know what's going on at the ground level and have a mechanism where you can receive that feedback in a trusting environment.

Communicators must be constantly monitoring both the internal and external environments, using both informal and formal channels. Environmental scanning activities are performed always and often 43% of the time (n=13). The most common method among interview participants used to detect changes in an organization is fluctuations in key performance indicators (n=7), often in the form of a stakeholder pre/post/pulse survey. The second most popular method (n=4) for identifying changes is listening to stakeholder grumblings, gossip, or resistance feedback, followed by anecdotal or gut instincts that address behavioural changes such as when people care enough to respond or assessing the tone of an event. One participant also mentioned competitor comparison research or other external data points that identify when an organization may be underperforming.

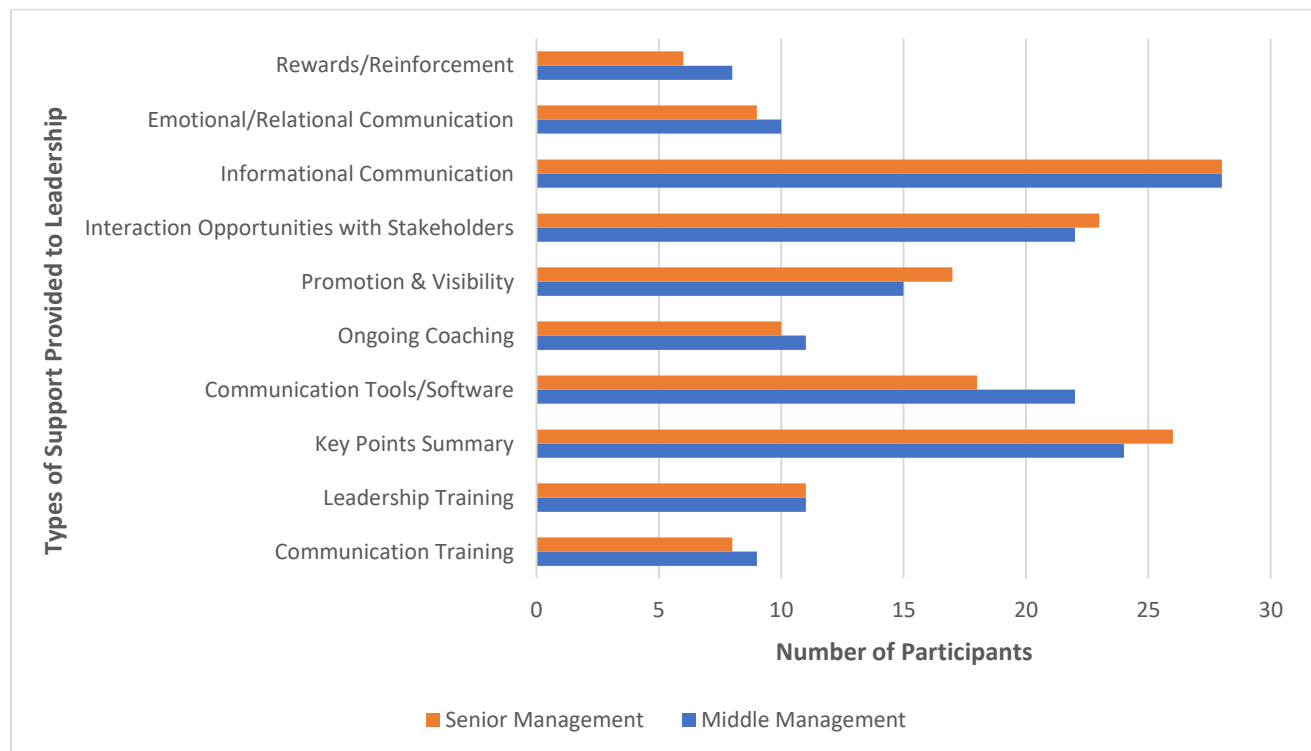
The research established that change indicators are found in conversation and action, backed by data to present to senior leadership. However, 69% of respondents (n=20) felt that

leadership perceives environmental scanning activities that identify indicators of change as moderately and slightly valuable. So, the work is being done, but its value is not being realized.

During change management, communications support to leadership as shown in Figure 8 includes providing informational, promotional and connection opportunities for leaders. The research suggests that communications may be able to offer additional value by training leaders in how to better take advantage of meeting opportunities through emotional/relational communications and positive reinforcement behaviours. Being afforded an influential position, communicators may provide coaching and leadership training throughout change management.

Figure 8

Leadership Communication Support (Survey Results)



During a change, 47% of respondents (n=16) indicated communications support is provided to leadership often. There were no significant differences between the support that senior leaders and middle managers receive, suggesting that irrespective of capability and operational levels, all leaders struggle with the human element and require support to navigate.

Figure 9 summarizes leadership support tactics mentioned during the interviews. For one interviewee this looked like a weekly update email sharing what they were excited about, worried about, focusing on, and thanking someone who made a difference. Another example is a printed road map, so leaders knew what was coming, the theme of each component, and what soft skills or hard activities were required. One participant humanized the project sponsor and team responsible for pushing the change forward. While another interviewee assisted senior leadership by bringing relevant groups to the table who were left out of the discussion.

Figure 9

Leadership Support Tactics (Interview Results)



The research suggests that communicators are boundless strategic partners, influencers, advocates, and connectors who have cultivated relationships based on trust, particularly with senior leadership. This is illustrated in the following set of quotes from interview participants.

Senior communicators bring familiarity and comfort talking to senior people and reflecting to them, this is what we're hearing and helping them understand what the risks are of continuing in a way that isn't working or that has some level of resistance or risk attached to it.

Communication is a two-way dialogue where there is this intention to create not just an understanding but to influence behaviour because we're not bound by verticals or departments. To make sure that the information in the experiences and the resistance or the excitement doesn't live just where it happens. But you help connect the way people are acting, what they're doing, what they don't want to do, what they do want to do with that kind of strategic intention to go through all of these pieces. Your role is to say I've heard something over here. It's important.

Discussion

RQ1: How and to what extent can communicators foster an organizational culture of change?

Saladis (2017) indicates that an organization's culture is created by its leadership. Positive and negative cultures experienced in the research results have been molded by leadership through both action and inaction. The literature would suggest that organizations with resistant cultures have not successfully built an environment that embraces change. When we break culture down into its two parts—cognitive and emotional—leadership is responsible to

create a shared sense of both thought and feeling among employees (Men & Yue, 2019). It's likely that the breakdown in resistant cultures doesn't strictly relate to one cultural element, but the research tells us that the change's mission, vision, values, and goals are being communicated (cognitive culture).

Additionally, there is an overwhelming spirit of distrust among respondents, suggesting shared feeling, or the overwhelming stakeholder emotion around change, is an area of improvement for leadership in change management. Symmetrical communication can assist in building a positive emotional change culture by creating a sense of empowerment, confidence, and care with stakeholders (Men & Yue, 2019). This creates trust that when linked to cognitive cultural elements, can create engagement in the change through reciprocity (Jiang & Luo, 2017; Lemon, 2019b; Men & Yue, 2019). Yet, survey respondents believe organizations are transparent and feedback-oriented, which contrasts a sense of distrust among respondents and poses questions around authenticity. This suggests that the way symmetrical communication is being executed may lean towards performative rather than functional communication during change management, which the literature would advise creates negative associations with change, hindering engagement, adoption, and ultimately spinning poor organizational culture.

Evidence of this may point towards improperly understanding stakeholder risk tolerance as mentioned by Horlait and Lambotte (2021). Most organizations in the study did not communicate risks of the change, despite having a cognitive culture of risk management (Barsade & O'Neill, 2016). Ferraro (2017) suggests identifying risks and stakeholder sacrifices up front is an important communication element for successful change management. Despite risk management behaviour mitigating exposure and a general culture of transparency among respondents, leadership is omitting negative risks associated with change (Saladis, 2017). This

breaks trust and destroys emotional culture (Barsade & O'Neill, 2016). The Association of Change Management Professionals (2019) says that effective change occurs when the perceived risk is minimized and benefits are achieved. Without properly identifying project risks and perceived risks through symmetrical communication, effective change cannot be realized.

During organizational changes, more than half of respondents indicate stakeholder appreciation is not communicated. Yet, Einwiller et al. (2021) noted that appreciation is the number one contributor to engagement. The Association of Change Management Professionals (2019) also includes appreciation as part of the stakeholder engagement plan. Beyond notes of thanks, Jiang and Men (2016) explained that appreciation may be shown through stakeholder empowerment, decision involvement, and information sharing. Perhaps this is one fragment of a larger emotional culture contributing to a delayed mindset adoption in the organizations studied.

RQ2: What barriers do communicators encounter and how do they navigate success when preparing and implementing change management?

Like the first research question, the second line of inquiry also pulled on the theme of resistant culture. Lee (2020) notes that during difficult times, listening and collaborating with stakeholders builds organization-employee relations that lend itself to stakeholder engagement. However, this notion must be authentic to build strong relationships (Lee & Kim, 2017). The study participants noted a lack of leader support, early stakeholder engagement, and action to mitigate concerns. These results are consistent with Ferraro's (2017) eight reasons for resisting change, most notably, that the right stakeholders were not part of the discussion early on and their concerns weren't validated. This suggests an inauthenticity in stakeholder collaboration and commitment to the change. Leadership is critical to building organization-wide commitment and ensuring communication needs are met (Walden & Kingsley Westerman, 2018).

Kim (2018) notes that two-way symmetrical communication is an important step in understanding what information stakeholders need and at what frequency. The study found that organizations were consistent in engaging stakeholders during and after a change, but fewer organizations sought stakeholder input before the change occurred. Yue et al. (2019) advises that internal communication gives stakeholders representation and the chance to feel in control of organizational changes. Therefore, omitting the opportunity to learn and discuss the change before it occurs modifies the organization-stakeholder dynamic. Changes happen *to* stakeholders, rather than *with* stakeholders, creating feelings of resentment and inability to cope.

Study participants felt that their organizations were transparent, but according to the literature, organizations are merely skimming the top. Yue et al. (2019) notes that transparency is demonstrated through stakeholder participation, listening, and seeking understanding. Stakeholder collaboration within the research could be improved, but transparency also means taking accountability for benefits and risks of the change. When leadership omits risks and solely focuses on the benefits, it creates an idealist vision, rather than reality, and sets stakeholders up for failure. This suggests that perhaps change resistance is also rooted in the disparity between what was promoted about the change versus what occurred.

Strategies to mitigate barriers followed both a dialogic and formal method, with stronger weight given to formal internal communication. Kent and Taylor (2022) state the goal of dialogue is to relish the relationship through organic interactions that connect stakeholders with each other and to the organization. By focusing efforts on formal communication, organizations are missing the link that creates engagement with change (Lemon, 2019a). While both dialogue and formal communication form part of a sound strategy, strategic communication efforts may not be successful without the element that derives meaning. Dialogue also accounts for

personalities that affect emotional culture, factoring in different approaches to a formal communication strategy (Verčič & Špoljarić, 2020). Accordingly, dialogue must occur first, before strategy is developed, and strategy must be continually modified throughout the change as new information arises.

RQ3: How and to what extent should communicators support leadership's change management communication?

The research demonstrated that organizations are working toward fulfilling Men and Stacks' (2014) duty to support leadership communication at a general level. Men and Yue (2019) advise communicators to coach leaders on best communication practices and participate in organizational decisions to establish and preserve symmetrical communication. Not all research participants were fortunate to be in a position that influences organizational decisions. However, respondents perceive that leadership does not value the results of environmental scanning. This raises questions about firstly, the information highlighted to leadership, secondly, the data collection method and presentation format, and thirdly, the relationships and influence within an organization that may affect message delivery.

Scholars noted differing goals between senior and middle management, yet the research results indicate communicators may not be differentiating support enough between these two groups. Senior management's goal is to build connection with the organization's vision and culture, while middle management ensures stakeholders feel heard and valued (Yue et al., 2021; Lee & Kim, 2020). Additionally, van Niekerk and van Rensburg (2022) noted that middle managers are both leaders and contributors, carrying senior management's vision while managing conflict. This dual role suggests the need for visibility that requires a higher degree of communications support. Leadership support largely resembled informational and tactical means

in the study, whereas Lee and Kim (2020) suggest turning attention to stakeholder traits and organizational areas of concern. A mix of both informational and emotional communication support provides leadership the tools to develop and change strategy (Einwiller et al., 2021).

The study's results indicate improvement in coaching relationship building communication practices. Yue et al., (2019) discusses transformational leaders who build trust through emotional support, while Thelen (2021) mentions the importance of servant leaders encouraging stakeholder discussion. Both leadership styles require Jiang and Luo's (2017) authentic leadership to build trust and engagement. By offering support that builds organizational leaders as relationship managers, it creates stronger communication pathways within the organization. This type of support positions communicators as strategic partners rather than tacticians.

Elevating the role of communications in change management as suggested by the research goes beyond the model developed by Ferraro (2017). The change management communication model outlines a framework focused on understanding the change among different stakeholder groups and ensuring they have practical tools to execute (Ferraro, 2017). Coupled with a stakeholder engagement strategy, The Association of Change Management Professionals (2019) states formal and dialogue based two-way symmetrical communication is needed to support change success. However, the engagement strategy is based on the communication strategy, which lacks a relationship management framework.

Limitations

The study notably has a few method limitations related to sampling. At 34 survey responses and 10 interviews, results represented views of a subset of communicators and change management professionals. Additionally, respondents were recruited using a non-probability sampling method, which “cannot generalize to the larger population, only to the sample you observed” (Stacks, 2017, p. 225). While efforts were made to obtain input from every province in Canada, affiliations with the Master of Communication Management (MCM) cohort and local communications association chapters (International Association of Business Communicators and Canadian Public Relations Society) may have skewed results towards views primarily held within Ontario and Alberta.

Additionally, a few survey and interview questions asked participants to describe the value of communications. In some instances, these results may be biased because communicators were assessing their own value. Future researchers may wish to question senior organizational leaders on the value of communications in change management for a more accurate portrayal.

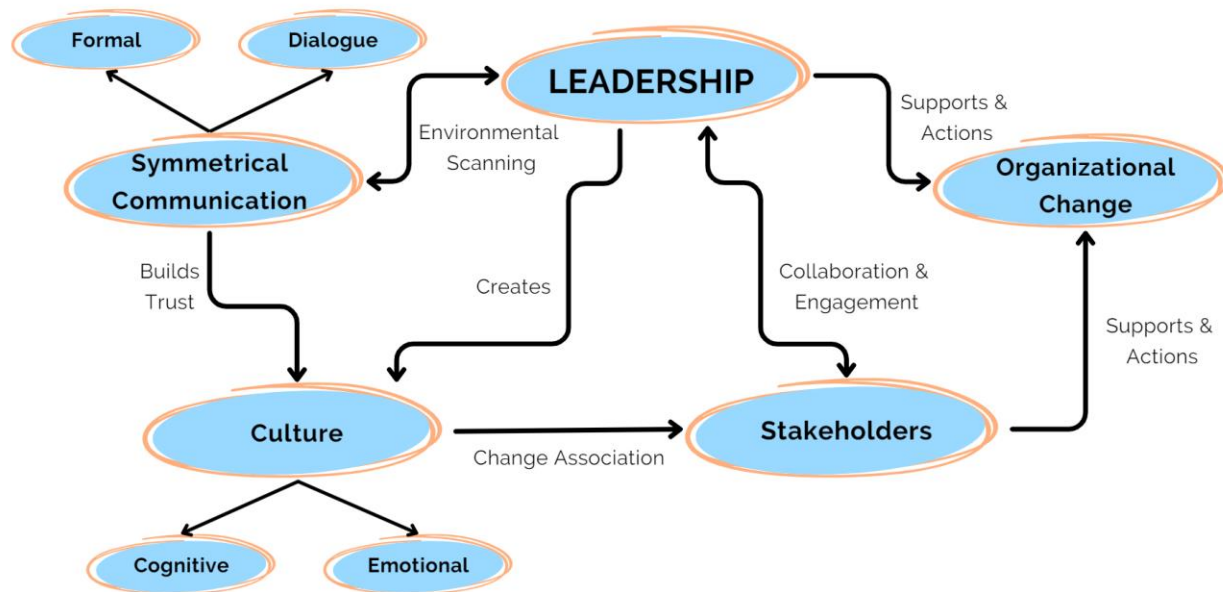
Conclusions and Recommendations

Leaders have many opportunities to impact stakeholders that develops their acceptance or resistance to change. There’s a lot of pressure on leadership to execute multiple roles, which is why communications support is essential to understand current and predicted future states through environmental scanning, to raise concerns that affect organizational direction and culture, and to assist in coaching leadership at all levels. This study sought to answer the question, how and to what extent can an effective communication function determine change management success? Results suggest communications immensely determines success *if* the role

is reimagined. The study's conclusions formed Figure 10, which demonstrates the relationship between leadership, culture, and communication.

Figure 10

Change Management Success Model



Central to the change management success model is leadership, which is responsible to funnel the change throughout the organization from start to finish. Communicators use environmental scanning activities to bring up insights to leadership that help inform strategy. Symmetrical communication uses both formal and dialogic methods to build trust, which is foundational for a positive organizational culture. Leadership then uses the information gathered from environmental scanning and symmetrical communication tools to create both a cognitive and emotional culture. The organizational culture determines stakeholders' association with change and whether they will support or resist efforts. Meanwhile, leadership is also collaborating and engaging with stakeholders using symmetrical communication to understand

the concerns, risks, and benefits of different groups. Authentic stakeholder collaboration ensures that after listening and gathering information, leadership supports and actions the organizational change in a way that preserves stakeholder relationships. If stakeholder needs are met, they too will support and action the change.

The model is cyclical in that every action moves its way through the different stages, sometimes in tandem, with its success rate fed back to leadership through environmental scanning. The model does not vary throughout the different stages of change management because the research indicated that stakeholder collaboration is important at every phase, culture must be continuously built, and communication needs are perpetual. However, the focus within each category is fluid, responding to changing stakeholder requirements identified through feedback mechanisms. The model also demonstrates the necessity of communication within change management, because without it, leadership does not have the tools to properly set the stage for positive stakeholder engagement and adoption of change. Thus, three recommendations arose for organizations to positively increase change management implementation and adoption.

Recommendation One: Cultivate an emotional culture.

1. *Learn your organization's informational and emotional culture.*
2. *Understand how culture impacts change management success.*
3. *Develop strategy to mitigate risk and continuously build a positive emotional culture.*

Both the literature and research pointed to the importance of culture in determining an openness to change. Culture is one of the organizational backbones that indicates how stakeholders should feel and act in different situations. When change is introduced that creates uncertainty, stakeholders fall back on culture to dictate their reactions. Traditionally,

communication has provided information to help stakeholders understand the change. This step is still important, but the communication strategy should shift from solely informational to tap into the emotional culture of an organization. Communicators may support leadership in understanding the reality of organizational culture, rather than what organizations promote as their culture, through environmental scanning. Once the current culture is understood, communicators may offer how the culture may impact change success and provide recommendations on how to reduce risks and shift culture over time. Resistance is a feeling, and the research shows that solely focusing on informational culture such as mission, vision, and values does not do enough to mitigate the risk.

Culture is also built upon organizational history and every action or inaction moves towards or away from desired culture. For this reason, emotional culture should be continuously cultivated and not focused on solely during change management. Communicators can assist in building a culture based on trust, transparency, authenticity, and empowerment through symmetrical communication. The research also noted the importance of stakeholder appreciation in developing a positive emotional culture.

Recommendation Two: Partner with communicators for strategic insights.

1. *Bring communications into the conversation at idea conception.*
2. *Position communicators for maximum visibility and influence in an organization.*
3. *Delegate tactical responsibilities to allow space for advisory roles.*

There's a disconnect between the type of support communicators believe they can offer leaders and what is produced in practice. The research found that communications support is largely tactical, such as key points summaries, email templates, and reports. Leadership is not

receiving top value from communicators in this manner. However, communicators must also educate leadership on their offerings to be given the opportunity to showcase strategic talent. The brunt of the weight can shift to a more manageable state when communicators act as strategic partners with leadership.

The first step is bringing communications into the discussion from the start, not once the idea has already been formulated. Communications' view of organizational matters and emphasis on relationship management breeds versatility that can lend itself to any organizational topic. Without access, it takes longer to build understanding and develop relationships.

The study suggested strategic support should be differentiated between senior and middle management to meet their specific goals. Communications support transcends specific change management goals to act as coaches and advisors that assist management with relationship building activities. This in turn enhances overall leadership skills that translate across organizational initiatives.

Recommendation Three: Engage in authentic stakeholder collaboration during planning.

1. *Float ideas past stakeholders early to help build the change management plan.*
2. *Portray genuine interest in listening, gathering information and learning from stakeholders.*
3. *Employ symmetrical communication to validate and act on stakeholder concerns.*

Research results suggested stakeholder collaboration efforts in organizations were mainly performative, something that was necessary for optics or to sway public opinion. Yet all study participants noted the importance of proper discussion among stakeholders, which suggests that leadership may halt true symmetrical communication. By taking away the opportunity for

discussion, stakeholders feel resentment when changes happen to them, solidifying a negative emotional culture. During planning stages is also when risks should be identified, which cannot be fully realized without stakeholder consultation. Concerns must be heard, validated, and acted upon. Stakeholders should feel appreciation for participating in the discussion. Without proper symmetrical communication measures used early in a change management project, informational communication will not be effective to sway behaviour that matches the desired change.

Successful change management relies on strong leaders who believe in the initiative, two-way symmetrical communication that involves stakeholders from the start, and an organizational focus on positive informational and emotional culture building. The complex nature of organization-stakeholder relationships requires constant monitoring through environmental scanning and commitment from leadership to use communication as a tool that strengthens bonds. All three elements—leadership, communication, and culture—provide a foundation for stakeholders to create positive associations with change and increase the success rate of long-term behavioural change in an organization.

Future Research

The results of this study revealed additional areas of research that the scope did not allow for further investigation. Scholars may wish to build upon the study's findings to add to the growing body of research examining the role of communications in change management.

Firstly, further research is needed to explore the disparity between the perception and misperception of organizational transparency. Participants noted their belief that organizations displayed transparent cultures, yet when organizational actions were examined, it was evident that true transparency was not achieved. What leads stakeholders to believe in transparency? Is

authentic transparency necessary, or has transparency become a buzz word with a similar effect?

What is the appropriate amount of transparency to obtain change acceptance and trust?

Study results also revealed a belief that leadership does not recognize the value of environmental scanning. Future scholars may wish to interview leadership to understand what information they believe is important to highlight and act upon. How and when does leadership want this information presented? What should communicators stop and start doing when it comes to environmental scanning?

Additionally, the literature noted the importance of dialogic communication in building an environment of trust and stakeholder engagement. Research could explore the ideal formula for the split between dialogic and formal communication to obtain success in change management.

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Appendix A: Survey Questions

1. When answering each question throughout this survey, think of one organizational change initiative that you planned and/or implemented. In one sentence, describe the organizational change and the primary stakeholder group.

2. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? I would describe the organization's culture as...

Statement	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Not sure
Transparent						
Ethical						
Change-oriented						
Authentic						
Trusting						

Feedback-oriented						
Engaging						

3. Which of the following was communicated to stakeholders regarding the organizational change? Check all that apply.

- a. Mission, Vision, Values
- b. Goals and objectives
- c. Procedures
- d. Benefits
- e. Risks
- f. Appreciation
- g. None of the above
- h. Not sure

4. Of the items that were communicated in the previous question, how were the messages communicated?

- a. Generally (the same message for all stakeholders)
- b. Segmented (different messages for each stakeholder group)
- c. Both generally and segmented
- d. Neither generally nor segmented
- e. Not sure

5. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? The organization...

Statement	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Not sure
Communicated the reasons and benefits of the change clearly, effectively, and often						
Carefully phrased a vision to describe the desired future state						

Provided an opportunity for those affected by the change to provide input						
Established trust by following through on commitments and displaying consistent leadership behaviour						
Matched the vision with reality						
Insisted on an enterprise-wide focus on risk management						
Implemented standard project management processes						
Communicated a need for the change						
Packaged the change in a way that stakeholders embraced the solution being offered						

6. How would you describe the organization's relationship with the primary stakeholder group?

- a. Exchange (actions based on a transaction with the expectation of receiving something in return)
- b. Communal (actions based on goodwill)
- c. Both exchange and communal
- d. Neither exchange nor communal
- e. Not sure

7. What frequency were stakeholders asked to provide feedback prior to, during, and after the organizational change?

Frequency	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	Not sure
Prior to the Change						
During the Change						
After the Change						

8. How valuable is stakeholder input to determine the following:

	Extremely valuable	Very valuable	Moderately valuable	Slightly valuable	Not at all valuable	Not sure
What information is needed						
How much information is needed						
How well the organization is fulfilling the need for information						

9. How would you describe the level of stakeholder engagement or disengagement prior to, during, and after the organizational change?

Frequency	Engaged	Somewhat Engaged	Neither Engaged Nor Disengaged	Somewhat Disengaged	Disengaged	Not sure
Prior to the Change						
During the Change						
After the Change						

10. How often did communications provide support to leadership during the change?

- a. Never
- b. Rarely
- c. Sometimes
- d. Often
- e. Always
- f. Not sure

11. Which of the following activities were implemented to support leadership communication at the senior and middle manager levels? Select two answers per row: one for middle managers and one for senior managers.

Support Activity	Middle Manager	None	Not Sure	Senior Manager	None	Not Sure
Communication training						
Leadership training						

Key points summary						
Communication tools and software						
Ongoing coaching						
Promotion and visibility						
Interaction opportunities with stakeholders						
Informational communication						
Emotional/relational communication						
Rewards/reinforcement						

12. How frequently do you conduct environmental scanning activities that foresee indicators of change?

- a. Never
- b. Rarely
- c. Sometimes

- d. Often
- e. Always
- f. Not sure

13. How valuable does leadership perceive environmental scanning activities that identify indicators of change?

- a. Not at all valuable
- b. Slightly valuable
- c. Moderately valuable
- d. Very valuable
- e. Extremely valuable
- f. Not sure

14. Which of the following barriers to successful change management have you experienced?

Check all that apply.

- 1. Failure to understand the business problem
- 2. Proper stakeholders were not engaged early in the project lifecycle

3. No one listened to or validated stakeholder concerns
 4. Void in project communications
 5. Inability to properly track and measure the change
 6. Lack of leadership commitment
 7. Not sure
15. Rank the following options in order of importance to change management success. Drag-and-drop items in the left list to move them to the right list. Your highest-ranking item should be on the top right, moving through to your lowest-ranking item at the bottom right.

Your Choices	Your Ranking
Leadership	
Communication	
Culture	

16. What percentage of the elements required for successful change management does effective communication make up?

- a. 0%
- b. 25%
- c. 50%
- d. 75%
- e. 100%
- f. Not sure

17. How successful or unsuccessful would you rate the organizational change?

- a. Completely Successful
- b. Somewhat Successful
- c. Neither Successful nor Unsuccessful
- d. Somewhat Unsuccessful
- e. Completely Unsuccessful

f. Not sure

18. How experienced are you in the communications/public relations field?

- Intermediate (6-10 years experience)
- Senior (More than 10 years experience)

Appendix B: Interview Guide

1. Describe the organizational change.
 - a. What was the change?
 - b. When did it occur?
 - c. Who were the stakeholders?
 - d. What role did you play in the change?
 - e. How did the organization define success and what were the organization's results?
2. How would you describe the organization's culture?
 - a. How does the organization's culture contribute to stakeholder willingness to participate in change initiatives?
 - b. What strategies do you employ, if any, to build a culture of continuous change?
3. How do you foresee change indicators and bring these indicators to the attention of senior management?
4. How did you engage stakeholders in the change initiative?
5. How did you support leadership communication at both the senior and middle manager levels, as applicable?
6. What was the top barrier you encountered during change management planning or implementation and how did you overcome this barrier?
7. What value do communicators bring to change management planning and implementation?