



Cadmus Compass Series: Leading your organization in times of change

Leading through change: putting people first in your workplace communications

By Sonia Checchia, Senior Specialist, Cadmus

In times of change, instability, stress, and uncertainty, the single most valuable currency is information. Organizations that thrive in periods of change harness the power of information and democratize it. They share information just-in-time, *demonstrate* transparency and openness, and facilitate two-way dialogue.

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In a [previous article](#) on leading through change, Cadmus Senior Vice President Beth McDonald provided a primer on organization design, along with the 'BEST' model, a four-part process to guide organizations on how to approach a redesign effort due to budget cuts or staff reductions. The fourth step, and 'T' in BEST, is about 'telling the story,' i.e., communicating the change. Though the current environment may not allow for the development of an ideal communication strategy, in this article I share best practices for leaders who put people first during challenging times.

Change communications done right

If you are a leader in an organization that is facing uncertainty and stress, here is a round-up of best practices for employee communications.

1

Recalibrate the plan

If your organization has a communication strategy with an established cadence for team meetings, leadership emails, employee newsletters, etc., take a close look at what's planned. What's always worked probably won't work for the current situation. Consider the major activities, decision points, and milestones that you anticipate in the next three months, and adjust the plan accordingly. That's your new starting point. Then, commit to revisiting the plan weekly.

2

Prioritize connection

The best practice for leaders facing a time of turmoil and change is to establish more frequent touchpoints with staff and the most senior leaders, e.g., daily or weekly meetings replace monthly or quarterly meetings. Get in touch regularly.

3

Type less; talk more

In the world of work, email is an easy way to close the loop on a task and reach a large number of people quickly. In times of change, higher-touch communications are needed. Forget about email. The best practice is to shift from (or rely less on) "push" channels, and to create forums for dialogue. Once information has been shared "live" through discussion, then email, newsletters, and other written channels can provide a recap, transcript, recording, or one-stop-shop for FAQs.

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Leaders who prioritize communication send a signal to staff: You matter.

4

Assemble the experts

When your organization is facing significant changes, people need to hear it directly from the top. For any staff meetings, it's critical to gather the organization's leaders to share updates and field questions. If the change is related to facilities or the return-to-office policy, engage a leader from that group. For any topics related to staffing, benefits, etc., engage your HR partners. If the change is related to technology, such as a new policy regarding using your own device, arrange for an IT leader to answer questions.

5

Near real-time updates

While some organizations—in particular those with a strong hierarchy—cascade communications by group/role/level, the best practice in times of change is to share updates with everyone at the same time. Avoid the “preview” or “heads up” for certain groups, which can reinforce the hierarchy and the feeling that certain staff are “in the dark.”

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Sharing information as it's available builds trust and demonstrates fairness—important values to reinforce belonging. Even if you don't have the answers, tell them that.

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Frontline huddles

Encourage frontline leaders to hold office hours and team huddles. Suggest that they make “just checking in” phone calls with their direct reports. Personal outreach is critical to maintain community when change is in flight. These allow staff to connect, share their concerns with their peers, and strengthen relationships.

7

Explain why

Explaining the *what*, e.g., decisions about downsizing, cutting programs, staff actions, is part one, but it's incomplete without also explaining the *why* behind the decisions. The best practice is to give it to them straight. If some number of staff is to be laid off based on tenure or performance, share the criteria. If budgets are cut based on priority to the customer or client, share the criteria. Always communicate the rationale.

8

Future tense

Fear and anxiety soar when people are uncertain about the future. When the present is tense, shift to future tense. As much as possible, paint a clear picture of where the organization is headed, what it will look like, and what the priorities will be.

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“What about me?” That's the big question in org change. Your role is to help people make a connection between the change—and how they will be needed, or how they will contribute, in the future.

9

Talk even if there is no news

There's a rule in the world of work when it relates to meetings, and it is to have as few as possible. In times of change, that rule goes out the window. The best practice for an organization that values relationships and connection is to establish a more frequent cadence of touchpoints. When talking with staff, share what you know and commit to checking back in by x day, whether or not you have any new info. Knowing when you will receive info, and where it's coming from, is the kind of reassurance staff need when faced with major change.

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Pop-up meetings cause panic; pre-schedule your meetings so staff know what to expect. “We’ll find out more tomorrow” provides tremendous reassurance in times of change.

Find ways to assess what employees need, what's resonating, and to get a pulse on the mood/situation. Call on a few trusted staff who you know will give it to you straight. Convene a kitchen cabinet.

10

Feedback loop

I'll close with an upside to the down times. I have consulted with leaders in the private sector and government, in good times and in bad, and I find that the most stressful times can also be the most forgiving from a communication standpoint. It's not about preparing the perfect presentation or planning a flawless meeting. What your staff will remember is that you showed up and prioritized their needs, their concerns, and their questions. That's the most important part of leading change.

Sonia Checchia is a senior specialist at Cadmus where she consults on internal, executive, and change communications. With two decades of experience in communications consulting and event design, her diverse background spans government, management consulting, and nonprofits, providing her with a comprehensive understanding of

organizational culture, stakeholder engagement, and employee experience. Sonia holds a master's degree in sociolinguistics from Georgetown University and a bachelor's degree in international studies from American University. She is passionate about bringing people together to have conversations that move an organization forward.

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