

**Growing and Developing People through a Values Driven Approach
To Improve Meaning in Internal Communication**

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**Growing and developing people through a values-driven approach to improve
meaning in internal communication**

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Growing and developing people through a values-driven approach to improve meaning in communication

Summary

This paper provides a review of the literature and the preliminary findings from a Qualitative study investigating the perceptions of internal communication managers in understanding the relationships of normative re-educative organisation development (OD), sensemaking in terms of meaning making and effective and trusted internal communication. These perceptions highlight ways of enhancing and managing internal communication through aligned values, shared meaning and trustworthy internal communication.

Growing and developing people through a values-driven approach to improve meaning in communication

Background

From its genesis, values have played a significant part in organisation development (OD). The creation and alignment of both positive and negative values impact on outcomes at individual, group and organisational levels (Bushe and Marshak, 2009; Church et al., 1994; Margulies and Raia, 1988; Worley and Feyerherm, 2003). When values are correctly understood OD professionals integrate them into organisational life to increase effectiveness through building trust, sincerity, teamwork, ideas creation and problem solving (Cummings and Worley, 2009; Neilsen, 1984). If the focus is on organisational efficiency and the bottom-line, capable managers find employees are looking for greater meaning in both their job and the communication they receive in terms of work and values alignment (Cummings and Worley, 2009).

Internal communication managers have been pushed towards being information disseminators rather than communicators (Vercic et al., 2012). Information delivery limits higher levels of employee commitment (Quirke, 2008), an issue that needs addressing (Linke and Zerfass, 2011). When internal communication creates shared meaning, values are aligned (Kitchen and Daly, 2002; Proctor and Doukakis, 2003) generating a sense of belonging and employee engagement (Welch, 2012). OD, in the context of this study, is focused on improving organisational effectiveness through the development and growth of employees, which is achieved through normative re-educative OD. This family of strategies, based on participation and trust (Quinn and Sonenshein, 2008) is investigated in relation to being a values based approach for the creation of shared meaning in internal communication.

Literature

OD has evolved with a shifting emphasis from “changing behaviour and what people do” to “changing mindsets and what people think” (Bushe and Marshak, 2009, p. 357). Normative re-educative OD aims to alter the minds of individuals through interventions designed to help them rethink their values, beliefs and attitudes (Mann-Feder and Litner, 2004). As individuals engage in these interventions, they look to discover value and meaning as it relates to them (Choi and Ruona, 2011). The transmission of information doesn’t change behaviour, it requires an intervention focused on values and attitudes at both a personal and shared level (Lozano, 2006; Bennis, 1969). Through a normative shift and re-education, enabled by reflection and learning, individuals grow and find meaning (Janićijević, 2012, 2014). Argyris (1991) proposes two concepts for learning, double-loop learning, based on interaction, feedback, reflection and refined interaction. Single-loop learning takes place when there is no questioning of the underlying program (Argyris, 1977). The significance of double-loop learning is it brings to the surface the values, beliefs and assumptions enabling individuals to confront the behaviours hindering learning and take action accordingly (Argyris, 1994). To be ongoing, individuals must learn to learn from their experiences (Chin and Benne, 1969; Deming, 1994; Roth and Senge, 1996).

Understanding individual behaviour and why they avoid learning, Argyris and Schon (1974) propose two theories, ‘espoused theory of action’ - “the theories that people report as governing their actions” and ‘theory-in-use’ - “the theories that actually govern their actions” (Argyris, 1998, p.345). To further understand ‘theory-in-use’, Argyris (1979) developed two models; Model I, found to be in use by most individuals, comprises behaviours of control, winning and not dealing with feelings leading to miscommunication, low trust and defensiveness, thereby limiting learning.

Growing and developing people through a values-driven approach to improve meaning in communication

There is no questioning of the underlying norms (single-loop learning) (Argyris, 1998). Model II is where one expresses their own views leading to effective problem solving that question the prevailing values (double-loop learning) (Argyris, 1998). To enable learning, it is important to overcome defensive routines by understanding these two models (Argyris, 1994).

As the values of the individual develop the associated shift in attitudes provides greater understanding of others leading to enriched meaning (Hampden-Turner, 1982). It is through the process of sensemaking that meaning creation is understood (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). Sensemaking is retrospective and cognitive by nature, where in the present the creation of meaning is developed through dialogue and personal reflection on a past event (Weick, 1995). As sensemaking is examined, linkages to communication are apparent (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011).

Communication between employees is the receiving, co-constructing and de-constructing of meanings, which occurs in ways management does not always anticipate (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011). Therefore communication in organisations is a complexity that is more than information exchange but a reflective process that needs constant inquiry. It is the reflective process that links directly to a normative re-educative OD approach with its recognition of the importance of an environment that is collaborative by nature with communication at its core (Dunphy and Stace, 1988; Safran, 1991).

This research uses as its foundational theory the concepts and principles expressed within the normative re-educative field of OD as conveyed in the theories and publications of Chin and Benne (1969) and Argyris (1977, 1979, 1991, 1994, 1998) to understand the creation of values. In turn to understand how meaning may be improved, the theories and publications of Weick (1995) are examined along with literature on internal communication (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011; Kitchen and Daly, 2002).

Research Methodology

Qualitative research describes behaviours, lived experiences, emotions and feelings of individuals and/or groups (Crotty, 1998). In qualitative research observations are processed through the mind and body of the researcher (Tracy, 2013). This study explores the relationships between OD, sensemaking - in essence the making of meaning and effective internal communication from an interpretive position. The overarching research question that guided this study is: What is the relationship between normative re-educative OD, meaning and internal communication?

Denzin (2009) suggests interviews and narratives provide the researcher with the life experiences they are looking to explore. The participants for this study were internal communication managers from a diversity of organisations. Through semi-structured interviews they were asked to share their stories, thoughts and/or metaphors reflecting upon the relationship between individual behaviour, values and meaningful communication.

Analysis of data consisted of thematic analysis through the constant comparison method, that of classifying or coding data into related groups enabling similarities or differences to be identified (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Dye et al., 2000). Engaging in

Growing and developing people through a values-driven approach to improve meaning in communication

the hermeneutic circle, that of reflection and co-construction of data between the researchers and participant, meaning is developed through life experiences enabling an understanding of the relationship being researched (Fersch, 2013; Lavery, 2003). These methods produce thick rich descriptive data that through coding thematically coupled with interpretation through the hermeneutic circle enable new knowledge to emerge (Liamputtong, 2013).

Preliminary Findings

To date ten interviews have been conducted with internal communication managers face to face initially or via videoconference. Preliminary analysis of the ten interviews revealed over 100 concepts, several of which have been combined and refined resulting in 45 concepts. Three initial themes were formed from these concepts, first, 'participative values' includes 'lived values', 'fosters communication' (storytelling), 'collaboration' and 'values in action'. The second, 'model II organisation', consists of the concepts 'values based leadership', 'values alignment' and 'values shift'. The third, 'building relationships' combines 'building connections' and 'relationships'.

The theme 'participative values'

This theme is an expression of the importance of collaboration and participation of employees. They value having input and contributing to the organisation, described by one participant as *"to build that narrative together...you are part of the co-creation of a strategy...then you build it, you own it, you're more likely to deliver on that...understanding the part I am going to play..."*.

It is about being able to *"give them permission to come up with awesome ideas, improve the way they work and continue to evolve..."*. Individuals are able to grow and develop enabling the organisation to *"...attract and retain and create a culture that people want to work and thrive in."*

The theme – 'model II organisation'

This type of organisation has an understanding of people and the need to nurture values and behaviour development through questioning underlying assumptions. This is reflected in the following participant comment:

...people having the space to step back and look at the behaviour that they had been conducting in the workplace and all of a sudden kind of having the realisation on the impact...how far they had strayed away...from what their core purpose is... really enabled people to bring that value much more to the surface and lead through that value and therefore have the legitimacy to be able to make the different kinds of decisions and behave in different kinds of ways...

For *"...if your personal values are more aligned with that of the company, I think it's easier for you to know your direction, to align your activity with what the company is trying to achieve."*

Employees have a choice; they are informed as one participant explained:

...engaged them in understanding, at quite a deep level...they said to the people, you don't have to sign up this, this is where we're going as an organisation, it's up to you if you want to be part of this journey and if you don't, that's absolutely fine...

Growing and developing people through a values-driven approach to improve meaning in communication

It is important for leadership to understand their people for:

...if the CEO doesn't have that clear, concise story of why we are here, what is the reason we exist beyond making money...they don't communicate that effectively to employees then it's very difficult to connect with the hearts and minds of individuals...

Defensive routines are overcome when employees are able to be open and honest leading to more effective communication. Participants explained “...you could be really authentic...have an open forum where people feel safe to be able to give feedback and say things without fear of being shot down if your values were to be supportive and open...” and “...if you get people into that attitude from being willing to be really authentic and...honest...that has a huge impact on the way they communicate informal and formal communications...and that actually starts to build engagement and commitment with employees”.

The theme ‘building relationships’

Highlighted above was the importance of connecting with the hearts and minds of individuals. This theme is defined as forming a connection with others in a way that makes you feel part of the organisation understanding how your role contributes to its success. Describing this, participants explained, “...it's that connection, the values, the people, they understand their part...”

The flow on effect is to communication demonstrated by the following comment: “...really stay connected with each other and I think that creates a better place, a place of more easier communication flows.”

Where there is a lack of connection to the organisation, another participant explained:

...if they feel that there is no moment where you've let them into a thought or you've been honest with them and you've heard them, importantly that you've heard them back then they can't build the rapport or a relationship...

To build internal commitment and engagement, employees want to feel connected and be heard.

Conclusion

In summary, the aim of this study was to understand the relationship between normative re-educative OD, sensemaking (meaning) and internal communication. Where there is alignment between these three theories, the themes, ‘participative values’, ‘model II organisation’ and ‘building relationships’ were evidenced. It is apparent when values are aligned, relationships are built and employees feel connected enabling effective feedback and learning to take place improving the meaning in communication. Where employees are involved in creation of the values and see the demonstration of those values present throughout the organisation, this improves employee commitment.

As an in-depth literature review revealed, a linkage between these concepts had not been adequately researched or explained by past literature. Through the insights from internal communication managers, this linkage is being seen and by understanding it, a unique contribution may be made to the total body of knowledge.

Growing and developing people through a values-driven approach to improve meaning in communication

A practical contribution is made to organisational life in improving and developing a more effective trustworthy value-based professional practice for internal communication managers.

These insights have the potential to change the way in which internal communication is crafted and delivered. By including the action science aspects of normative re-educative OD, this reflective learning process may lead to more trust-based internal communication that further encourages individuals and groups to re-examine core values, beliefs and operating assumptions about themselves and others.

Growing and developing people through a values-driven approach to improve meaning in communication

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Growing and developing people through a values-driven approach to improve meaning in communication

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Growing and developing people through a values-driven approach to improve meaning in communication

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