Let's Give Them Something to Talk About: The Role of Communication in Change

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Background

The global medical center was in a state of major change. To address market conditions related to overseas clinics, they had recently appointed a new CEO, based in the U.S. He brought in a COO, and a former medical center president came out of retirement to help lead the transition. The change included new medical records systems, new payroll systems, new team structures that brought together teams of individuals who differed in culture and language, and new employees. This executive transition team worked with the corporate communication and marketing teams to announce all the changes prior to beginning the implementation of new systems and processes.

After three months, they were pleased that they didn't receive push back from employees impacted by the changes, nor even many questions about the changes, and prepared to roll out the new operating and human resources systems. They sat back to enjoy improved efficiencies, higher profits, and teams who were satisfied and high-performing. Within six months, they realized this was not happening. In fact, pre-change employee satisfaction levels were decreasing. Worse, patient satisfaction scores were beginning to decline.

The CEO called the head of communication, and she assessed the situation as beyond communication, and she hired an organization development (OD) expert to help them figure it out. Even better, the OD expert they hired was also a communication expert. (Yes, they hired me.)

As I got in and examined the situation, I realized that, operationally, the change management plan was fine – all the steps to introducing and integrating new systems were sound. The problem seemed to be that communication was missing from the change strategy. When

told of this initial assessment, the CEO was puzzled. "We did announce it," he said. "What more could we have done?"

Based on my communication and OD experience and education, I know there is a lot more they could do.   My peers agree, and the business world is starting to take note. A friend who leads mergers and acquisitions for clients of a global financial services firm told me that he always adds communication as a crucial element to transition and integration plans - and that this is always questioned by his clients and bosses.   He attributes it to the fact they just aren't used to thinking about communication as part of this kind of transition.

In my view, mergers and acquisitions are among the most dramatic and disruptive types of organizational change because they usually include changes to things that people care about in the quality of their daily work lives – such as to whom they report, the physical location of their building, their salaries and positions, their team members, and other factors. However, people rarely have buy-in before mergers or acquisitions take place, since these decisions usually are made by very senior leaders in carefully guarded settings.

My counsel to the medical center was based on my training and experience, and my observations and instincts that communication is the critical factor for successful change (that is, change that meets the goals of the situation). I would like to be sure. In this paper, I examine the ideal role of communication in change – broadly for applicability to many change situations and types.

My research question: what does the literature on change and communication say about the role of communication in the strategy and design of effective change management? My hypothesis is: in change management programs deemed by change recipients to be effective (dependent variable), the existing literature discusses communication as the key strategic element

(independent variable). This is a broad, qualitative topic, and this paper will just begin to look at it through the existing literature about change and communication. Going beyond the literature, I will look at change model I've created that does include communication at its core, and I discuss how that can both be used now effectively, as well as held up for further analysis.

The conclusions I draw should lead to areas for additional research (including quantitative analyses of communication and change) and practical application for my professional peers in OD, leadership, and communication in the worlds of business, nonprofits, and government.

Literature Review

To examine the role of communication in change management, I looked at existing research linking those two fields of study, bringing in the basics of strategic organizational communication theory. I use change theory as my contextual framework, with systems theory providing the ultimate structure.

Literature Linking Communication and Change

A broad review of change management literature that includes communication reveals that scholars have studied the topics of communication and change as mostly separate disciplines, with few works crossing over to both at the strategic level. These major themes emerged from the literature reviewed: assessment/readiness, leadership, culture, strategy, interventions, competencies, and management. Communication is included mostly as a "how-to" or a way to get to effective change, and mostly at the interpersonal level. Further, most of the studies are qualitative in method.

One exception is a study by Oreg, Vakala, & Armenakis (2011), a literature review that focuses on the reactions of change recipients, summarizing 60 years of quantitative research on change. The reactions were coded by the authors into affective, cognitive, or behavioral reactions, with "antecedent" variables such as commitment to organization, trust in management, organizational status, culture, job characteristics. Communication is listed as part of a category of 22 other "miscellaneous" characteristics, and as part of the change process. The factor that yielded perhaps the most consistent and strongest relationship with change reactions is the extent to which change recipients trust management, with communication an indirect independent variable. More directly related to communication, the amount and quality of change information with which change recipients were provided showed that additional information and realistic, supportive and effective communication during change, was associated with several positive reactions, such as greater change acceptance and support for the change (Axtell et al., 2002; Gaertner, 1989; Wanberg & Banas, 2000, in Oreg, at al 2011). In addition, communication about the change was linked with a number of other responses, such as lower levels of anxiety and uncertainty, and increased trust in management and consequences, such as decreased turnover intentions (Ashford, 1988; Bordia et al., 2004; Gopinath & Becker, 2000; Johnson, Bernhagen, Miller, & Allen, 1996; K. I. Miller & Monge, 1985; V. D.Miller et al., 1994; Paterson & Cary, 2002, in Oreg et al 2011). Correspondingly, the study showed lack of communication during the change can lead to uncertainty, which may be a key source of change recipients' difficulties during change implementation (Schweiger & DeNisi, 1991, in Oreg et al 2011). In one study, however, contrary to what was hypothesized, additional information about the change corresponded with negative evaluations of the change (Oreg, 2006, in Oreg, et al 2011). The rationale provided for this finding was that it is not merely the amount of

information that determines reactions to change but also the content of this information.

Alongside the value for change recipients in receiving additional information, sometimes

learning more about the change can give change recipients all the more reason to resist it.

Overall, these authors concluded that there is complexity about the role of information

about the change in explaining the reaction to change.   Further, how much the individuals

perceive themselves as having control over the outcome is also likely to moderate the effect of

information on the reaction to change. Additional information without the ability to change

anything may lead to increased frustration, and thus resistance, rather than support.

So it appears that the right balance of content delivered by the right people at the right times

during change is the key to achieving change goals.

Several researchers have commented on the importance of providing employees with

adequate information during layoffs. In their 1996 article on change related to workforce

reductions (layoffs), Johnson, Bernhagen, Miller & Allen included communication as one of the

variables impacting a range of employee psychological responses to change. They concluded that

managers can influence survivor information deprivation, career future uncertainty, work

satisfaction, and propensity for turnover by paying attention to, and if possible controlling,

organizational identification, financial rewards, work team communication support, and manager

communication support. Defining communication as "information," these authors said that

information deprivation concerns the amount of information employees feel they are receiving

about organizational events. They concluded that organization members feel deprived when they

think that they do not know what is going on. Feldman (1989, in Johnson et al 1996) argues that

one of the keys to keep surviving workers informed of changes by explaining the rationale behind the changes and assuring the employees of their status with the organization

The gap I find in the literature in the previous section is that, mostly, it has classified communication as "information," which connotes a one-way flow of content and data that might or might not allow for input, feedback, or any two-way interaction with change recipients. The studies I found do not look at two-way communication methods specifically related to change. These include in-person meetings and other forms of live dialogue.

The school of thought that relates communication and learning also seems to say that change can be informed by certain data points, to be used as communication content to drive the change. To me, this also addresses the one-way communication approach. Chris Argyris, the primary scholar of communication and learning, said in a *Harvard Business Review* article (1994) that communication can sometimes block the learning that is important in organizations – and in the context of this paper, important to change. He said that formal communication methods like focus groups and employee surveys let people tell their managers how they feel without having to take any responsibility for their problems. While an argument could be made that learning is important to change, I believe it not direct enough to impact the study of communication and change.

Communication Model

Public relations scholars are trained to recognize the importance of striving for an ideal communicate that is a two-way symmetrical model – information flows equally between and among the parties involved. The need for this approach is addressed in communication literature, most notably by James Grunig and Todd Hunt (1994), who have characterized the

most common methods of communication and organized them into the following models: press

agentry/publicity (one-way, propaganda), public information (one-way, information

dissemination), two-way asymmetrical (uses scientific information to persuade without

dialogue), two-way symmetrical (goal is mutual understanding and agreement through dialogue

and collaboration). Of the four models of public relations commonly used by organizations, they

say two-way symmetrical model is the most effective because it refers to dialogue, which effects

change through buy-in as well as understanding.

Communication as a Change Tool

Much of the research about communication and change is about the "how-to" of

communication in change, discussing communication as coaching, learning, and on an

interpersonal level. One standout concept is that of change as communication. Ford (1999, in

Anderson, 2012) argued for a definition of change as "shifting conversations," in which people

use different language to identify and understand change. He said that when change does occur,

it's when new language is used. Ford & Ford (1995 in Anderson, 2012) said there are four types

of conversations around change: conversation that initiates change, those that seek to understand

change, conversations for performance and those for closure. (p. 80.)

I do agree with this view of change that it is a continuous movement and process rather

than a one time or finite event. I do agree that communication plays a key role. I think it plays

an even bigger role than the scholars seem to say, at least so far. The literature about

communication in coaching actually equates the two. These are not actual academic research

studies – more, they are practitioner guides. Anderson (2012) defines coaching as "a one on one

intervention in which an individual works to improve specific personal, interpersonal, skill areas

to take actions to reach a future goal, working with a facilitate on the process of personal change." p. 202. According to the International Coaching Federation, coaching is delivered through the following process:

Coaching typically begins with a personal interview (either face-to-face or by teleconference call) to assess the individual's or business' current opportunities and challenges, define the scope of the relationship, identify priorities for action and establish specific desired outcomes. Subsequent coaching sessions may be conducted in person or over the telephone, with each session lasting a previously established length of time. Between scheduled coaching sessions, the individual may be asked to complete specific actions that support the achievement of one's personally prioritized goals. The coach may provide additional resources in the form of relevant articles, checklists, assessments or models to support the individual's or business' thinking and actions. The duration of the coaching relationship varies depending on needs and preferences (http://www.coachfederation.org/need/, 2015).

Related, if change can be defined as moving from one state to another, communication occurs "when an exchange results in shared meaning" (Grossman, 2013, p. 55). Language as a tool to effect change also is captured by authors such as Kegan and Lahey (2001), which is largely about how leaders can communicate to reach the changes they seek. These are social construct models of change, where the job is to foster appropriate environments so these conversations can occur. In fact, Ford (1999, in Anderson, 2012) says the role of a change agent is to hold these types of conversations. The premise is that a group cannot function without words, and that communication is the vehicle that allows a group to move toward its goals. Words call into being the realities, or potential realities, that they represent. Words, then, have the power to create new realities and change attitudes; they are immensely powerful tools.

Although this may seem obvious, it is a truth that often goes unnoticed. Through language, we unravel the immense complexity that is our world.

Change in an Open System

Scholars view two-way symmetrical communication as the ideal, and although I have not seen it addressed this way, I believe this is a reference to systems theory (the grounding framework for OD, but not necessarily communication research). In looking at change in an open system (which all human systems are), we see that "feedback" is one of the key mechanisms of a system. I think any study of change has to include consideration of systems theory, foundational to OD. At a very basic level, systems theory builds on the work of Austrian biologist Ludwig Von Bertalanffy, who studied the systemic interconnectedness of nature (trees, plants, their environment, and the weather) in the 1950s. Rather than investigate each element in isolation from each other, Bertalanffy studied them together and particularly focused on how they are connected. Social psychologists Daniel Katz and Robert L. Kahn were among the first to adapt this perspective to organizational theory. "All social systems, including organizations, consist of the patterned activities of a number of individuals," they wrote in *The Social Psychology of Organizations* (1966, later revised).

To be effective, transition has to account for all aspects of the system that is changing. Literature on biologic and environmental systems agrees that to be classified as a system, the following must be present: 1). Objective - Every system has a predefined goal or objective towards which it works. 2). Standard - It is the acceptable level of performance for any system. 3). Environment - Every system, whether it is natural or manmade, co-exists with an environment. It is very important for a system to adapt itself to its environment. 4). Feedback –

Information comes from all parts of an organization system. Feedback about the output of a system, based on observation, improves the system and ensures it meets standards. 5). Boundaries and Interfaces - Every system has defined boundaries within which it operates.

Main Change Theories

John Kotter, renowned change scholar, says that change occurs in the following steps: John Kotter (1995) provides a widely used eight-step process for change. He says that change must go through a series of phases that in total usually require a considerable amount of time. The steps are: 1. Establish urgency. 2. Form powerful guiding coalition. 3. Create a vision. 4. Communicate the vision. 5. Empower others to act on the vision. 6. Plan for and create short-term wins. 7. Consolidate improvements and produce still more change. 8. Institutionalize new approaches.

These steps address change as the end result (the tangible difference in how we act and think today and how we want to act and think tomorrow), and, transition as the process and art of getting there, of shifting mindset and managing our emotions so we can safely and happily land in the new normal.

This difference – between change and transition – is a point made by social psychology theorist Kurt Lewin in the 1940s. Lewin was aware that change is not an event, but rather a process. He called that process a transition. Transition is the inner movement or journey we make in reaction to a change. Lewin created a helpful theory for my transition – his theory of unfreezing, transition, and refreezing. In unfreezing, this stage is about getting ready to change. It involves getting to a point of understanding that change is necessary, and getting ready to move away from our current comfort zone. Second, people are 'unfrozen' and moving towards a

new way of being. Lewin refers to this stage as freezing although a lot of people refer to it as

'refreezing'. As the name suggests this stage is about establishing stability once the changes have

been made. The changes are accepted and become the new norm – freezing back into place.

People form new relationships and become comfortable with their routines.

Lewin created this theory in 1947. More modern interpretations criticize the

characterization of freezing, saying that before anything new really becomes solid, it changes

again and rather than think of freezing, we engage in a continuous process that requires great

flexibility. I think this is an accurate way of looking at change. Lewin actually advocated for at

least a period of time in which the change takes hold. He said, "A change towards a higher level

of group performance is frequently short-lived… and soon returns to the previous level. This

indicates that it does not suffice to define the objective of planned change in group performance

as the reaching of a different level. Permanency of the new level, or permanency for a desired

period, should be included in the objective" (Lewin, 1947).

Lewin's concern is about reinforcing the change and ensuring that the desired change is

accepted and maintained into the future. Without this people tend to go back to doing what they

are used to doing. This is probably what Kurt Lewin meant by freezing - supporting the desired

change to make sure it continues and is not lost.

Change Readiness

Understanding change readiness (another area of change research), can support the

inclusion of communication as a critical element of change strategy. Anderson's Change

Readiness Assessment (2011) and other tools can help **t**o determine the baseline or starting point

related to the desired change. Knowing that, I can craft a change plan that has a better chance of

being effective. While the actual plan is beyond the scope of this paper, I would include the

following elements: 1). Study the change – who is losing what? 2). Understand the subjective

realities of each person on the team, and for the team as a group. 3). Find ways to compensate

people for what they're losing. 4). Create steps for the change. 5). Include feedback mechanisms.

This is in keeping with the two-way symmetrical model of communication, as discussed earlier.

The plan for the transition itself would include the following steps, throughout which

communication is embedded:

1. Create a theme and metaphor to describe the change.
2. Create a transition or change team.
3. Provide training for creative thinking, innovation, and other skills needed for goals.
4. Ensure resources are adequate and available as needed.
5. Create an evaluation plan that assesses: a. reaction (how do they feel?); b. learn (what do they now know?), c. behavior (did they change the way they do things?), d. impact (did it matter?)

Communication and Change

When it comes to change, Greiner & Cummings (2009) say that key stakeholders need to

be actively involved in strategy making from the start. Coch & French (2009) agree, especially

if some individuals within the organization's system are resisting the change. They say that it is

possible for management to dramatically modify or even remove resistance to changes large and

small. They advocate the use of communication, mostly in-person and from leadership level

individuals, in order to communicate clearly the need for change and motivating participation

through collaboration.

Wikoff (2015) believes that "To drive behavioral change, you must communicate the

need for change as it relates first to the overall business and second, on the personal level, saying

that addressing the popular acronym WIIFM (What's In It for Me?) is crucial if employees are expected to demonstrate desired change attributes. Wikoff attempts to establish parameters based on designing a communication plan under the philosophy of matching the sender of your message with the receiver's ability to receive the message. Supporting the two-way communication approach, Wikoff emphasizes the plight of the change recipient in knowing his or her role in the change.

According to the 2009/2010 Communications ROI Study conducted by Watson Wyatt Research and Innovation Center, there is a direct correlation between effective communication within an organization and the profitability level of the organization. More specifically, "effective employee communication is a leading indicator of financial performance and driver of employee engagement. Companies that are highly effective communicators had 47 percent higher total returns to shareholders over the last five years compared with firms that are the least effective communicators" (Watson Wyatt Research and Innovation Center, 2009, p.7). This study included a sample size of 5 million employees that spanned 328 different organizations from around the world. Another finding was that companies are more successful when employees have been educated and clearly understand the culture and values of their organization. The WWRIC (2009) stated that "communicating the EVP (Employee Value Proposition) effectively helps companies get the most out of their investment in talent, compensation and benefit programs" (p. 6). The study's data showed that highly effective communicators are twice as successful at integrating their organization's EVP into their overall communication strategy as those organizations that have less effective communication.

The view of the importance of communication is backed not only by theorists but by practitioners. Irene Rosenfeld, CEO of food company Mondelez International, attributes

communication to her success in turning around a failing company. She said in a 2014 interview

that she believes:

> "a big part of any leader's job is to communicate clearly and communicate often, particularly in times of change. It's important that people know where we're going as a company (our goals), what it will take to reach our goals (our strategies) and how we'll achieve them (our values). Along the way, we all need to "tell it like it is," which is one of our core values, so that we have candid conversations about how we're doing and what we can do better. Finally, it's crucial to recognize people's accomplishments and assure them their hard work is appreciated."

Designing Change Model

Taking all of the above into consideration (systems view, need for two-way

communication, need for communication to be a strategic element in change), I created a

strategic model (see the figure below). It is called the "Designing Change" model to depict my

desire to put change within a creative as well as scientific context. My intent is to show the

change process as a continuum of distinct, related, and interactive phases. In addition to serving

as a practical guide, the Designing Change model seeks to further organizations' understanding

of change theory –that is, the "best" ways to effect change within their organizations.
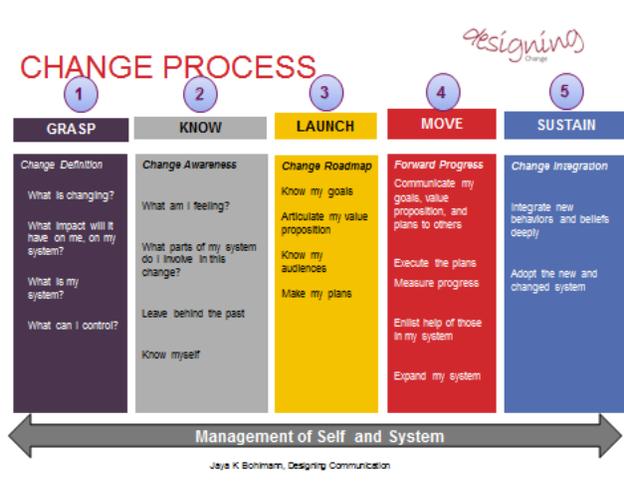

Figure 1. *Designing Change* model by J. Bohlmann, 2013

I believe my model depicts change according to Lewin's "freezing" model. Broadly described, the *Designing Change* model contains the following phases:

1.   Grasp – leaders and consultants come together to create definition for all aspects of

the change, including the business case (the reasons for the change), and desired outcomes (goals).

2.   Know – understanding of the change and its impact on all parts of an organization's system is deepened.

3.   Launch – strategic plans are made that align with a shared vision and mission for a desired and mutual future state.

4.   Move – implementation of the change strategy begins and is followed through.

5.   Sustain. In this final stage, feedback and communication as well as stakeholder engagement are important in order for change to become the new normal state. This stage focuses on the future, which could include another change initiative (highly possible given the current dynamic state of organization environments).

Since we are talking about change within human systems, communication and emotion are addressed as part of each stage.

The *Designing Change* model calls for clear communication at all stages of change – I believe it is the conduit and the engaging force for individuals and groups in the system driving and impacted by the change. The first stage, for example, calls for leaders and other decision makers to come together to set the stage and identify important aspects of the change. In the second stage, further understanding is asked of an additional level of employee and stakeholder groups. Third, plans are created and this involves yet another set of stakeholder groups. By the fourth and fifth stages, all stakeholders of the organization's system, internal and external, are involved. They are, in fact, the change agents – they are facilitating and implementing changes while providing and taking in feedback so that the change strategies are analyzed for any

possible need to adapt, as well as measure results of the change initiative that indicate success or

failure.

Conclusion

My research question was: what does the literature on change and communication say

about the role of communication in the strategy and design of effective change management?

My hypothesis was: in change management programs deemed by change recipients to be

effective (dependent variable), the existing literature discusses communication as the key

strategic element (independent variable). This paper looked at that broadly and from a

qualitative manner, and found that the literature does not currently discuss communication as a

strategic element. I believe I found that, with its emphasis on communication as a tool for

specific aspects of change, the literature on change and communication doesn't go far enough.

To be effective, I believe, and researchers agree, that communication needs to be part of

the change strategy, embedded throughout the process and viewed as a critical success factor for

any change initiative. Too much emphasis in the literature and in the practical applications of

change management is given to the actual systems and operations being changed in

organizations, with communication as an afterthought or peripheral tactic.

Change isn't the same as communication, after all. Change is a shift to different

behaviors and mindsets. In an open system, feedback is required for functioning and is a quality

of its very open-ness. In a system undergoing change, particularly a human system, it is crucial

to have the elements of interaction, having a known and clear destination or new changed state,

collaboration, cooperation, open dialogue and leaders who talk about the strategy while

motivating those within the system to work hard to accomplishing the change. This emphasizes

the need to adopt the two-way symmetrical model of communication at the highest and deepest levels of change strategies.

In my *Designing Change* model, communication is indeed the key to every phase of change, the phases mirroring John Kotter (1995) and Kurt Lewin (1947) in their change steps and freezing-unfreezing-freezing approach to change. The difference in my model is that communication is in lockstep with everything else required to accomplish change – not an afterthought or a technique but as the leading strategy. *Designing Change* is not yet a comprehensive nor detailed model – much more can be said for each phase, on the academic and practical levels. While my clients use the model as a framework and a guide, they usually create detailed plans they then use to move to action around the elements of change. In future work, I would develop my model so it expands on each phase – grasp, know, launch, move, sustain -, explaining more clearly the interaction of change strategy, leadership, and communication. I would also expand on communication's role in managing the emotion of change that almost always, in my view, can cause a change effort to derail, or to speed ahead with full force. This is a realistic expectation in my experience, given that the change we're talking about in organizations is taking place among human systems. I believe this adds to the existing body of knowledge on change management.

So what do I recommend to my medical center client? Given our discussion in this paper, I would submit a proposal that they first evaluate the readiness of the staff for this change (even though the change already is underway, it will give them a starting point for communication), then craft a strategic change plan with communication at its center. This communication would consist mostly of two-way, live and in-person dialogue sessions with senior leaders of the organization, tracking the feedback and assimilating it into the change plan

in a flexible and adaptive approach. I would also recommend they move through their change according to the phases of the *Designing Change* model.

For Future Study

I offer the following recommendations for additional research (including quantitative analyses of communication and change) and practical application for my professional peers in OD, leadership, and communication in the worlds of business, nonprofits, and government. :

1. Broaden the scope of the literature reviewed to include more than academic studies. Many are done by consulting firms, for example, and publishing houses designed for the practitioner rather than the academician.

2. Delve more deeply into the specific link between effective change and the two-way symmetrical model of communication. If communication theorists are correct that overall, this is the most desirable model, then it should hold true as the best communication approach for change. I also would want to know between which parties involved with the change system should that communication occur, in what specific forms, and how often/when.

3. Group the literature by communication-related themes (communication and leadership, communication and change recipients) and further group them by one-way and two-way communication methods (one-way being newsletters, intranet, emails from the supervisors and C-level executives; two-way including interactive methods such as discussions, meetings, town halls, feedback sessions, and the like). Create a coding system for the variables and responses, and correlate the variables.

4. Conduct quantitative studies that include surveys and possibly experiments, mixed with the qualitative methods more commonly used in change and communication studies.

5. Define closely the meaning of "successful" change management. While I've broadly included this definition to mean meeting the goals of the specific change management process for any given organization, some standardization is needed in order to truly study success. Perhaps it's wise to study change only (and first) among organizations undergoing the same kind of change (downsizing, mergers, acquisitions, bankruptcy, new CEO) and among types of organizations (nonprofit, government, for profit, publicly traded).

6. Remove coaching from the study of communication and change. Comparing the definitions of coaching with the literature posed here, coaching is a change communication tool on the individual rather than organizational level rather than as a strategy or as communication or change itself. Coaching can help people manage and understand the change by managing their mental and emotional processes related to the change, but is not itself change.

Overall, I would elevate the study of this field so that it includes change and communication on an organizational level much more broadly. At present, it appears most of the literature focuses on change and communication at the individual level. This is interesting and important, but not as practically applicable to those in OD or leadership roles seeking help with managing effective change at the macro, or enterprise-wide levels.

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