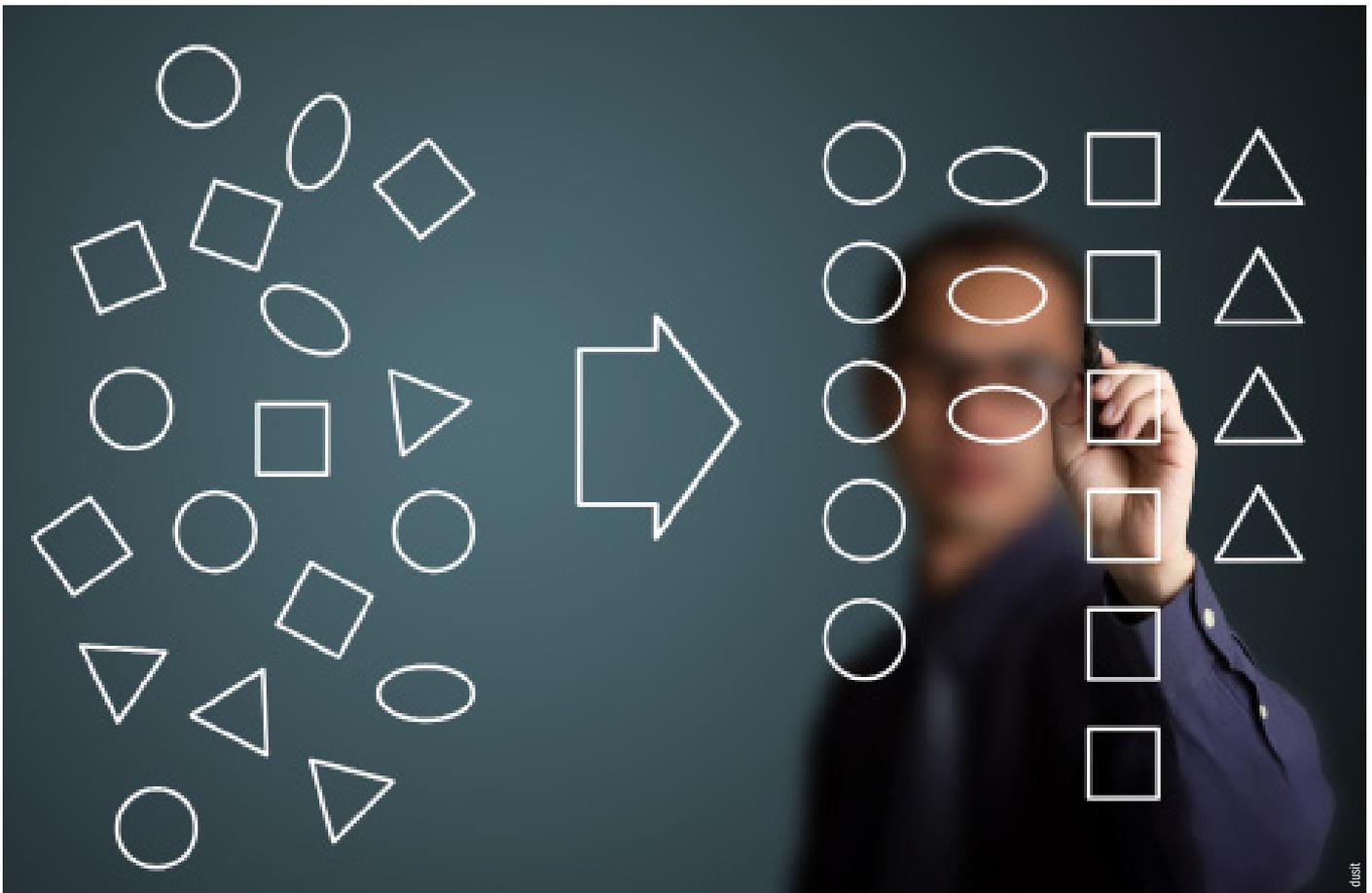


# What Every Communicator Needs to Know About Change Management

By Jaya Koilpillai Bohlmann, APR, M.A.



As human beings, we literally have change in our DNA. Every cell in our body, every hair on our head, is changing all the time. Change is in our environments, too — this year dramatically so, as we try to understand and keep up with changes in our nation's capital and their ripple effects on our clients and companies.

Of course, public relations has always been a dynamic and changing

profession. We know this from our own experience, and studies show that turnover in PR is among the highest of any profession, reaching 30 and even 55 percent in recent years, according to studies by the Institute for Public Relations. Such rapid turnover can be due to mergers and acquisitions; employees seeking opportunities for growth and promotions; or economic factors like client and account turnover, reduced

budgets and staff reductions. We've seen it all, and somehow we're living through it.

But we don't just want to survive amid change — we want to thrive. Merely keeping our heads above water won't move us or our organizations to a bright new horizon. Such inertia can even mean financial and reputational ruin, when related to changes like turnover in agencies, where talent is a

business model cornerstone.

To reach your brilliant future, you need a plan built on a solid understanding of change. And you can be the strategic adviser who provides such plans for your organizations.

Most of us did not study change management in school, and our companies rely on human resources and strategic-planning personnel or external consultants when they start a change-management initiative. As a result, PR professionals are often left out of change-related decisions, relegated to implementing the few tactics where communication is deemed necessary.

But rather than bemoan this state of affairs, I believe PR professionals can seize change management as an opportunity and a path to leadership and partnership/counselor status. Taking this step requires a solid understanding of change management, and the role of communication in change.

I've written this four-part series of articles to help PR professionals understand change management. My *Designing Change* model depicts change within a creative as well as scientific context. I created the model to provide a clear and distinct road map for change, with communication at its core. Not only can understanding change open a path to leadership, it can also help us better lead teams, manage our businesses and counsel the C-suite.

### Steps for understanding and managing change

Change theorists agree that effective change management requires us to:

- ◆ Study the change. What, specifically, is changing? What is the current state of affairs, and what is the desired future state?

- ◆ Understand the subjective realities of each person on the team, and of the teams themselves. Are people losing something because of the change, or do they think they are?

- ◆ Find ways to compensate people

for what they're losing.

- ◆ Create steps for the change.
- ◆ Include feedback mechanisms.

Incorporating these qualities, and broadly described, the *Designing Change* model entails the following actions:

- 1. Grasp:** Leaders and consultants come together to define all aspects of the change, including its reasons and goals.
- 2. Know:** Understanding deepens of the change and its impact on all parts of an organization.
- 3. Launch:** Strategic plans are made, with a shared vision and mission.
- 4. Move:** The change strategy is implemented and followed through.
- 5. Sustain:** Feedback, communication and stakeholder engagement are important for the final shift to the new state. This stage addresses the future, which will likely include another change initiative, given the current dynamic nature of organization environments.

Feedback, part of the two-way, symmetrical model of communication, is ideal for public relations, especially as interaction and engagement increasingly replace traditional one-way communication.

The *Designing Change* model addresses change as part of a human system, with the *individual* at the heart of the change — rather than just a checklist of tasks. It comprises five distinct, cyclical phases and calls for internal work by individuals and teams (reflection and self-understanding), in addition to tactical, external behaviors.

### Systems of change

Any study of change should take systems theory into consideration. At a basic level, systems theory builds on the work of Austrian biologist Ludwig Von Bertalanffy, who in the 1950s studied the interconnectedness of trees, plants, their environment, and the weather. Rather than investigate each element separately, Bertalanffy studied them

together, focusing on how they are connected. Social psychologists Daniel Katz and Robert L. Kahn were among the first to adapt this interconnected 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* in 1966.

This interconnected view of systems allows us to strategize change holistically, accounting for all the people, factors and elements of change. Broad perspective is crucial to building an effective change strategy that is realistic and values-driven. Using the systems approach as a practical guide, the *Designing Change* model seeks to help organizations better understand how to effect change. Most important to PR professionals, the model calls for clear communication at all stages of change.

Communication connects and engages individuals and groups who are causing or being affected by change. The first stage of the model, for example, calls for leaders and other decision makers to come together and identify important aspects of the change. In the second stage, the change is communicated to additional employee and stakeholder groups. In the third, plans are created. By the fourth and fifth stages, all stakeholders of the organization's system, both internal and external, are involved.

They are, in fact, the change agents — facilitating and implementing changes while also providing and receiving feedback so that change strategies are analyzed for any needed adaptations, and results of the change initiative are measured to indicate success or failure.

In subsequent articles of this series, I will describe the model's five stages in practical terms that you can put to immediate use in your organizations. ■



Jaya Koilpillai Bohlmann, APR, M.A., is an experienced communicator, business leader, coach, author and thought leader. Her current book, *This Changes Everything: Transforming Your Life from the Inside Out*, shares her proprietary, five-stage model that addresses the individuals at the heart of any change initiative. Bohlmann has served on the board of PRSA's National Capital Chapter.