



Change Management

I wrote the short responses below in a discussion board after completing a change management simulation in Foundations of Strategic Communication Management with Michelle Shumate, Ph.D. These responses follow up on a simulation I completed to practice the skills of leading organization-wide change, including evaluating one's context/environment, examining stakeholder relationships, and developing implementation strategies based on the power of the change agent and the urgency to produce results. Formulating these responses provided me with an opportunity to reflect on my performance in the simulation, compare my results to those of my classmates, and draw key learnings for the next time I'm in the position of leading change.

Compare your results with others in the class. Why do you think some of you were more successful than others? What seemed to work? What didn't work? Were there any common missteps? Did you take the time to diagnose and strategize before you began to act? Which levers did you find yourself using first? Which levers did you use later?

I was only able to complete one of the scenarios, but I'll compare my results to those who had the highest change efficiency scores in scenario #4.

I think the key to succeeding in these scenarios is having the right person pull the right lever at the right time. For example, a quick analysis of the spreadsheet data revealed that the ineffective lever pulls failed because the change agent lacked credibility and/or good timing. This is something I was certainly cognizant of as I went through the simulation, and I frequently came back to the phases of change and Kotter's eight steps of change management to guide my decisions. However, there's no precise rulebook to follow in an organizational change process because people are going to move through the stages of adoption at different paces.

As I went through the simulation, I had a few key strategies in mind:

- I tried to balance levers that would affect the entire organization (one-third) with those that were more targeted (two-thirds).
- I tried to be precise about who I focused my time and energy on, which was primarily the laggards and dissenters.
- I tried to provide regular communication to the entire organization as the process unfolded.
- I tried to provide a lot of positive reinforcement. In fact, fully one-third of my levers were either telling a success story or recognizing an adopter. I find this tone of communication to be fairly effective.

I'm fairly happy with my results, but I definitely plan to try the other scenarios to improve my skills.

Some contingencies made it more or less difficult for you to lead. Why do you think that leading change in a low urgency situation is more difficult? Why do you think leading change as a middle manager differed from leading change as the CEO?

I was only able to complete one of the scenarios (in which I was the CEO in an urgent situation). Nonetheless, it makes perfect sense that change management is more difficult when the change agent holds less power and the situation lacks urgency.

I think about this mostly in terms of psychology, which is to say that people need motivation to act. A CEO is likely better equipped to motivate employees because: 1) their position and power are more visible to and far-reaching within the organization, and 2) resistance to their wants and needs could very well threaten one's employment. Similarly, an urgent

situation is better positioned to motivate employees because they see the immediate risks and dangers – both to the organization and to themselves – of failing to adopt the necessary change.

It sounds trite, but I see now why achieving buy-in is so important when I attempt to make changes within my organization. I am not the head honcho and it's rare that other people see marketing/communication issues as urgently as I do. So it's incumbent on me to uncover motivations and initiate persuasion campaigns to get people on board. I also need to be sure I have a close and positive relationship with the CEO in order to effect systemic changes that will last.

This scenario required you to manage your own credibility and power. Did you lose credibility at any point during the simulation? If so, when? How did you get it back? Did you try to build a coalition?

One of the first things I noticed when digging into the data for scenario #4 was that the top three students all maintained credibility scores of 9s or 10s for the majority of the simulation. Unfortunately, my first lever (walking the talk) immediately brought my credibility score down to an 8, which is where I stayed for most of the simulation. I realize now that an action I'd previously considered to be "leading by example" was unhelpful because I'd given no explanation as to what I was attempting to lead! What seemed to work better for other students was holding town hall meetings in the first few weeks so as to get everyone on the same page. From there, things seemed to go pretty smoothly.

Interestingly, I pulled that same lever (walking the talk) again in week 45 when my credibility score was at an all-time low of 7. It earned me 19 "points" of influence and my credibility instantly jumped up to a 10 for the first time. This tells me that I made the right move by recognizing that my credibility had dropped and taking the right action to repair the situation. I don't remember my exact thought process, but I do recall looking for levers that were focused on my own actions/effort rather than anyone else's.

How long did it take you to notice that the change targets differed in their receptivity to change? How did you learn about the differences? What seems to have explained these differences?

I noticed this after the first few levers that resulted in some positive change. It wasn't surprising to me because I expected people to respond in different ways and to different degrees.

Notably, I did keep my eye on certain individuals throughout the scenario. I watched the CFO, VPs, and General Counsel pretty closely because I wanted to be sure my direct reports were getting on board. I also monitored some folks who I knew were most likely to resist the change: the CFO, the VP of Operations, the plant managers, and the benefits administrator. As long as they were making progress, I felt okay about how things were going.

I did, however, notice that there were some serious holdouts – people who weren't necessarily resistant to change, but who I think just didn't care as much. (I can't recall, but I believe the control and IT director fell into this category.) So while I didn't focus my change efforts on them, I did try to keep them in mind.

Ultimately, what I learned from this facet of the simulation is that I can't expect everyone to be won over by a single lever. I need to be consistent, find multiple ways to influence change adoption, and – perhaps most importantly – continually monitor and evaluate my results so I know how to proceed. This will also provide me with data about which change targets may require a more direct, one-on-one, or unique approach.

Which levers of change did you use first? Which ones did you use most often? Which levers worked best? Did that change over time?

My first few levers were walking the talk (week 0), holding town hall meetings (week 2), telling a success story (week 5), and building a coalition of support (week 6). The first and fourth levers produced no effect on the organization. The other

levers that produced no effect for me were providing internal skill-building (week 38), building a coalition of support (41), providing external skill-building (week 47), and revising the reward system (week 54).

I was really surprised that the levers related to skill-building produced no effect, and it wasn't because I lacked credibility or good timing. I'm honestly not sure why that is.

The levers that proved most effective – and that I would consider key milestones in this scenario – were ones that targeted the entire organization. However, there were also several key levers that targeted just a few people and yet earned me greater influence:

- Week 2: Hold town hall meetings (entire organization)
- Week 5: Tell a success story (target 3 people)
- Week 11: Tell a success story (target 3 people)
- Week 12: Conduct a pilot project (target 3 people)
- Week 19: Tell a success story (target 3 people)
- Week 16: Post progress reports (entire organization)
- Week 20: Clarify organizational values (entire organization)
- Week 28: Tell a success story (target 3 people)
- Week 31: Announce goals and deadlines (entire organization)
- Week 40: Tell a success story (target 3 people)
- Week 45: Walk the talk (entire organization)

Clearly, I liked to tell a lot of success stories! I found this to be a quick, effective way to win people over through positive reinforcement.

What did you learn from playing this simulation? Based on that, what are you going to do next time you find yourself leading a change?

I really enjoyed the simulation and learned several key lessons on leading change:

1. Take the time at the very start of the process to identify how much power you have and how urgent the situation is to the organization (not just to you). That will inform every single step of the process.
2. Know your stakeholders! Take the time to go through and map out all the parties involved, their roles, and their relationships with one another. Get a lay of the land. Don't overestimate your ability to remember all these details, otherwise someone may get overlooked.
3. Timing is everything. For example, town hall meetings tend to be most effective at the beginning of an urgent project, and resisters should be given a bit of time at the beginning to come on board before they're confronted.
4. Be honest about how much credibility you possess. Get feedback on this point from others if you struggle with self-evaluation, but don't just try to ram through a change because you think you have influence. Even the most influential people can lose credibility and fail at leading change if they make the wrong moves.
5. Expect resistance. Instead of just getting frustrated or upset by it, do some investigation and determine what's underneath it. The better job you do of addressing resistance and concerns, the more effective will be the change process.
6. There is a lot of influence to be gained by clarifying organizational values.
7. There are general best practices to follow, but there's not often a single "right" way to go about leading change. Things can happen that are outside of your control and you will almost certainly make mistakes. Don't let those things derail you. Instead, stay abreast of the situation and continually come back to map out the next steps in your plan.