Communicating Change to Nonprofit Stakeholders: Models and Predictors of Implementers' Approaches

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What is This?
COMMUNICATING
CHANGE TO
NONPROFIT
STAKEHOLDERS
Models and Predictors of Implementers’ Approaches

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Relationships with organizational stakeholders are especially problematic for nonprofits in times of planned change. Implementers of change initiatives must negotiate demands for their time and attention as well as attend to severe resource constraints. Interviews with nonprofit administrators are used as the basis for the development of six models of implementation communication adopted by nonprofit implementers in interacting with various stakeholder groups. The data are also used as a basis for theorizing about two communicative dimensions of the task situation—communication efficiency and consensus building—which may be used to predict implementers’ choices of approach to their communication with stakeholders.

The notion of stakeholders has existed in the organizational literature since the early 1960s. Ansoff (1965) argued that constituents must be understood in terms of their needs and leaders must serve the role of boundary spanners and interact with these groups to ensure the survival and direction of their organization. Freeman (1984) defined stakeholders as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives” (p. 46). Noting the wide variety of stakeholders to whom organizations are often responsible, Heath (1994) advised that communicating well with each of them is crucial.

Persistent calls from the communication discipline (Cheney & Christensen, 2001; Deetz, 1979; Deetz & Kersten, 1983; Mumby & Stohl, 1996; Putnam & Cheney, 1985) to attend to both internal and external dynamics and their effects on organizational communication draw our attention to the influence of stakeholders on organizational behaviors and vice versa. Deetz and Kersten (1983) pointed specifically to societal level influences as having as much an effect on the internal communication systems in most organizations as the internal management practices and decisions themselves. Cheney and Christensen (2001) described the transformation of traditionally external-focused public relations practices to ones that attend to internal audiences as well. They argue that how such practices are integrated (for the organization to communicate at least somewhat consistently to its many audiences) will largely influence the
ability to maintain credibility and legitimacy. Other scholars contend that organizations, by their very nature, are engaged in a continual process of negotiation over the influences of external and internal stakeholders (Mumby, 1988; Putnam, 1989).

Most nonprofits certainly serve as prime examples of organizations that must be sensitive to issues of stakeholder communication. In turbulent environments, marked by economic and political uncertainty and inconsistent social support for their missions, nonprofits face significant challenges to their existence, let alone success (Eadie, 1997). DiMaggio (1988) stated that constituent groups affect goal setting and goal attaining in nonprofit organizations. He suggested that nonprofit managers face more ambiguous and diverse goals than their for-profit counterparts, and this problem is magnified because of the large number of “external constituencies,” each of which has its own stake in, and accompanying goals for, the organization. Whereas financial measures of success are central in for-profit organizations, success in nonprofits is largely measured in relation to achievement of their mission or the services they offer (Kanter & Summers, 1987). Because consensus about the quality of nonprofit services is difficult to attain, the responsiveness of the organization to the needs of its stakeholders is an important indicator of its success. Although it is clear that all organizations (for-profit as well as nonprofit) have strong imperatives to consider multiple stakeholder demands, nonprofit organizations offer a rich exemplar from which to begin to explore these relationships.

More than one and a half million nonprofit organizations are operating in the United States alone, with hundreds of new nonprofits forming every year (Eadie, 1997). In the United States, these organizations employ 1 out of every 12 American workers and hold assets totaling $2 trillion, with annual income of $1.1 trillion (Carr, 2000). Hall (1987) described nonprofits as groups of individuals who associate to (a) perform public tasks delegated to them by the state; (b) provide services for which there is a demand that state and for-profit organizations will not fulfill; or (c) influence policy in the state, the for-profit sector, or other nonprofits. Other common characteristics nonprofits share are (a) the existence of a formal consti-
tution, (b) a system of self-governance, (c) a mission that does not include seeking a profit, and (d) use of a volunteer workforce (Salamon & Anheier, 1994). Nonprofit researchers provide numerous typologies for the study of these organizations. Three types of nonprofits are typically differentiated in the literature: philanthropic organizations, mutual benefit organizations, and advocacy organizations (O’Neill & Young, 1988; Rudney, 1987). Philanthropic organizations are typically those whose mission focuses on health, education, religion, cultural concerns, and social services. Because they are privately controlled and tax-exempt, donors can make tax-deductible contributions to this type of nonprofit. Mutual benefit organizations include those organizations such as chambers of commerce, professional associations, labor unions, and social clubs that exist for the benefit and interests of their members rather than the delivery of services to the public at large. Advocacy organizations promote social, economic, and/or political causes and include political parties, citizen groups, and lobbying groups among others.

Stakeholder communication is especially important in these organizations, as it is in all organizations, during planned change. Organizational stakeholders compete for the attention and resources of nonprofits to such an extent that the time and attention nonprofit administrators spend on these groups often consumes their job (Eadie, 1997). Managing the pressures of fiscal, political, and social concerns in addition to dividing attention among stakeholder groups makes change implementation in nonprofits, an already arduous task, even more complex. In addition, the tension of a mutually dependent and reciprocal relationship with internal and external stakeholders may delay change efforts when swift and decisive action is needed. As Kanter and Summers (1987) suggested, “the varying standards of clients, donors and others . . . make it difficult for them [nonprofits] to innovate or change” (p. 155).

Given the tremendous importance of nonprofit organizations to our communities, the critical role of stakeholder communication within those organizations, and the frequency with which organizations of all kinds face change, research into stakeholder communication under conditions of planned change is clearly needed. This
investigation was designed to begin to heed this call by (a) identifying general approaches that implementers take in communicating about change to stakeholders of nonprofit organizations, and (b) proposing important theoretical communicative predictors of these approaches employed by implementers. In the following sections, we present a review of relevant literature and build a more detailed rationale for the study’s focus and approach.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

PLANNED CHANGE IMPLEMENTATION MODELS

The term planned organizational change is used here to describe change that is brought about through the purposeful efforts of organizational members as opposed to change that is due to environmental or uncontrollable forces (e.g., fire burns down plant, government shuts down production, customer characteristics or needs change). Types of planned changes in organizations include technologies, programs, policies, alterations of an organization’s physical characteristics, changes in staff and role assignments, and introduction of new processes. Essentially, what stakeholders themselves define as planned change can be considered as such. For some, relatively minor and somewhat predictable interruptions in normal practice will be considered change; for others, only major alterations of ongoing operations will be perceived as change. Tornatzky and Johnson (1982) defined implementation as

the translation of any tool or technique, process, or method of doing, from knowledge to practice. It encompasses that range of activities which take place between “adoption” of a tool or technique (defined as a decision or intent to use the technology) and its stable incorporation into ongoing organizational practice. (p. 193)

Implementers are those individuals whose formal role prescription requires them to carry out the installation of a planned change into ongoing operations.
Several attempts have been made in the management literature to develop (theoretically and empirically) models of general approaches as well as tactical or strategic models of implementation (for a full review, see Lewis & Seibold, 1998). These models focus on authority, power, and decision-making structures (e.g., who controls the implementation effort); the degree of planning versus flexibility that guides the effort; and the scope and timing of the effort (e.g., breadth strategies versus depth strategies; incremental versus transformational approaches). For example, Nutt’s (1986, 1987) studies of implementation tactics—a coherent set of steps used by managers to elicit support for the planned change—used in-depth interviews from 91 service organizations to construct four models of implementation. The models he developed were based on differences reflected in his data concerning the relative influence and power of various constituencies (users, change sponsors, management, experts) in the decision-making process. For instance, the persuasion model was marked by little management review, experts’ control of development, and independence of experts. In contrast, the edict model was evidenced by sponsors’ control and personal power, avoidance of participation, and low expert and user power. Although these models tell us something about the nature of relationships among participants during implementation efforts, they provide little insight into the communicative activities by which these approaches are constituted.

COMMUNICATION WITH STAKEHOLDERS DURING CHANGE

Nonprofit managers get very inconsistent advice about how best to communicate during planned change efforts. Eadie (1997) advocated sharing information widely during change efforts to increase a sense of stability and security among nonprofit stakeholders in the uncertain conditions brought about by an organizational change:

The more everyone knows the better—not only because they can use the information in their work but also, and perhaps more impor-
tant, because it makes them feel better about the organization. And feelings have a lot to do with positive energy and commitment. (p. 55)

In nonprofits where uncertainty is a constant element of the organizational culture, involving stakeholders in planned change efforts is perceived not only as important but also as in concert with the cooperative and collaborative organizational values of these organizations. Eadie (1997) advised nonprofit managers to hold regular team meetings with internal stakeholders during change efforts. He also warned against creating a false personal sense of involvement such as when administrators communicate strictly with key managers or team leaders and believe this interaction is equivalent to interacting with all team or organizational members. Eadie (1997) cited two examples of change efforts gone awry in nonprofits because of poor internal stakeholder communication. He describes two nonprofit chief executives of economic development corporations who were otherwise effective leaders but failed to assuage the anxieties of their internal stakeholders during a planned change because the executives were too busy to hold team meetings with organizational members.

On the other hand, some authors advise managers of nonprofits to limit the information that goes out to stakeholders based on whether they are internal or external to the organization. Anthony and Herzlinger (1975) suggested giving more information to internal stakeholders than to external stakeholders. These authors claim external stakeholders should receive less information about the change, and what information they do receive should be in summary form so they have cursory knowledge of organizational activities. It should be noted that this strategy keeps external stakeholders from having enough knowledge to influence how change activities are carried out.

Other authors have suggested that the most effective practice involves targeting messages to various stakeholder audiences. Employing marketing concepts is at the core of Mason’s (1984) prescriptions for nonprofit managers. He advised managers to recognize the need for two marketing plans in the nonprofit: one for donors (e.g., paid and unpaid staff, board members, volunteers, and
those who make donations) and the other for clients (e.g., members and clients/customers). Mason’s plan illustrates the duality and simultaneous responsibilities of nonprofits to attend to the motivations and intended outcomes of interactions with internal and external stakeholders. During change efforts, different expectations are usually held regarding internal and external stakeholders. Internal stakeholders may be expected to help plan and implement a change and, at the very least, support it, whereas external stakeholders may be expected to champion the change in the community with other stakeholders.

Some recent research has described the communicative nature of some implementation activities. Zorn, Page, and Cheney (2000) use a three-fold interpretive framework to show how the communicative practices of an implementer in a government organization may be viewed alternatively through functional, romantic, or critical lenses. These authors illustrate how managers draw on popular press managerial discourse to develop persuasive appeals in support of the change initiative. Other authors have noted and explored the importance of creating vision (Fairhurst, 1993) and reframing (Bartunek, 1988; Reger, Gustafson, Demarie, & Mullane, 1994) during the implementation process. These authors have demonstrated the importance of formal and informal talk about planned changes in creating cognitive and emotional reactions to them.

Other empirical work has investigated implementers’ uses of various channels for dissemination of information to and solicitation of input from stakeholders (in both for-profits and nonprofits) concerning a change initiative. In her study of 89 organizations (21 of which used volunteers), Lewis (1999) found that implementers significantly differed in the degree to which they disseminated information to and solicited input from employees and volunteers. Volunteers received fewer opportunities to communicate with implementers across all channels investigated. To our knowledge, this study represents the only attempt to examine and compare differences in change implementers’ communication patterns with stakeholder groups, although a study by Cheney and Frenette (1993) examined differences in general communication with internal and external stakeholder audiences. Although management
scholars have long recognized the importance of distinguishing among types of actors in the change process (DeLuca, 1984) and have pointed to important political differences in groups whose stakes are threatened during change (Frost & Egri, 1991; Schein, 1985), very few studies of planned change communication assume more than a general audience of “users” (often synonymous with employees) for implementers’ messages about change.

In sum, the implementation communication literature to date is limited in a number of ways. First, it fails to document and contrast the variety of communicative approaches taken by implementers in installing planned change. This limits our ability to examine and theorize about how communication dynamics are best predicted during change events and how they may relate to various change outcomes, because we lack even a common language with which to reference observed differences. Second, as Lewis (1999) argued, “one weakness of the change literature has been a treatment of receivers of change programs as a single entity; ‘users’” (p. 52). This oversight grossly oversimplifies our representation of the reality of implementers’ communicative task. Third, little is known about the thoughtfulness with which implementers approach communication about change in terms of the rationales they have for the actions they take. Just how implementers decide to engage stakeholders about change and how they make decisions about whom to include in those interactions is unknown. This could be especially critical in predicting the likelihood of implementers’ adoption of specific communicative tactics and in understanding their evaluation of change efforts. In light of these weaknesses and the continual calls for additional research concerning formal implementation communication (Ford & Ford, 1995; Lewis & Seibold, 1998; Papa & Papa, 1990), a study with a focus on implementers’ communication with stakeholders is timely.

**STUDY DESCRIPTION**

This investigation was designed to identify general approaches that implementers take to their communication about change with
stakeholders of nonprofit organizations. The goal was to construct models inductively that reflect implementers’ approaches to change communication. Thus, the research question driving this study asks what are the primary approaches that implementers take to change communication in their organizations. These models were then used as the basis for theorizing about the contingencies that predict the communication approaches implementers will use during the installation of change initiatives in their organizations. In the following sections, we (a) describe the methods for the study, (b) present the models and the interview data that exemplify each, (c) propose theoretical contingencies that predict the use of each model, and (d) discuss the implications of these models and predictors for research and practice.

**METHOD**

**SAMPLE AND RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS**

Twenty-eight individuals who were involved in leading an implementation effort in their nonprofit organizations were contacted for an interview. All 28 agreed to participate in the study. Twenty-six interviews were conducted, including people from 23 organizations, for a participation rate of 92% (two interviews were cancelled due to scheduling conflicts). A sampling frame for this study was established to capture three general types of nonprofit organizations: philanthropic, advocacy, and mutual benefit. For ease of comparison, we decided to omit hospitals and churches from our sampling frame, because it seemed likely that they would constitute very different sorts of nonprofits based on their size, mission, and professionalization of executive (and other) employees.

The research was conducted in Austin, Texas. The sampling frame that was established included a directory from the local chamber of commerce, a listing of organizations funded by the United Way, community Internet Web pages, and the listing of “helpful numbers” of local service organizations in the Austin tele-
phone directory. Potential interview participants were initially contacted by phone. Participants were given a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study and were ensured of the confidentiality of responses.

The participating nonprofits represent a myriad of services and programs offered to the local community and vary widely by type, size, budget, affiliation, and number of people they serve in the community. We achieved the goal set in our sampling strategy in receiving responses from each of the three types of nonprofits (philanthropic, mutual benefit, advocacy). A list of participating organizations is presented in Table 1.

### DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

Self-reports of participants’ strategies for implementation communication were elicited in moderately scheduled interviews that
were conducted either face-to-face or over the telephone. The interview schedule, developed by the researchers and adhered to in all of the interviews, was semistructured and allowed for additional probing by interviewers to elicit more detailed responses from participants. Detailed interview notes were taken by researchers with the permission of respondents; interviews were audiotaped when possible. On average, the interviews lasted 45 minutes.

Participants were asked to think of a specific planned change implemented in their organization in the previous 5 years. We asked that their example be something that “affected many people and/or many aspects of your organization. It should have been a new program, policy, technology, funding initiative, campaign, service, major project, or any other major change that was purposefully introduced.” Participants were acquainted with our definition of stakeholders in a written statement that read:

Stakeholders are those people/organizations who have “a stake” in the results of the organization’s operation and accomplishments. Stakeholder groups may include board members, volunteers, clients/customers, members (participants/donors), paid staff, funding agencies/foundations, national headquarters, other organizations like yours, government agencies, and media/community.

The interview included questions covering the following five general areas: (a) a description of the interviewees’ job and organization, (b) their experiences with implementing change, (c) their communication with stakeholders during a planned change effort, (d) their rationale for communicative choices with stakeholders, and (e) the role of communication in implementing the change.

DATA-ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

The interview data were examined in an effort to model implementers’ stakeholder change communication. A model of a general approach to this communicative task was identified based on an
expressed rationale concerning implementers’ communication with stakeholders as well as a description of specific communicative activities used in enacting the approach. We contend that using implementers’ rationales in addition to their patterns of specific communicative actions offers the most stable basis for categorizing approaches. Because specific actions may be used by different implementers in service of a variety of possibly contradictory rationales (e.g., meetings used to invite comment that implementers consider valuable versus meetings used to disseminate information and to forestall complaining at a later time), it is important to understand the intentions of implementers as they communicate.

To construct the models from the data collected in this study, first, we looked for an implementer’s expression of intention. For example, if an interviewee specified that a rationale for communicative activity with stakeholders was “being as even-handed as possible in giving out information” and then gave examples of how this was carried out (e.g., disseminating information in a newsletter that went to all members or holding a general meeting for all members to hear about the change), it was considered a possible model. When several respondents’ comments reflected a general approach, we constructed a synthetic model to represent the rationale and template for communication activity that were suggested by the interview respondents’ narratives.

RESULTS

Six models of stakeholder change communication emerged from our analysis. Each of these is presented in the next sections. We do not present these as necessarily mutually exclusive models. It is possible that hybrid versions of these models are adopted by some implementers. However, each has an internal coherence or logic that sets it apart. For the purposes of later theoretical discussion, the six models will be treated as independent.
EQUAL DISSEMINATION

This model’s approach focuses on disseminating information to stakeholders of all sorts, early, often, and, most important, equally. Implementers reported this strategy involved canvassing organizations (sometimes very large ones) with prominent news flashes. Common vehicles for dissemination of information were newsletters, general meetings, individual meetings and phone calls, walking around and sharing, listserv postings, posters, and banners. An implementer at a local branch of a large nationally affiliated philanthropic organization characterized his communication with the agencies it administers this way:

We’re talking about nearly every day, using almost every mode possible. We made a conscious effort to communicate until we were blue in the face because we didn’t want the agencies to say, “we didn’t know this [change] was coming.”

Other respondents emphasized that communicating key information of what was happening in the organization was an ongoing task: “If we weren’t out there communicating to the public constantly, and I wasn’t communicating to the staff and board constantly, we would be nowhere.” Another respondent echoed this idea when talking about his organization, which spanned the whole state. He emphasized how important it was to get leaders out in the field traveling and meeting people. Continual dissemination about what is new in the organization and what changes are coming was seen as key to “making people feel more connected.”

This blanket strategy of information dissemination has the advantage of giving everyone fair notice of the change and not catching anyone by surprise later. In fact, several respondents remarked that their main reason for using the strategy was to prevent the complaint by people unfriendly to the proposed change that they were not told early enough or given enough details. By providing everyone the same information at the same time, this complaint was forestalled. As one manager of a philanthropic organization reported,
We felt that by communicating early, we didn’t have a single agency [upset]. Even the ones that disagreed with the final product said things to us like “we think the process was fair.” And, “we believe we were included.” And, “we don’t have any problem with that part of it.”

Another respondent, from a youth organization, put it this way: “Yeah, I think it does . . . it can soften the blow . . . create a sense of ownership.” This respondent felt that if members of his organization were not caught off guard by change, if they knew in advance it was coming, they would be more open to accepting it.

Implementers reported that there are costs to this approach to implementation communication. First, there are the tangible costs of information dissemination (e.g., the price of mass mailings and time for meetings). Second, sometimes, people offer unwanted advice or raise objections to the change. Because of concern about this, implementers struggle with how much detail they should give to all stakeholders. As one respondent stated, “There are lots of details about things that we’re in discussion about, and it sometimes adds to the confusion if there’s too much information.”

**EQUAL PARTICIPATION**

This model differs from the equal dissemination model in that it involves two-way communication (i.e., both disseminating information and soliciting input). One implementer in a large, nationally affiliated nonprofit described an approach that reflected the use of this model:

One thing we did was use town meetings to communicate internally. Externally, teams of volunteers from our regional office went to local city officials, community elite, and talked about why that chapter was going to be a part of the Austin chapter where we had face-to-face meetings. Then, press releases were sent to the media. We tried to give mom-and-pop shops a voice by attempting to bring them into the Austin chapter . . . There’s a lot more consensus building required within the nonprofit sector which can be a detriment to
how fast change occurs. It helps to retain trust. . . . That’s one of my biggest challenges as a manager is trying to move a process when we need to make change occur quickly in an environment where people want their say and want their stakes [recognized].

Implementers report that this notion of consensus building is very important to community building in these organizations and to creating a sense of team effort. Because the implementers often rely on cooperation from a number of stakeholders to get the change up and running, consensus building is frequently a key to their approach. One implementer put it this way: “If you are going to have any change, you need to have consensus. If you spring it on them, you’ll get problems.”

However, there are several downsides to the participative model. The process of soliciting input about the change is a decidedly tedious and political process, according to some participants. Implementers admitted to experiencing mild to extreme frustration over politics involved in seeking opinions, advice, and support for potential change efforts. One interviewee described how repetitious the process of making phone calls was in eliciting opinions about a potential change. The same interviewee repeatedly received negative responses from stakeholders about the change and mentioned how important it is for implementers to have an extreme amount of patience during a change effort. Others noted how risky the process of soliciting opinions may be for some change initiatives. For example, a museum curator indicated that soliciting advice from stakeholders may be problematic: “With any exhibit, particularly where there is a constituent group that you are talking about, if you run out and solicit their advice, you can get killed.” He noted how political, ethnic, and historical points of view could dramatically alter the presentation of any exhibit and how trying to please everyone is problematic:

Everyone would like to tell you how to do your exhibit. You want to take their advice, you want to get a consensus out of it, but at the same time you have to be careful of not letting other people run your exhibit.
For some implementers, getting consensus, at least from certain particularly sensitive stakeholder groups, is a “must-do.” For example, high-profile community or friends groups were frequently mentioned as ones needing special strategic care. One curator described a long effort to promote a change in the landscape of the museum grounds that would have required a tremendous public relations effort and fund-raising campaign to carry out successfully. After encountering resistance from the museum’s friends group and getting a no-confidence vote from her immediate superior (who had previously shown support for the change), she decided to quietly “let the project die.” Legitimacy of the change could only be established by the full support of these critical stakeholder groups. When strategies to cope effectively with their objections were not found, the whole change initiative was abandoned. So, although equal participation is often a goal of these implementers, we found that, in many cases, specific stakeholder groups come to hold special significance during change efforts. As one respondent put it, “We can’t run our organization with 100% participation in decision-making.” The third and fourth models represent some alternatives to the equal participation credo.

**QUID PRO QUO**

In this model, as the name implies, something of value is exchanged for the communicative access granted by implementers. In short, implementers give more communicative attention to stakeholders who have something they need or desire (e.g., money, expertise, approval power, resources). One senior vice president of a large, nationally affiliated nonprofit put it most bluntly, “There’s a pecking order with our communication. Whoever pays the most dues gets listened to the most. Just like in any business, your biggest vendor or supplier is going to have the most clout.” Funders, the board, and paid staff are often the stakeholders reported to be given the most preferential treatment. Funders offer financial resources,
board members maintain approval power, and staff members are considered needed talent.

As one implementer reported, “We went to the stakeholder groups that provide the most money and we asked, ‘What is it that you want us to be doing?’” Another responded, “I try to give the board, especially the executive committee, the most information. Because they own this organization. They are the public trustees.” A third implementer, who epitomizes this model, commented that she bases her decisions about what to discuss with various stakeholders on whether she needs support from them to get the job done or just needs agreement on a decision made. When she needs more from them, they get more communication. One managing director of a theater indicated her decision about whom to communicate with concerning an upcoming change was based on expertise. If a particular stakeholder or group of stakeholders has expertise in a given area (e.g., previous experience implementing a new program), then she will discuss those topics with that stakeholder.

Frequently, high-resource-holding stakeholders are given more preference about how they receive information and how much they receive. One volunteer director of a small political organization indicated that she spends a good deal of time trying to ensure that the board members receive the correct amount of information—neither too much nor too little. Another respondent reported that she always tries to communicate with “important stakeholders” using their preferred channel (e.g., phone, face-to-face, letter, meetings).

The primary advantage of this model is its efficiency. Implementers using this model could focus their time and energy on the stakeholders who are most crucial to the change’s success. As one respondent put it, “If we can get them [a key group of stakeholders] to accept change, then it happens . . . if not, it can be very rough making a change.” Also, implementers were able to limit access to the number of individuals whose point of view needed to be accommodated.

The downside to this model is that implementers run the risk of angering those who feel left out of the process. One respondent expressed this concern: “Something that we have to manage all the time is the perception that . . . because they’re [less vital resource-
holding stakeholders] not giving as much, they’re not getting as much.” Another respondent expressed the risk this way: “There’s nothing worse than a volunteer who says, ‘I didn’t know we were doing that.’”

NEED TO KNOW

An alternative to the quid pro quo model that still maintains a selective communication posture is the need to know model. In this model, implementers keep quiet about planned change except to those who really have to know or who explicitly express a desire for the information. In part, this is done out of an efficiency motivation (as with the previous model), in part it is used to avoid giving rise to potential objections from some stakeholders, and in part it is done to avoid overburdening stakeholders with large amounts of information for which they have little use.

One of our interviewees, from a large national nonprofit, captured the philosophy behind this model best: “During a change, I communicate with the minimum number of people, key people, and give them enough information to meet their needs.” Another example of this approach was provided by an executive director of a large nationally affiliated nonprofit who described the efforts to exclude a board from information about an upcoming change in procedures:

One of our programs is an early childhood program, which is partially funded by the state. It’s a highly effective program. Because we’ve had so many management changes in that one program, we’re going to be monitored by the state. And the CEO told us not to tell the board that we’re going to be monitored because they don’t want them to try to micro-manage or to get involved.

The key to this model is first deciding, from the implementer’s perspective, who needs information and access most and then devote the communicative energy to those individuals exclusively. As a director of a philanthropic organization put it, “You have to decide early on who you think is interested in the change.” This
model seems to be invoked when there are minor changes, especially of an administrative sort, and when members of organizations are selective about which of the organization’s activities are of interest to them. For example, a director of an advocacy organization indicated that he only gave information about external changes (policy issues with public importance) to the board and the national affiliate. Internal changes (administrative, nonpolicy issues) were handled between him and his staff. Other implementers base their decisions about who needs to know on status in the organization and explicit expressed interest. A director of a mutual benefit organization said that he talks through changes with volunteers and shares information based on their tenure and level of confidentiality. The director of another advocacy organization reported that, “The content of communication to members is based on the type of information they have requested to be notified about.”

Most of the advantages and disadvantages of the last model apply here as well. Like that model, this is a model of selective communication in which some stakeholders are given preferential treatment in terms of communicative attention. The major difference between the two models is the basis on which the preference is given. In the quid pro quo model, stakeholders had to offer something of value in exchange for access. In the need to know model they might be included simply because they have expressed an interest or because their function in the nonprofit makes them a logical recipient of information. Although this model is sometimes used as a means to manipulate stakeholders by keeping them out of the information loop, more often, it seems to serve as an efficient filtering mechanism to get change information to the most relevant stakeholder groups—at least in the eyes of the implementer.

**MARKETING**

The fifth model developed in this investigation also reflects a selective communication philosophy. The marketing model focuses on constructing messages specific to individuals or to stakeholder groups. As one respondent said, “I address the change
from their perspective. People care about ‘what’s in it for me?’” Implementers frequently spoke about how to deliver different types of content to different groups. One interviewee put it best:

Depending upon what group you’re talking to, your strategies are going to be different. When you talk to staff, you can depend on their direct experience. When you talk to the board, somehow, you have to make it illustrative. . . . The staff knows how important [change] is. The board kind of has to be led to it. The board has to be shown. So, the staff is already pretty motivated to make this thing work and to bring it into their consciousness and do everything they can to make it as effective as possible. The board needs to be educated [as to] why it’s important.

Another implementer echoed that idea: “All [stakeholders] take a different communication strategy. You couldn’t throw one message out and [have] it work for all the people you work with. They’re too diverse and come from too many different places.”

A key to success with this approach is knowing your audiences. One implementer described a detailed process of carefully thinking through and planning his arguments, thoroughly researching the topic that was to be discussed, and gathering as much information as he could about each individual’s perceptions and attitudes on the issue before making any kind of presentation. Another pointed out that “communicating with board members is very political. It’s helpful to know who they are and what motivates them. Understanding what’s in it for them [is key].” Playing to the particularities of powerful stakeholders seems to be especially important as the next statement from an implementer in a mutual-benefit organization reflects:

In organizations like ours, its funny. . . . Trustees have different attitudes. They don’t always agree what the mission is. They don’t always agree what the priorities are. And some people are more concerned with the bottom line than others. You’re often pulled between those trustees who want to take a more business-like approach and those who have more altruistic motives. . . . Let’s say I’m talking to board members about constructing a new Web site. If I’m talking to a board member who I know is concerned about the
bottom line, I might emphasize those aspects of our Web site that would be income producing.

In another example, the necessity of gathering information to analyze the audience is described: “When presenting something to the board, all arguments have to be carefully thought out in advance and a lot of preparation and information gathering is done.” This implementer communicates with board members in many informal phone calls to get a feel for what ideas they will accept. Then, information is crafted and presented formally.

These customized message strategies are not used exclusively with powerful stakeholders. One implementer described the care that was taken with a group of volunteers who were particularly disappointed with a major organizational change:

One group we did communicate differently were the volunteers who were working at the chapters who were going to be closed. We gave them much more hands-on communication. We brought them into recognition events and explained to them that they weren’t losing something but were gaining something. We probably tried to strategize with them more because we did not want to lose them. . . . On the other hand, board members like information written, numbers, they’re busy. . . . For volunteers it is much more hand-holding, personal. They’re into it for caring and providing services.

The advantage of this approach is having ready responses to any objections that individual stakeholders may raise. The homework involved in analyzing the audiences thoroughly prepares stakeholders to anticipate and respond in detail to concerns that may be raised. When the change is of major importance to the organization and is likely to give rise to much controversy, implementers appear to see this model as more necessary. For minor changes, the disadvantages of the huge time commitment required by this model may override its advantages. Also, customized messages entail use of communication channels that lend themselves to individualized communication. Where newsletters and the like were the main vehicle for communication from implementers to stakeholders, this model was very difficult or impossible to carry out.
REACTIONARY

The sixth model was apparent only in a few cases in our interviews. Still, it seemed important to include because it is likely underrepresented in our data due to interviewees’ reluctance to admit to it as their approach to implementation communication. In the reactionary model, implementers’ communication has the flavor of crisis management. These implementers were trying to survive a change (usually one that was forced on the organization or came up as a response to an unexpected situation). In one organization, a financial situation that forced a staff cut from 36 to 11 gave rise to much uncertainty in the organization. As the implementer described it,

Change happened so frequently that the grant agency would not accept [a] grant application from us because they didn’t know what would come of the changes. Confusion during this time of change prevented communication to anyone except the staff, no one on the outside. We just had to ride the wave of negativity until things calmed down and then we could communicate to everyone again.

This model represents an approach to change that is the least planned approach. Implementers probably rarely have the opportunity, under these circumstances, even to consider whether more generalized approaches or customized approaches are most beneficial. They communicate the best they can, whenever it seems prudent to do so at the moment. Unfortunately, for nonprofits that are frequently in financial crises, or near crises, or whose government or community mandate is frequently in question, this may be the mode that implementers use most often.

THEORIZING ABOUT PREDICTORS

There is little doubt that numerous situational, psychological, structural, environmental, and cultural factors influence, to some
degree, the selection of the approach that implementers use in introducing a planned change. For example, Lewis and Seibold (1993) suggested that the scope, novelty, and complexity of the innovation (or planned change) will influence how implementation activities are carried out. Furthermore, Damanpour’s (1991) meta-analysis revealed that structural variables such as high specialization, functional differentiation, administrative intensity (high proportion of managers), internal and external communication channels, and low centralization are significantly related to both initiation and implementation of innovation. We might also speculate that an organization’s culture is predictive of how a given implementation effort is carried out. The grassroots, volunteer-based advocacy organization would likely do things very differently than the highly bureaucratic organization with strong ties to a high-profile national affiliate. Similarly, differences in the management style of individual implementers might also influence implementation choices.

Our intention here is to create a theoretical scheme that parsimoniously predicts the conditions under which the models developed in this study will be employed. We argue that, to a great extent, the effects of the features of the organization, environment, and the characteristics of implementers on choices of implementation approach can be summarized in an implementer’s perception of two task dimensions: (a) the perceived need for communicative efficiency and (b) the perceived need for consensus building. For example, individual preferences for or cultural orientations toward participative values would tend to lead an implementer to perceive a greater need for consensus building. On the other hand, structural and environmental circumstances that limit access to resources would promote an implementer’s perception of the need for communicative efficiency. In turn, the combination of these two task-dimension perceptions predicts the model that will be adopted.

We define communication efficiency as the accomplishment of a communicative task with a minimum expenditure of time, effort, and resources. Many factors predict when a given implementer might perceive that communicative efficiency is needed during a specific implementation initiative. From our interview data, situa-
tions that would invoke this perception include (a) when the organization’s available channels for communicating are very limited in number and/or in information-carrying capacity; (b) when there is an urgent need to progress through the change process and, thus, little time for interaction about it; and (c) when resources devoted to the change are scarce and, thus, few can be devoted to the communication task.

We define consensus building as the effort put forth to achieve commitment to a course of action implied by a joint decision. As Fisher and Ellis (1990) noted, “members may be committed to a decision to the extent that they work to put it into effect without ever fully agreeing with it” (p. 142). According to our informants, implementers are likely to perceive a need for consensus building under the following conditions: (a) when changes are perceived to be controversial and/or highly novel, (b) when a history of resistance to similar change is present, (c) when critical resources (e.g., expertise, money, approval) are controlled by stakeholders other than the implementers, and (d) when ongoing support and cooperation will be needed to maintain the change.

When these two perceived dimensions of the task situation are combined, we can make predictions as to the implementer’s likely choice of an implementation communication model. Figure 1 presents the predictions made by our framework.
LOW COMMUNICATION EFFICIENCY, LOW CONSENSUS BUILDING

In this quadrant, we predict that the equal dissemination model is mostly likely to be adopted by implementers. In this task situation, implementers consider communication channels to be abundant and affordable, have no overwhelming urgency to implement, and perceive that commitment to the change and cooperation with implementation efforts will be relatively unproblematic. The logical choice for these implementers will be to use an approach that provides the maximum information for the maximum number of stakeholders and forestalls any potential negativism through equal treatment and early notification but that also does not create unnecessary commotion about the change by encouraging interaction about it.

HIGH COMMUNICATION EFFICIENCY, HIGH CONSENSUS BUILDING

We predict that the quid pro quo approach will be the most likely to be adopted in this circumstance. Although implementers may face an urgent timetable, a limited resource supply, and limited available channel capacity relative to the numbers and types of stakeholders, they are also faced with a need to gain the commitment of stakeholders (at least key stakeholders) while possibly overcoming resistance to a highly controversial change. In this circumstance, implementers are likely to concentrate efforts on those stakeholders who “hold the most cards.” Those high-resource-holding stakeholders who have something of vital significance to offer to the change will be the focus of the communicative attention. Gaining consensus from the few stakeholders with something to offer comes to be viewed as more beneficial than attempting to communicate with everyone on a limited budget and with limited time. It is also likely that in this circumstance, implementers will attempt to use a marketing approach with the few key stakeholders who do get the lion’s share of the communication. Where consen-
sus building is especially critical, it is likely that an individualized approach to presentation also will be viewed as wise. Because the marketing approach need only be devised for a few individuals or groups, the efficiency contingency is not violated.

LOW COMMUNICATION EFFICIENCY, HIGH CONSENSUS BUILDING

In this instance, we predict that equal participation will be the approach that is chosen. Nonprofit implementers who perceive their organization has time, resources, and available communication channels are likely to embrace the participative and democratic values common in the nonprofit sector. Where inclusion is affordable, this is likely the preference of most nonprofit administrators. In addition, where the change may be controversial and intense debate is predictable, implementers will probably view participation in the process as necessary to gaining commitment to the change. In some cases, a marketing model may be combined with the equal participation model. This combination is most likely when communication efficiency is an extremely low concern or when the organization is very small, with most communication occurring face to face.

HIGH COMMUNICATION EFFICIENCY, LOW CONSENSUS BUILDING

In this situation, the change sparks little controversy and requires little in the way of commitment from stakeholders to be sustained, and implementers themselves control the resources necessary for installation of the change. However, implementers are faced with a low budget for communication about the change, and/or a scarcity of available channels for communication, as well as possible time pressures (e.g., when a national affiliate mandates an administrative change immediately). We predict that the need to know model is most likely to be adopted in this situation. This
model is very efficient in targeting key individuals for communication and provides needed opportunities for interaction only with those whose opinions are pertinent to the change and/or who are specifically interested in the change.

CAVEATS REGARDING THE PREDICTION GRID

A few caveats are warranted as this grid is used in prediction of actual communication approaches of nonprofits. First, we do not present these predictions as recommendations for successful implementation. Rather, we argue that given the specific rationales of the implementers interviewed in this study, these are the critical dimensions that best predict what approaches were taken by implementers, for better or for worse. However, because they do represent managers’ common sense about the appropriate approaches for particular situations, they should be investigated for their prescriptive value. Second, there are also situations where off-grid predictions might be made. For instance, this would occur when an organization so prizes equal participation that it ignores the high need for efficiency and even the low need for consensus building and uses equal participation regardless of the task situation (e.g., practices democratic decision making for all decisions). What we argue regarding the predictions made by our grid is that they are the normative choices of most implementers. Third, researchers will find this grid most useful when correct categorization of implementers’ approaches are made and when assessments of the two predictive dimensions of the perceived task situation are accurate. It should be remembered that no single communication tactic or channel (e.g., use of rich media versus lean media nor use of a newsletter versus meetings) is necessarily indicative of an approach. Each of the approaches, as they were conceptualized through this grounded study, entails a philosophy of stakeholder communication, a rationale for the direction taken, and a set of communicative vehicles to accomplish the task. Because any given communicative tactic might be used in service of any number of general approaches, the key to identification of the approaches is
learning the general rationale of implementers in the use of the tactics they select. The key to identification of the two predictive dimensions of the task situation will be the perceptions of the implementers—as close to the time of execution of the implementation effort as possible.

**DISCUSSION**

This study embraces a stakeholder perspective of organizations. That perspective suggests that organizational managers and decision makers find themselves embroiled in numerous relationships with individuals and groups who have different and often competing interests in the activities of the organization. For some of those relationships, key resources may be transferred from the organization to stakeholders, and for others, the reverse may be true. The study presented here provides insight into how individuals involved in the implementation of major change programs manage those relationships communicatively.

The main contributions of this study have been the identification of several models of implementer communication with nonprofit stakeholders and the theoretical specification of predictors for their use. The model descriptions provided in this study afford many opportunities for future comparative examinations of the frequency with which they are employed and the outcomes associated with their use. Even when off-grid (nonpredicted) applications of the models are observed in organizations, the reference to the predictive dimensions presented here can provide insight. For example, one might ask whether off-grid use of these approaches results in less desirable outcomes for the change initiatives than do the approaches that are selected as predicted. For example, when implementers ignore the perceived need for consensus building and use equal dissemination or need to know models instead of quid pro quo or equal participation models, are implementation efforts more likely to fail? Or, when implementers embrace equal participation or quid pro quo as an unvarying model of change introduction, regardless of task situation perceptions (e.g., always using par-
ticipative decision making, always using an exchange philosophy to guide communication): Are the consequences more or less successful than when the predicted models are adopted? The model and the predictive framework provided here afford a comparison point for future research and future theory building. Although the rules implied by the prediction grid may hold in most cases, we can learn as much from exploration of the cases that are not well predicted by the grid.

The framework provided here also introduces a much needed language for talking about approaches to implementation communication. Where previous implementation models focused on authority, power and decision-making structures, planning, scope, and timing of change initiatives, our models focus on the communicative dimensions of implementation activities. Also, these models are built, in part, from an understanding of the philosophy of change communication and the rationale for communicative activity of implementers rather than mere collections of specific actions (in which the intention of implementers would be difficult to determine and in which similar actions may be used in contradictory ways by different implementers). This step is valuable in aiding communication researchers in specifying the trends in formal communication about implementation.

The results of this study also draw our attention to the numerous tensions faced by nonprofit implementers when communicating about change. They need to assess and balance (a) the needs for consensus building and communication efficiency, (b) the quantity of resources they can devote to communication of change and those devoted to the change’s technical and procedural requirements, (c) their own energies and investments in the change and the interests of numerous stakeholder groups, (d) the organization’s values concerning participation and power, and (e) the importance of the planned change. These tensions, among others, suggest the challenges that implementers, especially in nonprofits, face when introducing change. All of this is then compounded when a change is particularly controversial and catches the attention of many stakeholder groups and when organizational resources are slim and/or declining.
These data also point to a sobering reality: Due to the difficult financial and political situations of many nonprofits and the importance of achieving cooperation from high-resource-holding stakeholders during change, the quid pro quo model is probably a common choice (Lewis, Hamel, & Richardson, 2000). The downside to this model in excluding non-resource-holding stakeholders from communicative attention presents a potentially grim image of nonprofits whose mission is to serve their clients’ needs, but who rarely can afford to create opportunities for them to participate in decisions that are most likely to affect their lives. Although we recognized that drives toward conservation of resources might give rise to this sort of dilemma for implementers, we were somewhat surprised at the lack of even a representational system for giving voice to these stakeholders in some organizations.

In the quid pro quo model, the stakeholder relationship with the organization emphasizes the stakes that these groups can provide to the organization rather than the stakes they seek to have recognized (and needs met) by the organization. We found no evidence of a model wherein more access is granted to those for whom the impact of the change will be most significant but who have little or nothing to offer the organization. In the terms of Mitchell, Agle, and Wood’s (1997) theory of stakeholder identification and salience, stakeholders like these are considered dependent stakeholders; they have both legitimacy (i.e., claims of group are viewed as desirable and or appropriate) and urgency (i.e., claims are viewed as time-sensitive or of critical importance) in the eyes of the organization, but without the advocacy of others, they lack power (i.e., ability to gain access to coercive, utilitarian, or normative means to impose its will in the relationship).

We propose that another model that benefits such dependent stakeholders would be one based on prioritization of stakes. In other words, in this model, stakeholders whose stakes are more mission-centered (i.e., legitimate) and more urgent would receive more information, opportunities for voice, and empowerment to participate in decision making. In our opinion, an approach that provides for attention to dependent stakeholders would be more ideal for implementers in nonprofits where the stakes include basic
physical and psychological well-being of highly vulnerable populations. However, it appears that the fiscal and political realities faced by managers of nonprofits rarely allow for allocation of resources for this type of access. One important task for communication scholars is to develop communicatively efficient means for goals of inclusion to be realized by such nonprofits.

LIMITATIONS

The results of this study should be considered in light of the limitations of the methods used. The generalizability of the results are limited by the location of the study, the demographics of the participants, and the biases in the sampling method. Although a good variety of types of implementers and types of organizations are represented and no direct evidence of bias was detected, the relatively small number of represented viewpoints and number of organizations should temper our confidence in conclusions and the theoretical development based on these data.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

For practitioners, this study gives reason to pause and consider the criteria used to decide who in the organization will receive the lion’s share of communicative attention regarding a planned change, what approach is taken in dividing remaining communication resources, and how organizational philosophies of stakeholder communication are or are not guiding these decisions. Practitioners should consider whether individuals who have few resources to offer but who are affected directly by the change that is proposed are receiving information and/or opportunities to contribute ideas. Also, implementers might reflect on whether communication efficiency or consensus-building motivations are most directing their implementation approaches. For example, where they have a high value for consensus building but where considerations for communication efficiency are forcing a minimization of participative
opportunities, perhaps, novel and creative methods are called for to realign communicative practice with organizational philosophy.

Second, our analysis suggests that it is often wise, regardless of the need for communicative efficiency, to find a way to craft messages with different stakeholders’ needs in mind. Often, messages about planned change need to be designed strategically to address concerns, preempt resistance, recruit support, and forestall complaints. Practitioners who fail to market ideas to stakeholders, especially important stakeholders, may have little luck in achieving positive results from the change initiative.

Third, this study has identified several different models for change communication. Practitioners may consider these models as possible approaches for their own use. Having more models to choose from may enhance the likelihood that they will find a successful model for their own situation. It also may enhance their flexibility in seeing different means to accomplish change communication goals.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

Three directions for future research are immediately suggested by the models and framework presented here. First, as we discussed above, research should test the validity of the theoretical framework presented here in a variety of contexts. Second, data on stakeholder perceptions of communication during planned change in nonprofits needs to be collected. Such research should build on the focus on dyadic relationships between focal organizations and stakeholder groups and include examination of the multiple relationships among stakeholders (see, for a recent example, Rowley, 1997). A useful approach might be to compare the frequency and timing of contact that implementers perceive they provide to stakeholders’ perceptions of frequency and timing to identify gaps and inconsistencies in messages sent and received. Such an approach could also include a closer look at communication initiated by stakeholder groups as well as that initiated by implementers, to determine the conditions under which each activity takes place. A
third area for future work would take into account the possibility that approaches to change fluctuate over time. Researchers should test hypotheses concerning alteration in approaches during different phases of implementation, adding further refinement to a process-oriented theory of communication during organizational change.

NOTES

1. Self-report methods are most appropriate for gaining understanding of how individuals assess communicative situations and develop communicative plans for action. Furthermore, although for some methods, bias is a possible limitation, as Howard, Maxwell, Wiener, Boynton, and Rooney (1980) elegantly summarized, behavioral measures are no less prone to sources of variance that invalidate them (e.g., method variance, situation variance, natural variability within a given method and situation, obtrusive measurement variance, and rater variance). Indeed, a series of studies reviewed by Howard (1994) assessed the construct validity of self-report indices of more than a half-dozen different constructs, relative to various non-self-report indices of those constructs (e.g., behavioral measures, role plays, significant-other reports, expert judges’ ratings). In almost all cases, the validity coefficients of self-reports were superior to the construct validity of the other measurement approaches.

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