

BEYOND THE BROADCAST

Communication as Transformation Tool — Not Status Update

A Practitioner's Perspective on Strategic Communication in Complex Change Programmes



Communication as Transformation Tool – Not Status Update

Leadership · No. 46

Originally written September 2007 | Re-edited and re-rendered for the WhereBeyond Edition, 2025

“The organisations that transformed successfully were not the ones with the best communication plans – they were the ones whose leaders understood that communication is not a support function to transformation; it is the mechanism by which transformation actually happens.”

1. The Communication Problem That Nobody Calls a Communication Problem

There is a pattern that recurs with remarkable consistency across transformation programmes, regardless of sector, scale, or ambition. The programme is well-conceived. The business case is sound. The governance is in place. The senior sponsor has made the right noises at the right forums. And yet, six months in, the organisation is confused. People at the operating level cannot articulate what the programme is trying to achieve, why it matters, or what it means for them. The programme team is frustrated – they have been communicating relentlessly. Newsletters, town halls, intranet updates, cascade briefings. The volume of communication has been enormous. The effect has been negligible.

This is not, as it is usually diagnosed, a problem of frequency or channel. It is a problem of fundamental misunderstanding about what communication is for in a transformation context. And until that misunderstanding is addressed, no amount of additional messaging will close the gap.

2. The Status Update Trap

The default model for programme communication in most organisations is the status update. Progress against milestones. Key decisions taken. Risks being managed. Upcoming activities. This model borrows its logic from project reporting: it assumes that the primary purpose of communication is to inform – to move information from people who have it to people who need it.

In a contained project with a stable scope and a well-understood deliverable, this model works adequately. People need to know what is happening and when. The communication challenge is logistical.

But transformation is not a contained project. It is an attempt to shift how an organisation operates, thinks, or competes. The challenge is not informational – it is interpretive. People do not fail to transform because they lack data about the programme's progress. They fail to transform because they cannot construct a coherent narrative about why the change matters, what it demands of them, and whether the organisation is genuinely

committed to seeing it through.

The status update model is not merely insufficient for this purpose. It is actively counterproductive. By treating communication as information transfer, it signals to the organisation that transformation is something being done – a project happening over there, managed by specialists, about which one periodically receives bulletins. The very form of the communication reinforces the passivity it is trying to overcome.

3. Communication as the Mechanism of Change

The shift required is not from poor communication to good communication. It is from communication as a support function to communication as the primary mechanism through which transformation actually happens.

This is a stronger claim than it might initially appear. It does not mean that communication is important to transformation, or that it helps transformation succeed. It means that transformation is, in significant part, a communication act. The organisation does not first decide to change and then communicate about it. The organisation changes through the process of constructing, contesting, and internalising a new narrative about itself.

Consider what actually happens when a transformation takes hold. People at different levels of the organisation begin to describe their work differently. They frame problems through a new lens. They invoke different priorities when making trade-offs. They tell different stories about what the organisation is becoming. This is not the result of transformation – it is transformation. And it happens through communication, or it does not happen at all.

The organisations that transformed successfully were not the ones with the best communication plans – they were the ones whose leaders understood that communication is not a support function to transformation; it is the mechanism by which transformation actually happens.

4. Why Leaders Default to Broadcasting

If communication is so central, why do so many leaders treat it as an afterthought – something delegated to the programme office or the corporate communications team?

The answer lies partly in how leaders understand their own role in transformation. Most senior sponsors see themselves as decision-makers and resource-allocators. They set direction, approve plans, remove obstacles, and hold people accountable. Communication, in this mental model, is something that happens after the real work – a matter of packaging decisions for consumption.

This is reinforced by the organisational infrastructure around communication. Corporate communications teams are typically structured around channels and audiences, not around meaning-making. They are skilled at producing materials – presentations, newsletters, talking points – but they are rarely positioned to shape the substance of what is communicated. The programme team, meanwhile, treats communication as a workstream: a set of activities with deliverables, timelines, and owners, sitting alongside technology, process design, and organisational change.

The result is a communication effort that is professionally executed and strategically empty. The materials are polished. The messages are consistent. And the organisation remains unmoved, because nobody has done the harder work of constructing a narrative that people can actually use to make sense of what is happening.

5. The Narrative Gap

The concept of narrative is often invoked loosely in transformation contexts — as a synonym for messaging, or as a reference to the programme's vision statement. But narrative, properly understood, is something quite different. It is the interpretive framework through which people make sense of events, connect past to future, and locate themselves in a larger story.

Every organisation has a dominant narrative — often unarticulated, but powerfully felt. It encompasses beliefs about what the organisation is, why it exists, what it is good at, and what threatens it. Transformation, by definition, challenges this narrative. It says: the story we have been telling ourselves is no longer adequate. We need a different one.

The communication challenge of transformation is not to broadcast a new narrative from the top. It is to create the conditions in which a new narrative can emerge — tested, contested, and ultimately owned by the people who must live it.

This is fundamentally different from crafting a vision statement and cascading it. Cascade models assume that meaning flows downward — that if the message is clear enough at the top, it will be understood consistently at every level. In practice, meaning does not cascade. It is constructed locally, through conversation, interpretation, and negotiation. What a transformation means to a front-line team leader is not a diluted version of what it means to the executive committee. It is a different thing — shaped by different concerns, different histories, and different stakes.

6. What Effective Transformation Communication Actually Looks Like

If communication is the mechanism of transformation rather than its accompaniment, what does effective practice look like? In my experience, several principles consistently distinguish programmes that communicate effectively from those that merely communicate extensively.

Leaders as sense-makers, not message-carriers. The most effective transformation leaders do not cascade pre-packaged messages. They interpret the transformation for their context — explaining what it means here, for this team, given these pressures. This requires that leaders themselves have genuinely internalised the transformation narrative, not merely memorised the talking points. The difference is immediately apparent to their teams, and it is the difference between communication that lands and communication that bounces.

Conversation over broadcast. The programmes that shift organisational understanding invest disproportionately in dialogue — structured conversations in which people can surface concerns, test assumptions, and construct meaning together. This is not consultation in the usual sense, where people are asked for input that may or may not be

acted upon. It is a recognition that understanding is built through conversation, not through reception.

Acknowledging what is being lost. Transformation narratives almost always focus on the future — the target state, the benefits, the opportunities. But for many people in the organisation, transformation means losing something: familiar processes, established expertise, stable relationships, a sense of competence. Communication that ignores this loss — or worse, dismisses it as resistance — creates a credibility gap that no amount of future-focused messaging can bridge.

Consistency of action over consistency of message. Organisations spend enormous energy ensuring message consistency — the same slides, the same language, the same key points at every forum. But people do not judge a transformation's credibility by its messages. They judge it by its actions. When the messages say one thing and the decisions say another — when the organisation talks about empowerment but centralises decision-making, or talks about customer focus but cuts front-line capacity — the messages are not just ignored. They actively erode trust.

7. The Cost of Getting This Wrong

The consequences of treating communication as information transfer rather than as the mechanism of change are not merely suboptimal outcomes. They are specific, observable failure patterns.

“The programme that communicates relentlessly but transforms nothing is not suffering from a communication failure. It is suffering from a fundamental misunderstanding of what communication is for.”

The first is the compliance gap — where people change their behaviour to meet new requirements without changing their understanding of why those requirements exist. The organisation hits its implementation milestones. The new processes are in place. The new systems are live. But the underlying logic of how people work has not shifted, and the moment the programme's attention moves elsewhere, the organisation drifts back.

The second is the cynicism spiral — where repeated exposure to transformation messaging without corresponding changes in reality produces a population that is not merely sceptical but actively hostile to future change efforts. This is cumulative and difficult to reverse. Organisations that have been through several poorly communicated transformations develop an institutional immune response that makes each subsequent attempt harder.

The third is the leadership credibility deficit — where senior leaders' investment in the transformation narrative is judged against their actions, found wanting, and discounted. Once this deficit establishes itself, it extends beyond the current programme to the leadership's broader agenda. Trust, once spent on a transformation that talked but did not act, is not easily replenished.

8. Reframing the Communication Question

The question that most transformation programmes ask about communication is: How do we ensure our messages reach everyone and are understood? This is the wrong question. It assumes that the programme possesses the right message and needs only to transmit it effectively.

The better question is: How do we create the conditions in which the organisation can construct a new understanding of itself? This is a fundamentally different challenge. It requires leaders who are willing to engage in genuine dialogue rather than broadcast. It requires programme teams that understand communication as a core discipline rather than a support function. And it requires an organisational culture that treats transformation as a collective sense-making process rather than a managed change event.

None of this is easy. It is slower, messier, and less controllable than the status update model. It requires leaders to tolerate ambiguity, engage with dissent, and accept that the narrative the organisation ultimately constructs may not match the one they intended. But the alternative — a transformation that communicates endlessly and changes nothing — is not just slower. It is a failure that compounds with every message sent.