

BEYOND THE CASCADE

Transformation Communication Fails When It Only Reports the Journey

A reflection on why messages, meaning and authority must move together if change is to become real



Transformation Communication Fails When It Only Reports the Journey

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“Transformation communication is the organised movement of meaning, authority and expectation – not the orderly movement of messages.”

1. The Friday report

Every Friday afternoon, a transformation office issued a carefully prepared report. Thirty-seven pages described milestones, dependencies, expenditure, risks and achievements. The covering note thanked colleagues for their continued support. The distribution list ran to more than 180 names.

By Monday morning, the report had become evidence that communication had happened. It had not altered a decision, resolved an ambiguity or changed what any manager expected from their team. The programme was communicating continuously and the organisation was becoming less certain about what the change meant.

This is one of the quieter paradoxes of transformation. The larger the programme, the more communication it produces; yet the volume of communication often grows in inverse proportion to shared understanding. We create status packs, newsletters, briefing cascades, intranet pages, roadshows and question sheets. Then, when adoption stalls, we conclude that the messages have not travelled far enough.

The deeper problem is that the messages were asked to travel after the meaning had already been fixed elsewhere. Communication was treated as the report of transformation, not as one of the instruments through which transformation is made.

2. Reporting belongs to the programme; meaning belongs to the organisation

A status update answers a legitimate question: what has happened since the last report? Transformation communication must answer a more difficult set of questions.

- What is becoming true that was not true before?
- Which old assumptions no longer apply?
- What must different groups now decide, stop, learn or surrender?
- Where is the meaning still contested?
- What evidence will cause the organisation to revise its view?

The distinction matters because transformation is not only a sequence of delivered outputs. It is a redistribution of attention, authority, work and expectation. A common system changes who defines data. A shared service changes where judgement sits. An

outsourcing arrangement changes the boundary between management and contract. A new operating model changes what local discretion means.

These changes do not become real when the programme announces them. They become real when people use them to make decisions.

Reporting can describe a new process in perfect detail while leaving the old sources of authority untouched. It can announce a common policy while local budgets continue to reward exceptions. It can celebrate a successful systems test while supervisors still plan work according to the former model. The message is correct; the organisation's interpretation is stronger.

Transformation communication therefore cannot be judged only by accuracy, reach or frequency. It must be judged by whether it changes the decisions through which the organisation reproduces itself each day.

3. The seduction of the cascade

The communication cascade is attractive because it mirrors hierarchy. Senior leaders receive the central message, adapt it for their direct reports, and pass it down through the organisation. It offers order, scale and apparent accountability. In a period of large enterprise systems, shared services and increasingly distributed operations, that promise is difficult to resist.

But the cascade contains a hidden assumption: that meaning can be transmitted like an instruction.

In practice, every level edits the message, sometimes through words and more often through emphasis. A division leader repeats the enterprise case but reassures managers that local autonomy will be protected. A functional head endorses standardisation but tells specialists that existing controls remain paramount. A line manager explains the timetable but advises the team to wait until the design settles. Nobody contradicts the official communication. Each translates it through the obligations they already carry.

By the time the message reaches the people whose work must change, it may still contain the same phrases and support the opposite behaviour.

This is not simply distortion. It is the organisation making sense of an abstract intention through local reality. The mistake is to imagine that this interpretive work can be avoided. It cannot. It can only be made visible, challenged and governed.

A cascade can distribute words. Only conversation attached to decision can create shared meaning.

4. What a composite programme revealed

Consider a representative enterprise change in 2007. Eight business units were moving transactional finance work into two shared-service centres. Approximately 1,200 roles were affected, although fewer than half were expected to move or leave. The programme case promised consistent controls, lower processing cost and clearer management

information.

The communication plan was extensive. Monthly newsletters reported progress. A chief executive letter described the strategic rationale. Managers received a presentation pack and a list of frequently asked questions. Quarterly roadshows reached most major sites. An intranet page held the approved materials.

Survey responses suggested that awareness exceeded 80 per cent. Yet readiness remained poor.

The phrase "local management retains accountability" lay at the centre of the confusion. The programme intended it to mean that business leaders remained accountable for financial outcomes while transaction processing moved elsewhere. Local finance teams heard that they could retain approval practices and reporting routines. The shared-service designers assumed that common processes would remove most local variation. The systems team designed access rights around the common model. Four interpretations sat beneath one reassuring sentence.

The conflict surfaced late, during acceptance testing. One division submitted 74 requests for local approval variations. Another insisted on retaining a parallel spreadsheet reconciliation. A third refused to close its local supplier mailbox because managers believed accountability required direct control. The programme labelled the issue resistance to the shared-service model.

The more accurate diagnosis was a failure to use communication as a place where the operating model could be understood and tested. The roadshows had presented settled slides. Questions were collected, answered centrally and added to the list. The communication process was efficient precisely where the transformation needed friction.

The programme changed its approach. It convened working sessions around real decisions rather than general presentations. Managers traced three transactions from request to ledger entry, naming who would act, who would approve, who would see the evidence and who would answer for an error. Contradictions were recorded as operating-model decisions, not communication queries. Finance leaders published the reasoning behind each decision and the obligations that followed.

Within six weeks, the 74 local variations fell to 19 defensible exceptions. The parallel reconciliation was retained for two reporting cycles with an explicit closure test. The supplier mailbox closed after the service centre demonstrated a four-hour response for urgent queries. No new slogan was required. Communication became effective when it moved from explaining the model to exposing and resolving what the model meant.

5. Communication does not begin after the decision

Many programmes separate decision and communication as though they were sequential professions. Leaders decide; communicators package; managers cascade; employees receive. The separation appears efficient and protects the dignity of governance.

It also removes the organisation's interpretive evidence from the decision.

A decision made without testing how different groups will understand and enact it is not fully formed. This does not mean every employee should vote on strategy or that every decision must wait for consensus. It means that leaders need to know where the proposed meaning collides with existing authority, vocabulary and obligation.

The best communication work therefore enters before the decision is final. It asks not merely, "How shall we announce this?" but:

- Which words carry different meanings in different functions?
- What will managers have to say when the central team is absent?
- Which practical questions reveal an unresolved decision rather than a need for explanation?
- Which reassurance would make the announcement easier but the implementation less honest?
- What behaviour would prove that the message has become operational?

These questions make communication part of transformation design. They do not weaken leadership. They improve the decision's capacity to survive contact with the organisation.

6. The status report as institutional comfort

Why does the reporting model persist even when its limitations are familiar?

Partly because communication artefacts are countable. A programme can show that 2,000 employees received a bulletin, 600 attended a roadshow and 85 per cent said they understood the case for change. These measures create evidence of activity without requiring leaders to examine whether the organisation has accepted the consequences.

Partly because reporting preserves the boundary between those who decide and those who receive. The centre retains authorship; the rest of the organisation becomes an audience. Dialogue is permitted, but usually after the proposition is complete.

And partly because status communication offers emotional protection. Transformation is ambiguous. Leaders do not know every consequence at the outset. A polished narrative creates confidence and coherence. That can be valuable, especially when uncertainty is causing rumour. But when confidence becomes the objective, communication begins to hide precisely the tensions that leaders need to govern.

The resulting language is recognisable: progress is on track; engagement remains positive; detailed impacts are being assessed; further information will follow. Each statement may be defensible. Together they can postpone the moment when somebody must say what will stop, who will lose discretion and what remains genuinely unknown.

7. The strongest counterargument

There is an important objection to elevating communication in this way. Communication cannot rescue a weak strategy, compensate for absent sponsorship or make an incoherent operating model acceptable. Too much emphasis on narrative risks turning transformation into presentation. The work, not the words, must deliver the result.

That objection is right. Communication is not a substitute for design, authority or execution. A town hall cannot repair a budget contradiction. A newsletter cannot create a missing decision right. A persuasive story should never be used to manufacture consent for a proposition that leaders are unwilling to examine.

But this does not reduce communication to reporting. It reveals why serious communication must be connected to the work.

If the operating model is incoherent, communication should expose the incoherence before deployment. If sponsorship is absent, the inability to answer a practical question should reveal the missing authority. If the strategy depends on an unspoken sacrifice, dialogue should bring that sacrifice into the decision. Communication becomes superficial only when it is separated from the substance it is meant to move.

The choice is not between doing the work and talking about it. Transformation is partly accomplished through the conversations in which people interpret commitments, test implications and decide how they will act.

8. From audience to participant

The status model imagines recipients. The transformation model requires participants.

A recipient needs information relevant to their role. A participant needs a way to connect that information to decision and consequence. This changes the shape of communication.

Instead of one message adapted for many audiences, the programme develops a common intention tested through several operational languages. Finance may ask what moves between budgets. Operations may ask what happens at 3 a.m. when the standard route fails. Human resources may ask which roles and agreements change. Information systems may ask who owns the data definition. These are not obstacles to a clean narrative. They are the means by which the narrative becomes executable.

Instead of measuring only reach and understanding, the programme looks for evidence of changed judgement:

- managers can explain not only what is changing but which local decision it alters;
- questions become more specific as understanding deepens;
- contradictions move into governance rather than circulating as rumour;
- leaders use the same terms to mean the same obligations;
- employees can identify what is settled, what remains open and how the open issue will be decided.

This is slower than issuing a bulletin and faster than repairing an implementation built on incompatible interpretations.

9. The moral content of communication

There is also a question of respect. Transformation often asks people to work inside uncertainty while leaders protect the appearance of certainty. Employees can usually distinguish between an answer that is incomplete and an answer designed to close discussion. The first may create anxiety; the second creates distrust.

Honest communication does not require leaders to disclose every confidential matter or predict what they cannot know. It requires a disciplined separation between decision, intention, assumption and uncertainty.

A mature message can say:

- this outcome has been decided;
- this part of the design remains open;
- these groups will help resolve it;
- this is the evidence and timetable for decision;
- these are the consequences we can already see;
- these are the consequences we cannot yet judge.

Such language is less polished than the usual assurance. It is more useful because it gives people a truthful basis for action.

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10. What communication is for

At its weakest, communication proves that the programme has spoken. At its strongest, it helps the organisation think and act together while its structures are changing.

That requires a different professional compact. Leaders must allow communication to surface uncomfortable implications before decisions are complete. Programme teams must treat recurring questions as evidence about the design, not noise around it. Communicators must resist becoming the final stage of message production and take responsibility for the conditions under which meaning becomes action. Managers must be equipped to interpret, not merely repeat.

The Friday report still has a place. Programmes need records of progress, risk and decision. But the report should no longer be confused with the work of transformation communication.

A transformation is not understood when the central words have reached the edge of the organisation. It is understood when the organisation can use those words to make coherent choices without the centre in the room.

That is the standard that matters: not how completely the journey was reported, but whether communication helped the organisation become capable of making it.