

BEYOND MESSAGE REACH

Transformation Communication Must Govern Meaning — Not Broadcast Progress

The overlooked control that turns enterprise decisions into coherent local action



Transformation Communication Must Govern Meaning – Not Broadcast Progress

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“A message becomes a transformation instrument only when it changes what someone is authorised, expected or prepared to do.”

1. The question the slide could not answer

The programme director had reached slide 28 of the roadshow pack when a regional finance manager asked a simple question: "When the new service centre opens, who decides whether an invoice is exceptional?"

The slide said that local management would retain accountability while transaction processing would be standardised. The programme director repeated the sentence. The finance manager asked again. The answer did not exist.

The question was logged for the next edition of the frequently asked questions. The roadshow continued. Two months later, the same ambiguity produced 63 local exception requests, delayed systems configuration and forced the programme board to revisit a decision it believed had already been communicated.

This is the point at which our usual understanding of communication fails. We treat the unanswered question as a gap in the message. It is often a gap in the transformation itself.

Communication is not the decorative layer placed around a completed programme. It is one of the controls through which the organisation discovers whether a decision is understood, coherent and capable of becoming action.

2. Status tells us where the programme is; communication tells the organisation where it stands

Status communication has a proper purpose. It records progress, risk, expenditure, decisions and next steps. Senior leaders need it. Programme boards cannot govern without a reliable account of what has happened.

But transformation communication performs a different task. It helps people locate themselves inside a changing system of authority and expectation.

A monthly report may say that process design is 80 per cent complete. The people affected need to know which judgements will move to the shared service, which remain local, what evidence will support an exception, and who will answer when the new arrangement fails under pressure.

A bulletin may announce that an enterprise system will establish one source of management information. The organisation needs to know who now owns a definition, which local reports will close, and whether leaders will make decisions from the common

figures when they differ from familiar spreadsheets.

These are not requests for more detail. They are questions about the operating reality the programme is trying to create.

A message becomes a transformation instrument only when it changes what someone is authorised, expected or prepared to do.

The distinction is easy to miss because both activities use the same machinery: presentations, email, intranet pages, manager briefings, newsletters and meetings. The difference lies not in the channel but in the consequence.

3. The dangerous comfort of reach

Communication plans often measure distribution. How many people received the message? How many attended? How many said they understood? These measures are convenient because they are visible and can be compared over time.

They also invite a false conclusion: that reach is evidence of readiness.

A composite enterprise programme in 2007 illustrates the problem. Six divisions were adopting a common purchasing process as part of an enterprise systems rollout. The communication dashboard looked impressive.

- Ninety-one per cent of affected managers had attended a briefing.
- More than 3,000 employees had received the launch bulletin.
- Forty-two process guides were available on the intranet.
- Surveyed awareness exceeded 85 per cent.

Yet three weeks before the first deployment, only two divisions had removed local supplier-approval forms. Four finance directors believed their existing thresholds would remain. Site managers continued to place urgent orders through established telephone arrangements. The central procurement team assumed those practices would cease on the implementation date.

Everybody had heard the message. They had not attached the same obligation to it.

The programme responded first by increasing communication frequency. More reminders produced more evidence of reach and no change in local decisions. Readiness improved only when the programme stopped asking, "Have we told them?" and started asking, "What have they decided differently because we told them?"

That question exposed the missing work. Local finance directors had never authorised the closure of old forms. Site managers had no agreed emergency route. Procurement had no power to reject an order placed outside the new process. Once those decisions were made and communicated together, the implementation became credible.

Communication fails as a transformation tool when it reports a future state that governance has not yet made enforceable.

4. Meaning is made at the boundary

The textbook picture of communication is linear. Leadership defines the message. The programme adapts it for audiences. Managers cascade it. Employees receive and act.

Organisations do not work that neatly.

At each boundary, the message meets an existing obligation. A business-unit leader hears standardisation and asks what it does to local performance. A control function hears simplification and asks which assurance is being removed. An operations manager hears centralisation and asks who answers at midnight. An employee hears efficiency and asks what it means for a role.

These are not distractions from the message. They are the places where the message acquires meaning.

When programmes insist on preserving one clean formulation, they often drive this interpretation into private conversations. The official presentation remains consistent while every function constructs its own practical version. By the time those versions collide, the collision appears as resistance or scope change.

Serious communication brings the interpretive work into the programme early. It does not permit every audience to redefine the outcome. It does require governance to examine the questions that reveal competing assumptions.

The most valuable communication question is frequently not the one that needs an answer from the communications team. It is the one that needs a decision from finance, operations, technology or the sponsor.

5. Communication is a listening control, not a listening exercise

Programmes are regularly advised to listen. They run workshops, collect questions and invite feedback. The language is humane; the process can still be inert.

Listening becomes a transformation control only when there is a route from what is heard to what is decided.

Three distinctions matter.

- A request for explanation should improve the clarity of the message.
- A challenge to feasibility should test the design against operational evidence.
- A conflict of authority should enter governance and produce a decision.

Without these distinctions, every issue becomes feedback. The programme thanks the participant, adds the point to a log and continues. The organisation learns that speaking is permitted but consequence is unlikely.

The discipline is to trace recurring questions to their source. If 40 managers ask who approves an exception, the failure is not that the answer is missing from the briefing pack. The failure is that the decision right has not been made clear enough to survive outside the programme room.

This is why the communication function should sit close to decision-making. Its value is not merely in crafting acceptable language. It is in recognising when language is carrying unresolved structure.

6. The strongest objection: communication cannot compensate for bad leadership

There is a serious objection to this argument. Communication teams are often burdened with problems they did not create. They are asked to make an incoherent strategy sound persuasive, to create confidence where leaders are divided, or to explain decisions whose consequences have not been faced. Calling communication a transformation control may simply expand the expectation that words can rescue weak leadership.

The objection is justified. Communication cannot repair absent authority, a contradictory operating model or a business case that depends on impossible behaviour. No amount of engagement can make an unfair decision fair.

But that is precisely why communication must not be confined to broadcasting progress.

A communications team at the end of the chain can only package what it receives. A communication control connected to governance can expose that the proposition is not ready to travel. It can show that leaders are using the same phrase to mean different things. It can identify the reassurance that hides a real transfer of risk. It can refuse to label an unanswered design question as a need for clearer wording.

This does not make communicators the owners of strategy. It makes the evidence produced by communication part of strategic control.

The alternative is not modesty. It is institutional blindness.

7. The transformation value of saying what is not settled

One reason programmes default to status is that status creates a coherent picture. Transformation rarely feels coherent from within. Important matters remain undecided. Leaders fear that admitting uncertainty will create rumour or weaken confidence.

Sometimes it will. A programme cannot publish every disagreement, and premature discussion can unsettle people before a decision is mature.

But false certainty has a longer cost. When the organisation discovers that an apparently settled statement contained unresolved consequences, trust moves from the formal message to the informal network. Thereafter, each new communication is read for what it omits.

The more credible discipline is to separate:

- what has been decided;
- what remains an intention;
- what is being tested;
- what is known to vary by location or function;
- who will decide the open matter;
- when the answer will change action.

This is not weakness. It gives people a reliable map of uncertainty. In large programmes, that reliability matters more than an appearance of completeness.

8. Managers are not distribution channels

The manager cascade deserves particular scrutiny. Programmes often equip managers with a slide deck, speaking notes and a question sheet, then hold them accountable for passing on the message.

Managers do not merely transmit. They interpret the transformation for the people who work within their authority. Their credibility depends on answering the second question: "What does this mean here?"

If the central team has not equipped them with decisions, boundaries and honest uncertainty, managers will fill the gaps from local experience. This is not a failure of discipline. It is an unavoidable exercise of leadership.

The programme should therefore prepare managers for judgement, not recitation. A useful manager briefing addresses:

- the enterprise outcome and its non-negotiable elements;
- the local decisions already made;
- the issues that remain open;
- the evidence managers should gather;
- the questions that must be escalated rather than improvised;
- the behaviour that should now stop, start or continue.

When managers can hold that conversation, communication begins to change the organisation. When they can only replay the central slides, the cascade magnifies ambiguity.

9. The measure that matters

Transformation communication should still measure accuracy, reach and understanding. But it should not stop there.

The decisive measures are behavioural and governable.

- Are recurring questions declining because decisions have been made, or merely because people have stopped asking?
- Can managers explain which local choice the transformation changes?
- Have old processes, forms and reports actually been withdrawn?
- Do different functions use the same terms to describe the same obligations?
- Does feedback alter design, sequence, authority or resource where evidence warrants it?
- Can the programme identify which uncertainty will be resolved next and by whom?

These measures are harder to report than attendance. They are more valuable because they connect communication to execution.

10. Communication belongs inside the work

The practitioner conclusion is direct. Transformation communication should not be organised as the production and distribution of messages about the programme. It should be organised as a control on whether the programme's meaning can become coherent action across the organisation.

That means communication begins before decisions are announced. It tests language against operational reality. It separates clarification from feasibility and authority. It sends unresolved structure back into governance. It equips managers to interpret within clear boundaries. It measures changed decisions, not only reached audiences.

Status tells leadership what the programme has done. Transformation communication reveals whether the organisation can do what the programme now requires.

When we confuse the two, we produce more information and less control. When we distinguish them, communication stops being the commentary around transformation and becomes part of the mechanism by which transformation happens.