

Let's talk about ... change

Literature based analysis on the role of internal communication in all stages of Kotter's eight-step plan for change management in the case of corporate culture change

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Abstract

“Change we can believe in”

– Barack Obama, Slogan of the winning Presidential campaign 2008

Tomorrow will not be like today – change is an ubiquitous part of our life and brings new tasks continuously. Businesses challenge new technologies, different economical conditions or unpredicted influences. Management has to deal with these situations and manage change. One central tool for achieving employees’ attention about change requirements and encouraging action is communication (Schichtel, 2010, p.233).

This work will analyse the impact of internal communication during the difficult times of corporate culture change by applying the well-known change management-model of John P. Kotter. During all eight steps of change – (1) creating a sense of urgency, (2) installing or forcing a coalition for change, (3) developing a new vision and culture, (4) communicating the new culture, (5) acting in the new way, (6) creating short-term wins, (7) implementing more change projects and (8) anchoring the new way of doing things (see amongst others Kotter, 1996, p.21) – employee communication is necessary.

Internal communication has the power to support management during times of transformation – using different strategies and tools throughout the entire process. These activities can be summarised in five groups: **action** (support your communication with deeds), **communication** (talk, talk, talk: the higher the communication effort, the better the outcome), **continuity** (never stop talking about it), **involvement** (participate and know everything about the change project) and **trust** (ensure credibility and assurance towards change success). Paying attention to all these five characteristics for internal communication will help to successfully implement corporate culture change.

List of acronyms and abbreviations

eg.	exempli gratia (lat.: for example)
et al.	et alii (lat.: and others)
etc.	et cetera (lat.: and so on)
FAQ	frequently asked questions
p.	page
Q&A	question and answer

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1. Problem definition, relevance and research question

1.1. Describing the research problem

World and workspace are facing **new challenges** every day. If necessary, organisations and companies must encounter these challenges and change their behaviour. Only flexible, innovative and self-improving organisations will survive (Robbins, Judge, Millet and Jones, 2010, p.12). Kotter (2008b, p.10) adds, that “the rate of change won't slow down. And competition will speed up”.

So **change** is a key for economic success and has become “the lifeblood for both management and communication teams in [...] organisations” (Alpsten and Mogestad, 2009, p.279). It is an “ever-present feature of organisational life” (Burnes, 2000, p.251) and **corporate culture change** increased in significance over the last years (Frontiera, 2010, p.73). Burnes provides evidence that a high number of organisations has faced or faces the task of corporate culture change; in some cases these projects failed (2000, p.251-252). The author’s conclusion is that organisational change is “complex and difficult” (Burnes, 2000, p.252).

As Quirke (2009, p.229) describes it, **communication** is one of the most important supporting and forcing tools in transforming times. Through continuous communication, recipients can be convinced of the intention and become actively involved in changing the current behaviour (see Schichtel, 2010, p.233: “Kommunikation ist ein mächtiger Hebel”). Furthermore, the specific instrument of **internal communication** is described as stimulation for effective companies and organisations (Kitchen and Daly, 2002, p.50) and can help to “enable [the] understanding of the relationship between ongoing changes [...] and the consequent requirement to review strategic direction” (Welch and Jackson, 2007, p.190).

Together these two aspects – change and internal communication – can help to guarantee the organisational well-being. Internal communication can be a very effective instrument to drive and deal with changes in organisations (Argenti, 2009, p.183). However, there are still many difficulties and managers make numerous mistakes in implementing corporate change – as Kotter illustrated in his research “at least one big error” (2007, p.3). Especially the change of corporate culture is difficult (Burnes, 2000, p.182) and “not entirely manageable” (Cunliffe, 2008, p.67). But these “most painful” (Ajayi, 2002, p.79) changes are sometimes necessary and only the well-informed management can deal with this task appropriately.

1.2. Research objectives

According to Paul Watzlawick (“One Cannot Not Communicate”) communication is ubiquitous, especially during periods of transformation. The need for proper and continuous communication throughout the whole change progress is often forgotten or underestimated. This literature based analysis should help to understand the role of internal communication during this period of time. The outcome will be a guideline for internal communication activities in time of corporate culture change.

1.3. Determining the research question

For the analysis a theoretical basis concerning change management is needed. Literature provides many different approaches and theories. For this work the eight-step plan for implementing change by John P. Kotter is chosen. This concept is based on the common mistakes made by managers in transforming phases and includes one central phase of communication (step four, see Robbins et al., 2010, p.347). As internal communication can have more tasks in all eight stages of the change process, this aspect should be investigated. Therefore the research question (RQ) is:

RQ: What is the role of internal communication in all stages of Kotter’s eight-step plan for change management in case of corporate culture change?

1.4. Methodology

This work is a literature based analysis and comparison of existing sources. It will use at least ten primary resources including five articles from peer reviewed journals (50 per cent not older than five years).

1.5. Structure

After describing the problem and the objectives of the analysis in this section the next chapter will provide the theoretical framework and definitions of used terms and expressions.

In the following part, the connection between corporate culture and internal communication – the overall topic of the work – is described, followed by a rough description of the common eight-step-model for change management by John P. Kotter in chapter 4.

In chapter 5, all eight steps are linked with internal communication (strategies, tools, experiences, researches, etc.), making it possible to answer the research question and draw a final conclusion in chapter 6.

2. Theoretical framework

Before giving definitions of the key terms of this work (‘corporate culture’, ‘change’ and ‘internal communication’) it is necessary to clarify the meaning of the terms ‘corporate’ and ‘organisation’ in respect of culture.

Schein draws the difference between **organisational and corporate culture** as follows: while ‘organisational culture’ can be used for “all kinds of private, public, government, and nonprofit organizations”, ‘corporate culture’ is used in the “private sector” (2010, p.1) only. This difference is not a determining factor for the author and so he applies his concepts of culture to all kinds of groups, organisations and businesses throughout the book (see eg. p.35 or different case-studies about corporate culture, p.171-172, 224-225 and 331-334) and links corporate culture to organisational culture in the index (p.418 and 429).

Other academic writers (Welch et al., 2007, p.194) use the terms ‘corporate’ and ‘organisation’ as synonyms and support their arguments with literature based examples. Further analysis will provide similarities between ‘corporate’ and ‘organisation’: Robbins et al. for example define ‘organisation’ as “a consciously coordinated social unit, composed of two or more people, that functions on a relatively continuous basis to achieve a common goal or set of goals” (2010, p.13). All these characteristics are valid for businesses and companies as well.

Summing up, the difference between organisational and corporate culture is not crucial for this work and so concepts about organisational culture and corporate culture are used equally in the following analysis.

2.1. Corporate culture and corporate culture change

Literature provides numerous definitions and concepts of **corporate** (and organisational) **culture**. Semling for example describes corporate culture as part of “corporate identity” and refers to it as a “system” (2009, p.21 and 23). For Cunliffe corporate culture is like “the personality” of an organisation (2008, p.55).

In a similar interpretation, Robbins et al. identify culture as “a system of shared meaning held by members that distinguishes the organisation from other organisations” (2010, p.320). Burnes summarises a few concepts and defines corporate culture as “product of long-term social learning in which dominant coalitions play a key role” (2000, p.185).

Bellingham uses ‘Seven Ss’ to describe corporate culture – most of them are invisible: “shared values, strategy, structure, staff, systems, skill and style” (2001, p.1). Corporate culture furthermore “has a major influence on how employees behave” (Cunliffe, 2008, p.55) and is based on different tangible elements like values, norms, assumptions or beliefs – visible for both internal and external parties.

Schein defines three different levels in his culture model: (1) the “artifacts”, (2) “espoused beliefs and value” and (3) the foundation of culture, “basic underlying assumptions” (2010, p.24). These assumptions have to be understood to gain knowledge about the existing culture (p.32 and 53). Schick furthermore develops a comprehensive portfolio about influences and visible expressions of corporate culture to show the complexity of this construct seen in figure 1 (2007, p.123).

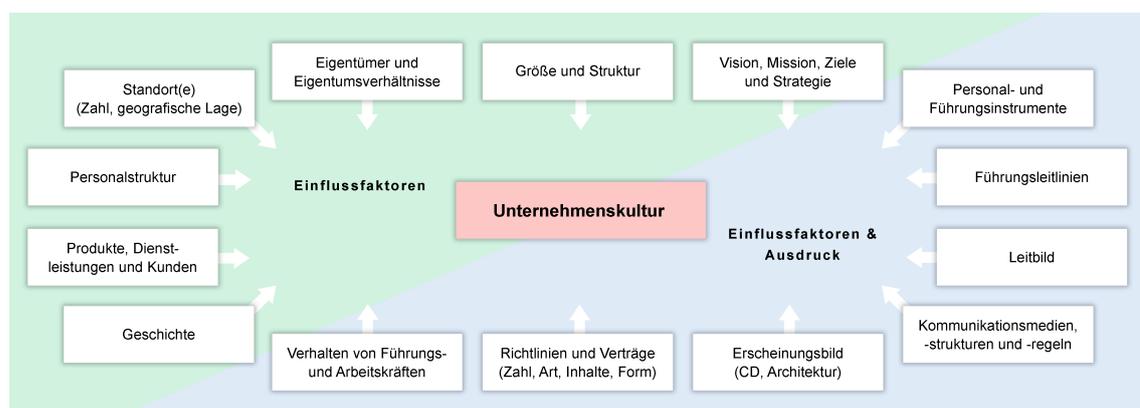


Figure 1: Influences and expressions of corporate culture
(source: adapted from Schick, 2007, p.123; literature in German)

Combining all these different approaches and definitions, **corporate culture can be described as a collection of values, behaviour and rules that makes the company (or organisation) unique.**

As outlined and illustrated above, corporate culture is influenced by many different factors – but these factors as well as culture do not remain stable. People, organisations, companies are constantly facing with change, a trend that has been growing over the last years.

As seen in the problem definition (chapter 1) and summarised by Burnes (“What worked in the past will not work in the future”, 2000, p.148) change is necessary. Frontiera, for example, lists many reasons for **changing the corporate culture** which are driven by “the basic desire to improve performance” (2010, p.73). Corporate culture change is a long-lasting process and needs management commitment (Schick, 2007, p.124; Kitchen et al., 2002, p.51; Burnes, 2000, p.185). Management should not delay such projects, especially when “the existing culture does not support the new strategy. Such a project demands [...] persistence, time, resources and patience” (Alpsten et al., 2009, p.296).

2.2. Internal communication

“Internal communication happens constantly within organisations and includes informal chat on the ‘grapevine’ as well as managed communication” – this is a definition by Welch et al. after their widespread theoretical research on the field of internal communication (2007, p.178). The authors list a several theoretical concepts and criticise the existing “gap in the literature on internal communication” (p.177).

A further definition identified internal communication as “the communication flow among people within the boundaries of an organization” (Mazzei, 2010, p.221). Kitchen et al. illustrate the role of internal communication as “precursor for organisational existence” and “survival” (2002, p.47). Employees request intense internal communication (Argenti, 2009, p.183f) and it is often described as a “crucial” management tool in today’s business used to “engage employees and achieve objectives” (Welch et al., 2007, p.177). This will help during corporate culture change.

3. Corporate culture (change) meets internal communication

Corporate culture and internal communication are strongly linked to each other. (see Semling, 2009, p.7-8). Welch et al. describe this interdependency as follows: “Internal communication takes place in a communication climate influenced by corporate culture. At the same time, internal communication influences corporate culture since it represents the culture” (2007, p.192).

Literature provides many examples for the significance of internal communication towards culture; and – as a result – towards the process of corporate culture change. As Mazzei describes, internal communication has the chance to establish the sense of urgency and further supports change efforts by “enhancing motivation” and “increase organizational trust” (2010, p.231). Welch et al. further classify different functions of internal communication. Those relevant for corporate culture change are:

- “awareness of [... the companies] changing environment”,
- “understanding of [... the companies] aims” and
- “communication” (2007, p.193) within the organisation

An additional model for successful change communication shows the significance of internal communication, because this is achieved using all internal communication channels: eg. newsletter, intranet, employee surveys, discussions, events or face-to-face-talks (Schichtel, 2010, p.255). Schick defines the major tasks for internal communication during corporate culture change (2007, p.124) as follows:

- assistance during the process of defining the future culture
- information for employees about the future culture
- changing the way of communication (according to the future culture)
- optionally leading the corporate-culture-change-project

This strong correlation between corporate culture (change) and internal communication justifies the following adaption of Kotter’s eight-step plan for internal communication activities in the case of corporate culture change.

4. Kotter’s eight-step plan for change management

Literature provides many different approaches and theories on change and change management. Ajayi (2002, p. 84-89) for example counted twelve relevant key thinkers. The first change concept was developed by Kurt Lewin. He describes change and the process of changing with three central stages: unfreezing the current situation, change itself (aim the target) and refreezing to the new situation (Robbins et al., 2010, p.346-347).

In contrast, other authors divide change into the steps “understanding”, “accepting” and “changing” itself (Bellingham, 2001, p.141) and highlight that executives have to carry the organisation through all these stages.

Basis for this work will be the input of “the best known writer on the subject of change” (Ajayi, 2002, p.86), John P. Kotter from the Harvard Business School, and his concept of an eight-step plan for change management (Kotter, 1996, p.21). Kotter’s theory is a guideline for “change execution” and a clear “change implementation model” (Stragalas, 2010, p.31). This model is only one of the means of dealing with change. But as Stragalas describes, Kotter focuses on the deeds during transitional periods and the “organisational behaviour [...] linkage between individuals, groups and the organisation” (2010, p.31). As a result this model is very useful for the research question about the role of internal communication during corporate culture change.

Kotter’s concept is built up on the ideas of Lewin (Robbins et al., 2010, p.347; Stragalas, 2010, p.33) and refers to the most common mistakes of management during change. He formulates the eight steps after describing the worst errors in change management from more than 100 companies of different branches. His concept should help deal with these problems (Robbins et al., 2010, p.347), but Kotter chips in that, “there are still more mistakes that people make” (2007, p.9).

On the following pages the final eight steps of Kotter’s model are described (see Kotter, 1996, 2007, 2008b, Kotter et al., 2002 or Robbins et al., 2010, p.347).

Step 1: Establish a sense of urgency (subsequently referred to as: urgency)

At the very beginning of each changing period there is the need for change – obvious or hidden. Kotter recommends establishing the “sense of urgency” within the company (Kotter, 2008b, p.10) so that people are “ready to move” (Kotter and Cohen, 2002, p.3). This urgency is not common and has to be created continuously (Kotter, 2008a, p.35).

Step 2: Creating the guiding coalition (Coalition for change)

The next task is to implement or force a “coalition for change” composed by a selected group of people. This team should have the “credibility, skills, connections, reputations and formal authority” (Kotter et al., 2002, p.4) for implementing the following change process.

Step 3: Developing a vision and strategy (Vision)

Visions or strategies are perspectives on the future and show what needs to be done (Burnes, 2000, p.162). So Kotter defines this third step as the central one, because the “vision of the change process can reduce the error rate [... and this is ...] the difference between success and failure” (2007, p.9).

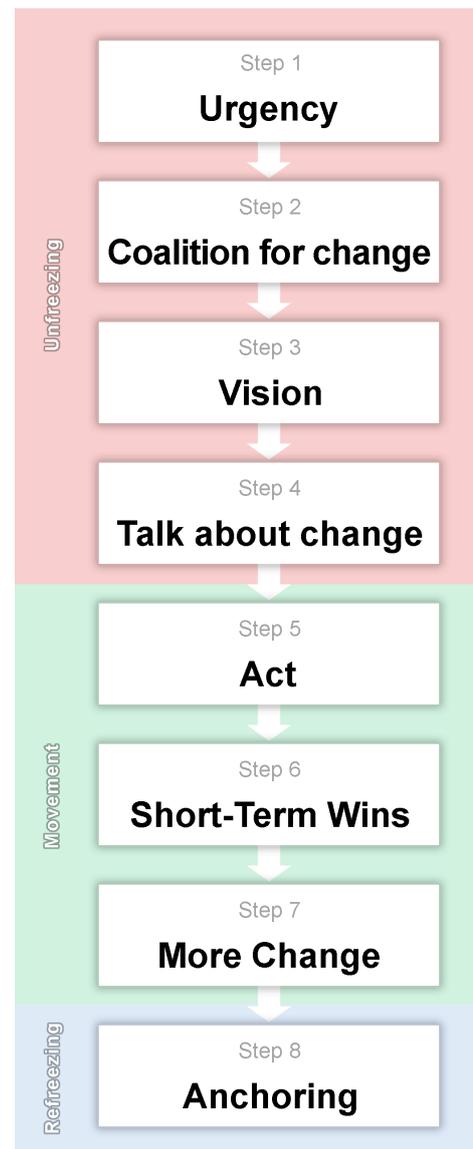


Figure 2: Overview to Kotter’s eight step model of change – linked to Lewin’s model
(source: adapted from Kotter, 1996, p.21 and Robbins et al., 2010, p.347)

Step 4: Communicating the change vision (Talk about change)

Kotter summarises step four under the claim “walk the talk” (1996, p.95) and argues that all members of the organisation or company must be informed about the changing task of the new vision, so that they can act accordingly “to make the vision reality” (Kotter et al., 2002, p.83).

Internal communication will have an important role in the communication-step and Kotter et al. begin their discussion with a summary of a few helpful key rules for talking about change (2002, p.4):

- “deeds are [...] more important than words”
- the message must be “heartfelt” and “repetition is the key”
- use as many different channels as possible
- symbols are helpful

Step 5: Empowering broad-based action (Act)

Starting this step the Kotter-model will leave the ‘unfreeze’ and enter the ‘movement’-stage (see figure 2). As new methods are being employed on a broad basis, the first big challenges may occur. In that time, management must address these issues and remove the “biggest obstacles” (Kotter, 2007, p.7).

Step 6: Generating short-term wins (Short-Term wins)

Altering procedures may bring forth positive results: the organisation will perform better, sell more than ever before or invent new technologies (Kotter, 2007, p.7). These ‘wins’ will help to reinforce the new culture (Frontiera, 2010, p.79) and therefore must be part of the planned corporate culture change process to show that change works thus creating motivation for further action (Kotter, 1996, p.21). The first short-term wins should be reached within the first 12 to 24 months and repeated throughout the change process (Kotter, 2007, p.1).

Step 7: Consolidating gains and producing more change (More change)

In the seventh step, Kotter sees the potential to gain more change readiness. The initial achievements and the awareness of employees about the changing process are the foundation for implementing new projects within this period of time (Kotter, 1996, p.21; Kotter, 2007, p.1). The author further advises the management to neither allow change initiators nor change resisters to declare the job as done too early. This is one of the most common pitfalls in step seven (Kotter, 2007, p.1 and 8).

Step 8: Anchoring new approaches in the culture (Anchoring)

The last step in Kotter’s model is to finalise the change process by establishing the new corporate culture. Management can ensure the anchoring by showing how change positively affected the organisation and promoting or hiring people who symbolise the new culture (Kotter, 2007, p.8-9).

5. Internal communication and Kotter’s plan

This chapter is the central part of the work and will link Kotter’s plan for change management with literature about internal communication in relation to corporate culture change.

5.1. Step 1 – Urgency

At the beginning of the change process internal communication will have the function of **sensitising** the staff. As Kotter assesses the difficulty of getting staff out of their “comfort zone” (2007, p.1), the upcoming problems and challenges must be put in “context for employees” (Argenti, 2009, p.194) – preferably in a subconscious way. Therefore, Kitchen et al. describe internal communication “as a tool for announcing [...] or preparing people for change” (2002, p.50).

Messages in the common communication channels must provide facts, figures and evidence with visuals and examples to ensure understanding, grasp attention and raise awareness (Alpsten et al., 2009, p.281 and 283). Therefore, a common strategy is to show employees what is happening outside the company (see Kotter, 2008a, p.36: “bringing the outside world inside” or “bring outsiders inside”). Especially when the corporate performance is good, establishing the feeling of urgency is hard – “but you have more resources to help make changes” (Kotter, 2007, p.3).

Another function of internal communication is to **involve** employees in the task of establishing the sense of urgency, eg. by organising discussions and debates (“Invite people to produce responses [...] otherwise you risk a backlash”, Alpsten et al., 2009, p.281). A key factor is open and honest communication about current economic or internal situations. As Kitchen et al. point out, credibility of communication is required because employees often react to change adversely (2002, p.48). If the staff is constantly briefed, they will realise the urgency to act and understand the circumstances (Alpsten et al., 2009, p.281).

Internal communication will be involved in and get responsibility for **strategic tasks** as well: eg. the rating and measurement of the change readiness of employees and managers (Alpsten et al., 2009, p.282). In the case of corporate culture change the internal communication department will have to analyse the current culture. The result of an internal communication audit will help to define future steps, choose the correct strategy and predict potential difficulties (Alpsten et al., 2009, p.282; Argenti, 2009, p.185).

5.2. Step 2 – Coalition for change

Establishing a coalition for change is a more informal way of change management and should involve internal communication – more **as a person**, less as a function. Therefore Alpsten et al. suggest including the communication department – especially the internal communication authorities (2009, p.285) – in all upcoming tasks and discussions, founding a “Change Communication Group” (Alpsten et al., 2009, p.286) and providing necessary data and information for that group. Some external input might be helpful in the planning stage (Argenti, 2009, p.187).

Internal communication will be an important **part of the ‘change coalition’**; it will gain more influence through collaboration with other departments. Kotter illustrates that the ‘change coalition’ should act “outside the normal hierarchy” (2007, p.1) and symbolise power “in terms of titles, information and expertise, reputations, and relationships” (Kotter, 2007, p.4-5).

Lack of **teamwork** will be a pitfall in this stage of change. So, internal communication has to work inter-divisionally, especially in close cooperation with management and the human resources department (Argenti, 2009, p.187; Mazzei, 2010, p.231). Wright further recommends communication professionals and a tight communication team (2009, p.276) – especially in the case of corporate culture change. It must also be ensured that internal communication is honest and ethical; therefore involved persons should be aware of the correct usage of persuasive techniques and methods (Welch et al., 2007, p.189).

Due to the affiliation to the ‘changing coalition’, internal communication can bear the task of being link and coordinator between all members of this team.

This second step of corporate culture change might be the first one if the **company’s grapevine** influences the project in a negative way. Especially if the staff is lacking information via the internal channels regarding current proceedings; they will fill the gap with rumour and external information (Mazzei, 2010, p.222). Argenti draws the attention to the faster and more persuasive means of this informal communication – most of the time without the influence of the communication department and executives. So management has to “tap into” the grapevine (2009, p.197) and use more informal ways to communicate and one-to-one-meetings to build up its credibility, an important factor for change implementation (Kitchen et al., 2002, p.48).

By utilising **employee involvement**, speculations and rumour will decrease (Smith and Mounter, 2008, p.173). Another point of view is that employees seek personal contact, especially in changing times. Internal communication can use these contacts very successfully by supplying them with specific information (Argenti, 2009, p.199). More involved employees can be very helpful during the process of corporate culture change as they are used to be more active in their communication behaviour (Mazzei, 2010, p.223 and 231).

5.3. Step 3 – Vision

The vision has to be simple, easy to understand (Smith, 2009, p.304) and should draw “a picture of the future” (Kotter, 2007, p.5). It must be formulated “concretely in terms of the specific problem [, ...] not [only] as ‘culture change’” (Schein, 2010, p.311). The vision has the power to “encourage action” if it is “meaningful [...], positive [...], clear [... and] engaging” (Alpsten et al., 2009, p.287).

Schein goes further by defining crucial characteristics of visions for cultural change:

- be “compelling” and “positive”
- “articulated and widely held by senior management”
- use “behavioural terms” and
- “nonnegotiable” (2010, p.305-306)

The organisation and its stakeholder will be influenced by the vision and the modified corporate culture. So, internal communication should be aware of all of these characteristics in the discussion and development process. To make communication much easier, the **expertise** of communication professionals might be helpful **for formulating such a vision**.

Internal communication should further motivate **employees** to become more **involved** in the process of defining a new vision. If this happens, the identification with the new culture will be higher. In general, employees will feel more valued and be more comfortable with the process. The role of internal communication is to make management aware of these circumstances and provide adequate communication tools (Argenti, 2009, p.184 and 186). The intranet for example is a common instrument and fast communication channel and has the potential to allow interaction and discussions in forums, so that everyone can easily participate. Argenti provided a practical – and successful – example, where intranet users were invited to discuss the corporate culture (2009, p.191). Other possibilities of allowing employee involvement are discussion boards or group interviews (Schein, 2010, p.326). Small group debates are very “conducive to resolving specific problems” (Argenti, 2009, p.190) and can help during vision development.

Kotter’s third step (vision) might be the right time for internal communication to focus on the managers as persons (on all levels of management). As ‘barriers’ of culture they will bring the vision alive and be tangible symbols for the whole process (Argenti, 2009, p.198-199). So these persons should be ‘used’ and get involved in internal communication efforts.

The final recommendation of Kotter is that the vision has to be easily communicated within five minutes or less. After that, the recipients have to show “both understanding and interest” (2007, p.6); if this fails the whole change process will fail.

5.4. Step 4 – Talk about change

After preparing the organisation for change (see last three steps), it is time to “walk the talk” (Kotter, 1996, p.95). The task is to promote in an active and goal-oriented way what to change and how to change it. Let the people know about the new vision in an honest way, through open and explicit communication. This will have positive effects on the process and will provoke a higher acceptance for culture change (Frontiera, 2010, p.77 and 81). Silence or reduced communication is not advised during the stage of implementing a new vision (Kotter, 1996, p.87; see section about the companies grapevine and rumour in chapter 5.2.).

Introducing the role of internal communication at this stage, suggestions about **change communication** made by Alpsten et al. (2009, p.289) are:

- communicate again and again – constantly at the same time and place using all media vehicles, (see also Schichtel, 2010, p.233; Kitchen et al., 2002, p.51, relevant to Kotter’s pitfall “undercommunicating the vision”, 2007, p.1)
- say it simple and be truthful, (see also Kotter, 1996, p.89; Frontiera, 2010, p.77)
- avoid rumour and speculations
- do what you are talking about (relevant to Kotter’s pitfall “behaving in ways antithetical to the vision”, 2007, p.1; see also Frontiera, 2010, p.81; Kitchen et al., 2002, p.51;)

In addition to that catalogue, Kotter identified some more key elements for effective change communication (1996, p.90):

- say it in metaphors and use examples
- talk honestly about “seeming inconsistencies” to make communication credible
- use two-way-communication

Internal communication has the chance to **symbolise culture change** by doing things differently: publishing memos or newspapers if not yet in existence or sending the corporate newspaper to the staff’s home (Argenti, 2009, p.194). Information should be broadcasted in more than one channel with the right mixture of different channels (find creative ways, use online, print and videos, direct communication between management and employees, see Argenti, 2009, p.193; Kitchen et al., 2002, p.51). Wright suggests testing the argument and wording with co-workers or people outside the company before using it, to see if they understand the message (2009, p.272).

In reference to different channels and new communication methods, internal communication and management should be aware of possible ‘noise’ or ‘gatekeepers’ (like line-managers, employees itself, etc.) in the communication process (Welch et al., 2007, p.187-188). So **channel selection** and, furthermore **wording** are key factors for the success of the change project. In this step, communication overload must be considered.

Visions and strategies are often invisible and employees have problems identifying with new objectives. Some authors therefore propose **visualising** the project by giving it a name, using a logo or launching an own section in the intranet to help employees find what they are looking for (Alpsten et al., 2009, p.290; Argenti, 2009, p.192-193). Another option is to use executives from all levels as credible message bearers for multiplying the vision – they are the most trustworthy ones (Alpsten et al., 2009, p.279 and 289; see chapter 5.3.).

Further literature will provide evidence that **face-to-face-communication** is one of the most effective forms of communication in the progress of corporate culture change. Welch et al., for example, establish the connection between one-to-one-communication and an effective and “excellent organisation” (2007, p.187). Approximately 80 per cent of the messages during change should be communicated face-to-face; especially delicate facts, like shutdowns, or redundancies are reasons for personal communication (Wright, 2009, p.275). Face-to-face-communication further can help in “achieving motivation and engagement” (Alpsten et al., 2009, p.286).

Other channels like corporate newspapers or intranet are used for standard cases and are to “support the conversation, not to replace it” (Smith, 2009, p.304).

As Wright describes, uninformed staff will construct the worst case in their minds (2009, p.273-274). Only communication in the form of FAQ-lists, Q&A-role plays or informal events (Wright, 2009, p.274; Alpsten et al., p.288 and 294) can help reducing that risk. Discussions and one-to-one-communication allow **feedback** and so employees will feel “as catalysts for organizational change” (Argenti, 2009, p.189). Thus management and internal communication can use their response for further activities.

Finally, communication during corporate culture change further needs coordination and **integration** at the following stages:

- what you say and what you do (see before),
- what you say and how you say it (“content and tone”, Argenti, 2009, p.187; “type of language”, Kitchen et al., 2002, p.50) and
- what you say to external and internal recipients (Argenti, 2009, p.187; Mazzei, 2010, p.222)

5.5. Step 5 – Act

“Action speaks louder than words!” – Alpsten et al. (2009, p.293) give the perfect introduction to the next step of Kotter’s plan. As mentioned in many references before, there is a strong connection between plans and deeds. Acting in the new way will help to establish the new corporate culture – as promoted in the vision.

The role of internal communication at this step is to accompany the implementation-process of corporate culture change through all media channels (**continue talking** about the project – regularly, trustworthy, consistent); make the process visible – every small item will help to reach the target (Alpsten et al., 2009, p.294).

For that reason internal communication has a wide range of possibilities (Schein, 2010, p.306-307):

- formal and informal trainings for all employees including management to learn about the new culture – the most effective way is doing the trainings in groups (like in the real work environment)
- provide coaches and valid feedback and support groups during the learning process, eg. in discussions, events (see also Kotter et al., 2002, p.123)
- establish role models (internal communication can show and use these models in all communication channels) – possibly external personnel with experience in change (see also Kotter et al., 2002, p.123)
- assist those involved by showing their actions and link them to the workspace of each employee, eg. by writing stories, giving rewards (Alpsten et al., 2009, p.294).

As Kotter and Cohen further pointed out, “the central stage [...] is changing people’s behaviour” (2002, p.2) so management has to **promote** this behaviour (see Kotter, 1996, p.21: “Encouraging risk taking and nontraditional ideas, activities and actions”). Internal communication’s task is simply to transmit this message.

At this stage it is important to **get rid of problems** or obstacles within the change process; internal communication should be prepared for any complications, making some plans for these circumstances. Furthermore it should avoid explanation or legitimization of problems (Frontiera, 2010, p.78). Communication should stay honest and credible by showing the true situation.

To plan and supervise the change progress, internal communication can do more research by talking to relevant stakeholders or interviewing employees (Alpsten et al., 2009, p.292) and running a “temperature check” (Argenti, 2009, p.186). This will provide a better overview of the progress or any possible difficulties that may have arisen due to the implemented communication plan.

Internal communication activities might focus on middle and senior management at this phase of change; often, this group is the biggest opposition to change (Burnes, 2000, p.171). Some special communication activities can help to involve and encourage this group. Further it should be considered, that change management at this step is influenced by politics (Burnes, 2000, p.183).

Wright finally establishes a connection between “**peer pressure**” of employees on managers (2009, p.276) and the motivation of executives to inform the staff; as pressure increases, change communication efforts decrease. Management should pay no attention to pressure in that stage of the culture change process – just “stay true to [...] values and remain focused on the larger plan” (Frontiera, 2010, p.78). And Kotter further called “pressure [...] a useful element in a change effort” (2007, p.8).

5.6. Step 6 – Short-Term wins

Again, change and especially culture change, last for a very long time. For these long-lasting processes a “detailed action plan” (Alpsten et al., 2009, p.287) is needed to organise all stages of communication – including short wins on the way to the final end. As Schein points out, “cultural elements can only be learned if the new behaviour leads to success and satisfaction” (2010, p.312).

Management is obligated to create this success, but internal communication has to talk about these first ‘short-term wins’ and use them for the current and following change efforts.

As shown in chapter 2.1. changing the invisible aspects of corporate culture is the most difficult step and so “the most effective strategy [...] is] to start changing things that are visible” (Alpsten et al., 2009, p.298). Kotter et al. further recommend using “wins that are as visible as possible”, “meaningful to others” and “speak to powerful players whose support you need and do not yet have” (2002, p.141).

Consequently internal communication has to apply positive results of the change process as **message**, story or barrier **in all or selected communication channels** (Alpsten et al., 2009, p.290) using clever wording and visualisation. A visualisation might be a promotion or rewards for correct behaviour, motivated and encouraged employees (Kotter, 2007, p.1; Schichtel, 2010, p.267-268). A visualisation need not only be positive – ‘punishing’ deeds for those still against the new culture is also an alternative (Frontiera, 2010, p.73).

5.7. Step 7 – More Change

This step is the logical follow-up of step six (Short-Term wins) and creates more change to bring the entire transition progress to an end (in the final step eight).

As Kotter (2007, p.8) warned, one of the most common pitfalls at this stage is to give change initiators and change resisters too much authority. Seeing the first (positive) effects, both will celebrate the end of the process – although with different intentions (getting rewarded for the successful project or stopping the project immediately). Frontiera therefore advises leaders to “stay true to your plan” (2010, p.82).

So, the simple task for internal communication in step seven is to continue change communication and – if necessary – to redesign the developed communication strategy. The challenge is to find the right balance between too much or not enough communication, especially because internal communication often is confronted with the danger of information overload, resulting in less efficiency (Welch et al., 2007, p.188).

5.8. Step 8 – Anchoring

Anchoring the new culture is the final step in Kotter’s plan. The job for internal communication is to continue talking about the change efforts (like in the steps before). As Schichtel argued, communication from the beginning to the end is the foundation for successful change (2010, p.255). Communication has to be present until the end, otherwise the change-speed will decrease and the project will be at risk (Schichtel, 2010, p.268).

When all change efforts have finally succeeded, the new corporate culture can be implemented and change will become an ubiquitous part of corporate life (see Kotter, 2008a, p.34: “change will be constant”). To symbolise and communicate the end of the change process, internal communication can be in charge of organising a final event, publishing a closing report or making a movie about the project.

As a result of corporate culture change, internal communication will be transformed as well (see connection between corporate culture and internal communication in chapter 3.; eg. Welch et al., 2007, p.192); finally the ‘new’ internal communication (in form of strategy, instruments, messages, vehicles, etc.) becomes an example for the changed culture.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

Different theories provide theoretical and practical input for change communication. Using Kotter’s model is just one option to plan and implement corporate culture change. This theory is chosen because it was developed after research in the workspace and formulates practical implications for changing times (Stragalas, 2010, p.31). Thus, the link to internal communication strategies and concrete activities can be established easily.

Stragalas takes into consideration, that “some actions would be important in more than one stage” (2010, p.35). This work confirms this theory: many different strategies and internal communication tools are present in more than one stage of Kotter’s plan.

As a consequence, all described internal communication-efforts can be summarised to five groups. These groups are valid for all eight steps of Kotter’s change model; therefore the **final assumptions and recommendations about the role of internal communication during corporate culture change** (see research question, p.6) are:

Action

- Symbolise and visualise the new culture by acting in the new way (let deeds talk, be a role model).

Communication

- Talk about the change process: What is the task to do? What happens now? What has already succeeded? After that: talk again.
- Use all different kinds of internal communication vehicles and channels, enforce and use two-way-communication, allow feedback and ensure continuous attention to the change project.
- Integrate communication and action during the whole process and within the entire organisation.

Continuity

- Ensure change communication throughout the process.
- Never allow the communication efforts on the change project to slow down.

Involvement

- Get involved and give professional input (concerning change development, implementation, controlling and strategy alteration).
- Be an expert for the change project and know all the relevant background.
- Be part of the ‘changing coalition’, know staff’s opinion and communicate informally with them.

Trust

- Guarantee reliable, honest, comprehensive and authentic communication.

Final note:

This work cannot provide a complete and fail proof manual for internal communication during corporate culture change – each situation is different and has to be evaluated separately. Furthermore, some influences on corporate culture change (leadership, economical situation of the company, existing culture or subcultures, group cohesion, to name a few) are not included in this analysis; they might be interesting aspects for further research on this issue.

Nevertheless, this work can be of help when considering important aspects of internal communication during such a process.

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