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DESIGNING AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNICATING ICT-RELATED CHANGE

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When implementing e-Government strategies, a whole range of challenges need to be met, comprising legal, technological, political, managerial, and social ones. Also, if implementation is to be achieved efficiently and in a way that optimizes workflows and improves services, this usually means changing the organization and its culture. In the present paper we will address some of the key factors relevant to leading change, focusing on the managerial and social/cultural aspects. We suggest that success factors in change projects can best be identified by taking on an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on insights from management and communication studies. Research on internal organizational communication so far has not put its focus on the support of change processes as a basic function of internal communication, despite the fact that the ability to change is increasingly considered to be vital for any organization. Similarly, literature from the fields of change and project management is in general rather unspecific with regard to systematic planning of communication. In order to fill these gaps, we are presently carrying out a research project aimed at developing a communication methodology for change. In this paper we present an approach for developing a communicative framework that can be used by organizational leaders and project managers when planning ICT-implementation and thus preparing organizational change.

1 Introduction

In the process of change, organizations are often confronted with major difficulties that may lead to a complete failure of change projects. As to the causes of failure, implementers regard communication problems as among the most influential [1]. It is therefore our goal to develop a communication methodology which helps to minimize the risks associated to inadequate communication in the context of change projects. The communicative framework presented in this paper will be empirically tested and enhanced in the context of a case study of the implementation of an ICT solution in a Swiss federal department.

Setting out with a short overview of the development and aims of e-Government in Switzerland, we will specify the aims of our research. After framing the research field by approaches from change management and internal organizational communication we will sketch out the main constituents of the communicative framework to be designed.

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1.1 E-Government as Part of the “Information Society Switzerland”

E-Government refers to the contribution of information and communication technology (ICT) to governmental processes and services. Information and communication potentials play a crucial role in this area: new technologies offer governmental actors additional channels to achieve their goals and to interact with stakeholders, often giving rise to the prospect of efficiency gains, the underlying idea being that if public administration processes are automated, costs will shrink dramatically, while output quality will increase. In this context, a reform discourse has emerged, which considers the widespread use of information technology in government activities as a change of paradigm and a turnaround in statehood [2].

In January 2007, the Swiss government has adopted its e-Government-Strategy [3]. The strategy aims at three goals: (1) Interactions between businesses and public authorities are handled electronically; (2) public authorities modernise their business processes, different administrative units interacting electronically; (3) people can handle important affairs with their authorities electronically. Developed cooperatively by the Swiss federal government and the cantons, the strategy puts its focus on the operational level, i.e. the digitalisation of administrative services and processes. In order to be able to fulfill various functions of e-Government, governments need to meet a whole range of challenges with regard to the implementation of an adequate strategy, such as legal, technological and political aspects. Among the challenges which may not have received sufficient attention so far are those arising in the context of internal communication: Implementers of ICT-solutions are invariably confronted with the necessity of change management, since effective e-Government usually amounts to reorganizing the public administration and therefore changing certain aspects of its culture. Successful implementation of e-Government solutions thus poses a social challenge, as it most often requires a change in mentality among public servants and their willingness to acquire new competences. In the following we will focus on communicative action as an instrument to lead these change processes and as a means of overcoming managerial and social obstacles in particular.

1.2 Leading through Communication: Case Study and Aim of the Research

Administrative reforms, in which the use of ICT is a core issue, currently appear on the agenda of different heads of departments or directorates, who are in charge of realising these reforms. The research project aims at examining the leading of change through communication by supporting the process of implementing an e-Government-program on the federal level. More precisely, the case study will focus on the implementation of a document management system (DMS) in the directorates of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. The application will enable members of the administration to file and share data and documents electronically. It therefore supports one of the three goals of the Swiss e-Government-strategy, namely the modernisation of public authorities’ business processes and their electronical interaction. Beside that, it is thought to contribute to improving transparency, efficiency and flexibility.

The aim of our research project is to establish an innovative model of communication for the public sector to be used by leadership and/or project managers in the context of ICT-related change projects. We thereby draw on approaches from management studies (public and change management) and communication studies (internal organizational communication). In addition to designing a communicative framework, tools for efficient and effective communication will be evaluated. The focus will be on the initial phase of change projects, where it is important to bundle the main energies in order to gain acceptance within the organization [4], which is crucial for the outcome of change projects. Our working hypothesis is: The earlier leadership succeeds in convincing as many stakeholders as possible to agree to a change project, the more efficiently goals can be achieved. The research project aims at providing the following benefits for the handling of change processes in the public sector: Firstly, adopting the suggested communicative actions is supposed to lead to an achievement of objectives in an efficient and effective way. Secondly, the stakeholders in the change process are to be encouraged to take on a more proactive role, thus reducing potential side effects. In sum, ICT-related change is to be carried out faster and with less resistance.

2 Framing the Research Project

2.1 Change Management: The Notion of Leading Change

In the context of organizational change Kotter assigns management and leadership with distinct responsibilities: an organization’s management is primarily in charge of planning and budgeting, organizing and staffing, controlling and problem solving. In contrast, leading an organization first of all means establishing direction [4]. At a preliminary stage of a change project, leadership must assess whether there is a need for change [5]. Given this is the case, leadership then is in charge of developing a vision as well as a strategy by which it can be achieved. Secondly, leadership must align people: A prerequisite for change is that everyone whose cooperation is needed understands and supports the vision and strategy. In other words, leadership is in charge of fostering willingness to change. Thirdly, leadership fulfills the task of motivating and inspiring the people involved in the change project, so that existing barriers (political, bureaucratic and others) can be overcome. Thus, leadership must grant the ability to change, be it on a personal level (knowledge, competence), on the business level (structures, processes), or on a technical level. Furthermore, in order for change to be sustained in the long term, leadership has to engage in a productive interaction with management (cf. [4] and [5]).

Kotter suggests that the process of creating major change follows eight stages: (1) “Establishing a sense of urgency”, (2) “Creating the guiding coalition”, (3) “Developing a vision and strategy”, (4) “Communicating the change vision”, (5) “Empowering broad-based action”, (6) “Generating short-term wins”, (7) “Consolidating gains and producing more change” and (8) “Anchoring new approaches in the culture” [4]. Krüger adapts Kotter’s model and distinguishes five phases of a change process: initialization, conceptualization, mobilization, implementation and sustainability [5]. During initialization leadership should establish an understanding for the need of change; in the phase of conceptualization its main task is to communicate the strategy, while during the third phase the objective is to encourage the willingness to change. Throughout the entire implementation phase the aim is to impart knowledge and abilities and to support problem solving. Maintaining the exchange of experiences is the goal during the last phase of sustainability. When communicating ICT-related change and planning a strategy it is helpful to envision the different phases in order to be able to inform stakeholders timely. Timeliness in communication is also considered a crucial factor by the Swiss Conference of the Information Services [6].

2.2 Internal Organizational Communication in Change Processes

Implementing ICT in the public sector means changing the workflow of the administrative units concerned and can to a certain extent be understood as a change in organizational culture. Implementers of ICT-solutions are likely to be confronted with a lack of acceptance, since fulfilling their task amounts to questioning processes that so far have been taken for granted. Hence, change
3 Basic Assumptions for Designing a Communicative Framework for Leading Change

3.1 Designing an Analytical Framework for Communicating Change

At the current stage of our research we suggest that a framework for the communicative leading of ICT-related change must take into consideration the following three dimensions: (1) the time axis, (2) specific levels of communication and (3) an analysis of the participants.

As the functions and the participants of communication vary according to the phases of a change process, different phases have to be distinguished on the time axis. As to the particular phases of a change process, we follow Kotter [4] and Krüger [5]. As for the different levels of communication, it has already been pointed out that communication takes place on a cognitive as well as on an emotional level. The distinction between an organizational (cognitive) and a social (emotional) level is an artificial one, which helps to differentiate between prototypical contents of a message in the context of change processes. Organizational communication focuses on the exchange of fact-based and job-related information in order to increase employees' performance. A communication concept will integrate activities that on the one hand stress the strategic level (e.g. "what is the change vision?"). On the other hand, within an administrative unit, a project-leader will also address operational aspects of the change project (e.g. "what is the project plan?"). Since we are dealing with ICT-projects, technical issues need to be addressed as well (e.g. "how does the tool work?").

On the social level, end-users for example will also want to know to what extent the tool affects their work habits. This points to the social dimension of communication which has an impact on employees' motivation. Internal communication needs to integrate both perspectives. An analysis of the participants will distinguish the target audience and communicators. Besides differentiating target audiences like executives vs. end-users, it is important to identify potential multipliers (opinion leaders) and to enable dialectics which may be used to create shared meanings and facilitate change. As is the case for any project, the success of ICT-related change projects depends on the support of top-level executives. In the context of e-Government, political issues may be relevant to the outcome of a project as well. Communicative activities related to product marketing therefore should aim at securing support not only from the members of an administrative unit, but also from a wider political environment. Carrying out a stakeholder analysis will allow leadership and/or project management to identify any actors who are likely to have an influence on the outcome of the project. In order to be able to make effective use of communication project-leaders require an overview over existing constellations.

Finally, an appropriate mode and channel of communication must be selected and applied (e.g. formal vs. informal, direct vs. indirect, verbal vs. non-verbal, reciprocal vs. one-sided). The relation between communicators and their target audience can be grasped according to the formula 1:n (interpersonal communication vs. small-group or organizational communication) [1].

3.2 Applicability of the Framework and further Proceeding

The framework presented here can be regarded as a pattern of thought, guiding change managers in their analysis of a given change project with regard to communicational implications. In order to plan communication systematically an organization needs leadership and/or project managers to orchestrate the above-mentioned dimensions, whereby the following aspects should be taken into consideration:
Communication plays a central role in the first half of a change process. For the successful and efficient implementation of IT-applications phases like “establishing a sense of urgency” and “communicating the change vision” (phases 1 and 4 according to Kotter [4]) are especially critical; professional support in the field of communication might be sought.

Before planning communicative activities a risk analysis (based on a context analysis) should be undertaken in order to identify critical factors with regard to specific phases of the change process and also with regard to specific target-audiences.

Leadership and/or project managers in charge of communication should develop an appropriate communication strategy, taking into account the time axis, various levels and goals of communication, different target-audiences as well as different communication channels.

From a practical point of view, the question now arising is: What communication tools are appropriate to use in a given change situation? Thus, our further research will focus on providing insights regarding specific methods to be used in specific change contexts. The framework presented here will be applied in the first phase of our case study: Having identified the major characteristics of the change process and its participants, we will validate the proposed framework in the field and offer support to the project-leader over critical communication phases by assisting him to systematically develop and follow an appropriate communication strategy.

References


