

Riding the waves through turbulent times

A guide to good communication through change and uncertainty

I remember it vividly...in my car on my way to the office. Mobile rings. Cue colleague in panic mode on the other end of the phone:

“Did you hear the news? We’ve been bought!”

This was not the kind of call our Health & Safety team would have approved of. In shock, distracted, full of questions, second guessing with my colleague what it meant...By who? But why? What will they do? What does it mean for us? Fully in the ‘away state’ by then, I don’t remember a thing about what I did for the rest the day.

Later that week. A town hall with our MD. His headline:

“Nothing’s going to change.”

**WE
SWIM AGAINST
THE TIDE**



Dear reader, everything changed. In his attempt to steady the ship our MD had committed two cardinal sins of communicating during change: dealing in absolutes and treating people like children.

Leadership communication during change is like walking a precarious tightrope strung over Niagara Falls. Do you risk confidential leaks if you say too much? Are you in the dark yourself? Do you have anything meaningful to say? All while feeling the weight of expectation to provide people with certainty, clarity, and comfort.

If you are in a similar position, you may not be able to offer certainty or clarity on everything. There are, however, some principles to communicating during change that will serve you well in the immediate and longer term as the business transforms.

Put on your own life jacket first

Inevitably this is a stressful and busy time – focusing on your own energy and wellbeing is critical to leading well. If you don't, how you feel about what is going on will be apparent to your team. Reflect on how you feel and write this down. Share how you feel with trusted friends, family or colleagues. Build a support network.

It may not be possible to always get all the sleep you want or work your typical hours. But, if there are things you know you need to stay feeling calm, positive and in control then prioritise them. How you feel is how you will lead, and a leader's behaviour is contagious. And you'll set the tone for the team in prioritising wellbeing as a foundation for performance.

Maintain calm and confidence

Balance optimism with realism. Be positive but not unrealistic ("Nothing's going to change!" – yeah right). Your people are smart, talented adults. Tell them that things may change, and that in your experience change can bring both challenge AND opportunity.

Remind them of what you are continuing to do to invest in them. Lean into your company values and reference these in communication (and keep showing that you live them). Great leaders do this instinctively.

Share stories of past experiences of change as a leader, so that they know this uncertainty is normal and will pass, bringing new horizons and opportunities. If you don't have them, ask your executive colleagues for them, or read other leaders' stories online. Tell these stories in a narrative style, not in PowerPoint. Moments of human connection with stories matter during times of change; they help our brains make sense of things.

Keep communicating, provide as much certainty as you can

Our brains are wired to predict. Uncertainty elicits a threat response.

“ *The network of the brain that is involved in noticing changes and deciding what to do – the prefrontal cortex – is one of the most energy-demanding, easily tired and easily overwhelmed parts of the brain. That means changing how we do even the simplest of tasks is a very complex process. This region is connected to every other part of the brain, and essentially works like a gating function, meaning everything slows down when you have to use it.* ”

Dr David Rock, Director of the NeuroLeadership Institute
and author of *Your Brain at Work*

“ *Change leads to uncertainty. Uncertainty sends people batshit crazy. To avoid sending them batshit crazy, get your communications right.* ”

Lorna and Lottie from 7 Seas – the *Deep C Dive* podcast ‘Filling the Void’

People will fill an information vacuum with rumour and second guessing. This wastes energy and time and bad habits set in – deprioritising collaboration with certain people or colleagues, political game-playing, or just checking out and polishing up their CV.

These are hallmarks of colleagues in the ‘away state’ or stress-response and this is unhelpful for the individual, team, and company.

Counter this with more communication. This may feel impossible due to NDAs, emails and PowerPoint decks entitled ‘Confidential DO NOT SHARE’. But being clear as a leadership team what you CAN say (and there is plenty) means you can keep engaging with teams who are keen for certainty.

Things you CAN say when it seems like you can't say anything:



What phase of the process we are in and what that means for how you will work *"The Exec is still working through the deal so there are lots of things we cannot confirm. We expect this to take 3 months. Until then we continue to focus on the same work we do day to day"*



What your expectations are of them *"Please keep focused on continuing the important work you're doing – this is what makes us great. If you have questions or worries, talk to me"*



Reassure them on the BAU that will continue, what is paused and why. *"These are the things we are keeping on doing. We're going to pause on this for now while we..."*



What to say outside the business *"While we are going through this important process my expectation is that everyone understands the sensitivity of communicating with friends or contacts outside the business"* or *"If a customer asks what this means for them you can tell them X/Y/Z"* - the content will vary depending on the circumstances, but be clear on expectations and give people tools to handle conversations well



That you understand how they may feel and how you will support them *"I know this is an uncertain time and you will have questions. I commit to update you weekly/monthly/on the intranet/in a town hall. In the meantime you can email me/visit the Teams Channel/talk to your manager"*.

Keep consistent with your key messages across your executive team. Make sure this aligns with the message from the top.

Meet people where they are

People appreciate and are reassured by seeing authentic leadership in real life (or at least on video) so consider:

- A vlog, or podcast with your reflections as well as updates. This can be as simple as a quick 45 seconds on your phone
- Informal Q&As in person or on Teams (record them and share afterwards too)
- Walking the floor, while emphasising your literal or metaphorical door is always open
- If you don't want to be on camera, at least consider an authentically written blog

Think about an easily accessed place for updates, FAQs and guidance. If they don't visit the intranet, then consider manager briefing packs so that people close to them can answer questions and share updates. Keep the FAQs growing with real questions you have had from the team. This will help them feel you are genuinely listening and responding.

Make short frequent updates as well as the bigger ones – don't put up a wall of silence.

Be human. Avoid business jargon and speak from the heart, lead with empathy. Acknowledge emotions and name your own.

Think about your audience and the outcome you want. Plan your communication by asking yourself

- What do I want them to *Think*? (the rational response)
- How do I want them to *Feel*? (the emotional response)
- What do I need them to *Do*? (the call to action)

Be willing to ask for information yourself. Gain clarity or surface ambiguity - about the process, the stakeholders, the timeframes. And about what you can and cannot share. Challenge (constructively and calmly) if needed. You will feel more comfortable communicating if you feel prepared and informed.

It can be easy to allow your own perspective on this change to colour how you engage with others, including new stakeholders and colleagues you need to collaborate with. Notice if that happens and navigate ambiguity and conflict with clarity and compassion.

Finally, **if your change involves a merger or acquisition and you are the acquirer**, a good amount of this applies. In addition:

Be wary of dealing in absolutes or assuming that your plans are the only viable plans. You may have done the buying but you now have a group of critical, valuable stakeholders to partner with to achieve your goals.

Lean in to listening and be curious, rather than assuming or assessing. This is tricky when a disclosure or legal process might have felt otherwise, but essential to building trust, managing risk and get the best outcomes.

Set expectations around culture, behaviour and collaboration early – and live them out loud.

Some resources to help you:

Self Compassion – practices to look after yourself, *Kristen Neff*

Radical Candour – a framework for navigating hard conversations

7 Seas 'Deep C Dive' podcasts

Filling The Void - Communicating Through Change

How to Escape The Pressure Cycle

Communicating During Unrest & Uncertainty

About us

7 Seas combines **deep expertise in culture, change, communication and coaching** to create impact and make lasting positive change for a wide range of organisations and their people. From global financial services, to complex NHS Trusts, via Automotive, Energy and some globally recognised brands.

With extensive experience in the public, private and third sectors, we bring our wealth of knowledge to you and your people. Whatever your challenges, we have likely seen it before. We've been there, done it and absolutely got the T shirt (it's probably got a band slogan on).

We do it with our **values of courage, compassion and creativity** as our north star, and our promise to you.

We help our clients **develop their organisational values and behaviours** to drive the positive cultures that fuel strategy and purpose. We work to **embed that culture across the organisation**, by identifying where in your cultural ecosystem the biggest impacts can be made.

We coach and develop leaders and their senior teams to equip them with the skills to face the challenges of the modern workplace – culture starts at the top.

We create strategies to **bring your people on the journey of change**, engaging, involving and motivating them as you go.

We develop compelling **Employee Value Propositions** and **Employer brands** to attract, retain and inspire talent.

We help you **tell the story of your organisation** and its strategy, bringing it to life, making it meaningful for all. Our creative team creates consumer grade campaigns designed to cut through and move your people.

We present and podcast (**'The Deep C Dive'**), we write and publish on culture, we chair conferences and sit on industry judging panels. We win awards with our clients for the impact we've made on their organisation.

We'd love to do this for you. Please **get in touch** to hear what we're doing for organisations like yours and ways we can help make your place a better place to be.

About the authors



Lorna Leeson, Managing Director

Lorna has an MSc in Strategic Human Resource Management, a degree in Theatre and Performance and is a Fellow of the CIPD. She's an Executive Coach, working with transformational leaders to recognise their role in creating cultures that thrive. She has also led large global, multi-generational teams of her own. Lorna is driven by helping clients create more human workplaces and loves nothing more than unpicking a cultural or

change puzzle. When she isn't working with the best clients in the world to shape people-centred cultures, she sings in a band, attends the odd improv class and is Cool Auntie (their words, not hers) and Godmother to a tribe of incredible future leaders.



Charlotte Dahl, Managing Director

Charlotte is an accomplished culture and communications consultant, speaker, writer, trainer and facilitator. She has a unique view on culture, engagement and internal communications, having spent equal parts of her career in consumer, then employee communications. Having worked for clients spanning every industry sector, she brings the insight

and quality from the world of advertising into organisational culture and communication. She is passionate about raising the profile, standards and effectiveness of internal communication and employee experience, believing employees deserve the same care, consideration, and creativity in communication as customers. She is mother to three phenomenal humans who entertain, inspire and encourage her to reach for the stars every single day.

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Want to learn more about how 7 Seas can help you and your organisation?

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