

TAKING CONTROL: How Effective Communications Can Help Public Employers Navigate Change

By Cathie Eitelberg and Tupper Hillard

We live in a world where many things change and few stay the same. Today, federal agencies and state and local governments face a daunting array of changes that are self-generated or forced on them by external factors, including:

- Budget realities,
- Reorganization, downsizing and furloughs,
- Introduction, reduction, redesign or elimination of benefits.
- Implementation of the mandates, reporting and disclosures required by the Affordable Care Act (ACA).

How the changes affect public sector employers and their employees will depend on how well each is communicated. No matter the potential issues, the key to keeping employees engaged is to tell the truth while helping them understand what is happening. This can minimize negative reactions and lessen the adverse impact of an impending change. By taking control of the communications—recognizing the potential effects, planning carefully and executing a thorough communications campaign—governments can provide a smoother transition for everyone.

This article focuses on how dealing with change may affect public sector employers and their employees and how the effective use of communications can make transitions easier and more successful.

Take Control

Change comes in many forms. Whether it is introducing a new health arrangement to employees or retirees; asking employees to participate in health risk assessments and tobacco-cessation programs or to pay higher premiums; or redesigning a defined benefit plan and/or introducing a hybrid plan, governmental entities throughout the country must address the challenges that accompany each change.

Although changes that employers must make because of fiscal or political realities are often more challenging than those initiated voluntarily, any change should be addressed proactively with a well-thought-out communications effort to sustain employee engagement (See the case study at the end of this article).

For public sector employers, the steps discussed in this article can frame the effort to take control of how they communicate change.

Know Your Audience

A change can affect different people in different ways. For example, Department A is involved in a pilot change to the compensation structure while Department B is not, or employees hired after a certain date will not get the same benefits as those hired before.

The first step to take control of change-related communications, then, is to assess and understand the impact the change will have on the public entity's constituencies or audiences. This insight can help ensure that employers keep their employees' needs at the center of any messaging strategy.

A public employer's audiences may include elected, appointed and nonelected leaders; managers and supervisors; unionized employees and workers not aligned with a bargaining unit; Medicare-eligible and non-Medicare-eligible retirees; and, of course, the taxpaying and voting public. Because these groups are motivated and engaged in different ways, they may exhibit various levels of commitment to the employer implementing the change.

It is important to identify and know the audiences to which a message is directed and to adjust the language, media and timing to fit each group. Taking into account differences among various groups can help the employer craft and deliver the right messages for each



group. Good communicators are sensitive to audience members' preferences and styles. They try to stay within their audiences' comfort zone as they carefully communicate the truth. If an audience tends to include detail-oriented analyzers, details should be carefully layered. If an audience is not patient enough to follow a lengthy explanation, pictures, graphs, maps and anecdotal evidence can help. If the news is likely to create an emotional reaction, communications should include opportunities for people to react.

A message's channel must also be carefully matched to the audience. While active employees may be comfortable with using the Internet, sending an email may be less effective for older retirees. A growing number of employers use social media to connect via mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets. When the audience is diverse, as is often the case for public sector employers, multiple forms of communicating the same message is often necessary. Employers should assess what channels will work most effectively for their audiences, as well as for the messages they need to convey.

Plan for the Long Term

Public employers should recognize that communicating in advance of implementing and while carrying out any change is an ongoing process rather than an event. Some changes will evoke emotions and concerns that must be dealt with over the span of weeks, months or years.

The most challenging questions do not surface immediately. They emerge over time after people have had a chance to reflect on the messages. Because people do not, generally, like to be rushed when being asked to embrace change, communication strategies should encompass timelines of one year or more.

Ideally, a public employer will have discussed and approved a well-

thought-out plan to phase in changes over logical timeframes. Having a plan for each round of communication—and making employees aware that there is a plan—will help if the employer needs to make a major immediate change (e.g., something mandated by the ACA). If there is a plan, employees and retirees will be more likely to understand and accept that the employer is only making changes because it must.

Cascade Communications

Many employers choose to unveil change through a “cascade” from level to level, as shown in the figure accompanying this article (page 10).

While managers are expected to support organizational changes, they obviously need to believe in the need for and benefits from a change before they can communicate it. In practical terms, this means managers must first be briefed and educated on the background and issues to ensure they can present those rationales consistently as reliable, credible spokespersons.

When communicating with management, employers should keep in mind that managers may focus principally on how a change will affect them personally—their future, their status, perhaps even their compensation. Before managers can authentically deal with their colleagues' concerns and questions, they must thoroughly understand and accept the change.

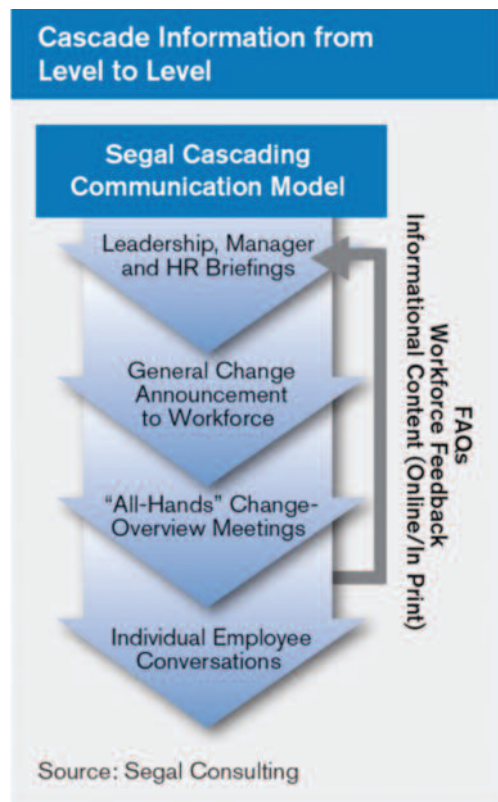
Once the leaders of the organization are briefed and provided with the resources they need to assist in communicating change, the change should be announced to the general employee population. Almost

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immediately, leadership should convene and participate in an all-hands meeting where employees get a big-picture overview and have the opportunity to ask questions. Such meetings provide valuable feedback and act as an extended conversation. They can help leaders gauge employees' reactions and highlight potentially critical issues.



On a more personal level, employees often prefer receiving such messages from their direct supervisors, rather than from an HR manager or official with whom they have no regular contact. Employees and others most directly affected by a change prefer to receive additional details privately, preferably from the manager with whom they have the closest working relationship. Of course, such a conversation will only be as effective as how well the manager understands the situation.

Let the Facts Speak for Themselves

Public entities should position themselves and their audiences as fellow observers of the realities necessitating change. It can be helpful to give affected employees a summary of the process followed to identify the need for change and the information that shaped the decision. Doing this allows the sender to focus the audience's attention on the how and why of the change, which can help improve their understanding and acceptance.

Sharing facts includes naming sources when asked, offering examples of what others have done in similar situations and, if the situation

allows, identifying other possible conclusions and explaining why those options are not feasible or helpful.

State What's Known When It's Known

Employers should communicate about a coming change and what it means as soon as possible. Waiting until all the details are worked out allows rumor to travel faster than fact. Even a fast-moving cascade of communications may not be as quick as the grapevine, but making an announcement just before a major change takes effect can create even more confusion and unease. Opening communications early and sharing messages on a continued basis will help stop unauthorized sources of information from overwhelming authoritative messengers.

It is, however, important to emphasize in early communications that all the details are not yet known and that the situation may change as additional information becomes available.

Employers should plan to originate all communication related to a coming change from a central source. Developing and maintaining a recognized source of information will build trust among employees and retirees that the information is important, factual and represents the entire story as it can be known at this time.

Don't Forget Day-to-Day Issues

Even when dealing with change, employees still care about and focus on day-to-day job-related issues. To minimize disruption, the details of a change need to be communicated early in the process, no matter how mundane they seem. In addition, key facts about the reasons for change and its potential benefits should be strategically repeated.

Employers should address the audience's concerns by drawing links between old and new realities, identifying new areas of opportunity and demonstrating how the employees' efforts to achieve the employer's goals will contribute to positive results.

Build a Feedback Mechanism

To gauge the effectiveness of communications, employers should use a range of mechanisms to collect feedback on an ongoing basis. Setting up an employee advisory group that includes representatives from different departments establishes a formal process for gathering input while offering the added benefit of getting employees actively involved in planning and implanting a change. Conducting open meetings or informational sessions during which employees can get updates, ask questions and share opinions is another valuable way to obtain feedback. Setting up electronic channels such as a dedicated social media account or a secure email address is a good way to gather open and honest responses. Audience responses reveal whether the communication plan needs to be refined.

Most public sector entities face a daunting landscape of changes from drastically reduced budgets, which can negatively affect programs and people, to the rising costs of health care and helping employees understand their choices. What distinguishes the more enlightened and successful public employers is how they manage the transitions and do what they can to ease the trauma for all constituencies. Communications—based on a strategic plan, executed with flexibility and clarity and employing the most effective resources—is the key to success. Taking control by knowing the audiences, speaking to audience members’ needs and concerns, using managers as credible

spokespersons and providing channels for feedback is fundamental for successfully navigating change.

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Case Study: A State in Transition

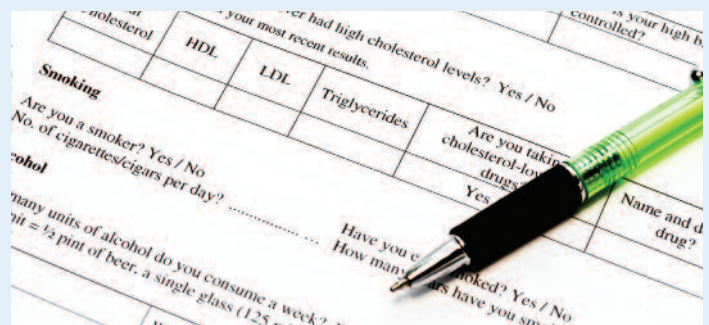
Last year, a state government committed to introducing significant benefit plan changes for employees for 2014.

Active employees and non-Medicare retirees previously had two health plan choices – a 70/30 plan with no premiums, office visit co-pays and coverage for only 70 percent of medical costs or an 80/20 plan with premiums and coverage for 80 percent of medical costs. In 2014, employees have three options – the same 70/30 plan, an enhanced 80/20 plan with a premium that can now be reduced by participating in a few basic wellness activities or a consumer-directed health plan (CDHP) that has a premium that can be eliminated if employees complete the wellness activities. Although the CDHP has a higher deductible than the other two plans, a portion of the deductible can be met by accessing a reimbursement account that comes with the plan.

The wellness activities include having employees attest that they do not smoke or show they are enrolled in a tobacco cessation program, take an online health assessment and name a primary care provider to oversee their health care.

Realizing how significant these changes might be for employees and their families, the state began to plan its change communications strategy months in advance of open enrollment. To help people adjust to the change, the state chose to:

- Send a decision guide to employees’ homes with details about the plans and instructions for enrolling.
- Hold information sessions across the state.



- Post four videos on the state health plan website that explore topics related to the changes.
- Update the plan’s website as soon as additional information about the new options become available.

This careful approach to communications gave employees:

- Sufficient time to become aware of, and comfortable with, the changes well in advance of implementation.
- Open access to resources that explained everything in detail and helped employees picture the new coverage.
- Opportunities to understand and appreciate the beginning of a cultural shift toward wellness and accountability.
- Valid reasons to sign up for the CDHP and meet the requirements to eliminate the premium.