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Editors

# Change 2.0

Beyond Organisational Transformation

## **Use of multipliers in change communication: How credible personal communication can make change effective**

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**During organisational change, face-to-face communication with the employees who are affected is a key factor for success. Typical interventions in change processes include kick-off events, management meetings and workshops. Given the limitations of these interventions, the preparation of credible communicators from different hierarchical levels and organisational units, as multipliers, is an effective alternative. Based on extensive research and practical experience in multinational companies such as BMW and Siemens, this article explains, using seven questions, how to choose and prepare those multipliers and how to integrate them into different communication activities.**

The use of multipliers is not just another communications activity, but an approach to communication. It is a way of increasing the overall effectiveness of a communications programme, if other means of face-to-face communication with employees on lower levels are limited in one way or another. Opportunities for personal communication between top management and employees are limited by availability constraints on top management. Personal communication between middle management and employees can be problematic when middle managers do not sufficiently support the change, which is frequently the case. Although direct supervisors are usually the preferred source of information for employees, their level of understanding of the change is often not sufficient to encourage them to accept the change.

The use of multipliers addresses these limitations in two ways. First, the credibility and accuracy of the information cascaded up and down the hierarchy is increased by giving multipliers a formal role in these communication activities. Second, those responsible for the change are provided with an alternative to personal communication via the management cascade. A

separate network of communicators from different levels and units is created for the purpose of the change project.

A multiplier approach is particularly appropriate when a change affects several elements of an organisation (e.g. strategy, structure, systems and/or processes), and when a change requires communication to a large number of employees at different locations over a long period of time. This is because face-to-face communication is more important when the change is a major one, and the return on the time and money invested in the preparation of multipliers is higher when multipliers are used in several communication activities over a certain period of time.

### What is the multiplier approach and what is it not?

The essence of the multiplier approach is to prepare employees from different units and levels to play a central role in communication relating to a specific change. Multipliers are chosen and prepared for the purpose of spreading an accurate understanding and favourable attitude towards the change. Related terms are ambassadors, apostles, best-practice scouts or blockbusters. The difference between the specific concept of multiplier and the more general concept of opinion leader is that opinion leaders are expected to influence others' opinions by the nature of their formal or informal relationships. The challenge in change projects is that opinion leaders always lead opinions – either in favour or disfavour of the change.

### Where does it apply in practice?

A multinational automotive company wanted to implement a new recruiting process and technology across all its locations in Germany. 70,000 employees – spread across five big and several small locations – were affected by the change in different ways. The challenge for the project team was to ensure that all people affected by the change would behave as assumed in the business case on the project. The project team knew that the investment of €10 million would not lead to the desired cost reduction of €13 million if employees did not adapt to the new process quickly and use the new technology adequately.

The idea behind the multiplier approach was to explain the change to one group after another, to make them accept the change, and to show them how to act in the future. The 50 multipliers were the key in bridging the gap between the ten people in the project team and the 1,000 people in

the next group. A clearly defined communication cascade in addition to the existing communication structure was created temporarily for the implementation of this one project.

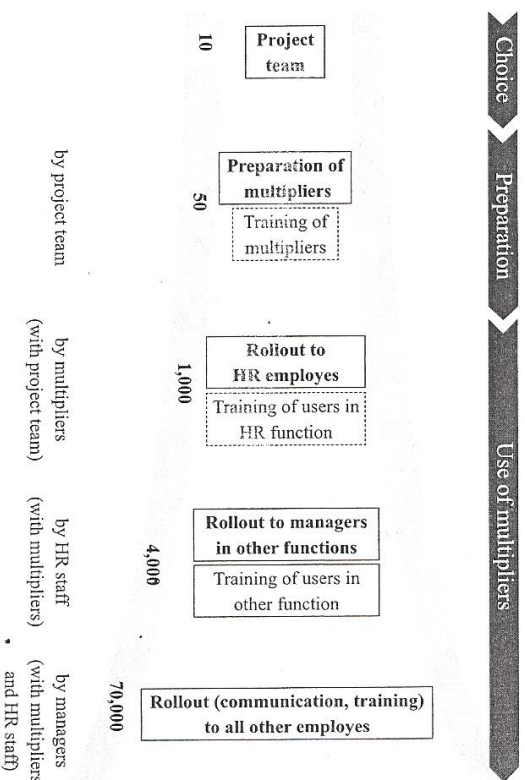


Fig. 1. Multiplier approach applied to the introduction of new HR process

### What is the role of multipliers?

Multipliers should be credible communicators<sup>6</sup> and thereby increase the effectiveness of communication activities. Their overall responsibility is to contribute to creating understanding and acceptance among those affected by the change.

In order to ensure that the multiplier approach has the desired effect, multipliers should have the following specific responsibilities.

1. They should help those responsible for implementation with the fine-tuning of the central implementation plan.
2. They should develop the local implementation plan. This will integrate the views of peripheral locations into the planning process.
3. They should play an active role in communicating the change. They should explain the change and answer the other employees' questions.

4. They should facilitate the top-down and bottom-up communication between those responsible for the change and those affected by the change. They should diplomatically mediate between the views of the project team and the users of the new process and technology.
5. They should have a 'translation function' in that they tailor information to the specific situation in their unit. They can answer the questions that employees tend to ask in change processes such as: "What does the introduction of the new process mean for us at our location?"

### How much time do multipliers need?

The amount of time multipliers need to fulfil their role depends on the complexity of the change and the ratio between multipliers and other employees affected by the change. As a rule of thumb, the workload of multipliers should not exceed three days per week, because otherwise multipliers would not be able to do their regular jobs. Of course, multipliers' regular tasks have to be reduced anyway, but removing multipliers from their normal responsibilities would cause several problems.

1. They would no longer be affected by the change themselves, thus making it more difficult to understand the impact of the change.
2. They would be less credible as communicators because they would be seen as part of the implementation team and not one of those affected.
3. It would be more difficult to reintegrate them into the new structure after the change has been implemented.

The actual workload of multipliers is likely to vary during the implementation process – with likely peaks in the preparation phase and during the central communication waves.

### How to choose multipliers?

The effectiveness of the multiplier approach depends on who is chosen as a multiplier. In order to fulfil their role as credible communicators, multipliers need to be accepted by the other employees and have a certain level of communication skills.

The following specific characteristics are particularly relevant.

1. Multipliers need to be personally affected by the change.
2. They need to be part of the employee group that they are expected to address – for example, the same function, location or level.

3. They need to have the intellectual capability to understand the change and its impact within a reasonable timeframe.

These characteristics increase the likelihood that multipliers will be willing and able to explain the change and that the other employees will perceive multipliers as "one of us". This so-called in-group bias – together with a history of personal interaction between multipliers and the other employees – are two key factors influencing the perceived credibility of a communicator. Furthermore, being affected by the change yourself and being part of the same group as the other employees is a prerequisite for understanding the other employees' concerns and uncertainties. Finally, employees from the same group speak the same language as their colleagues and have similar background knowledge.

4. Multipliers need to have the communication skills needed to explain the change.
5. They need to have the ability to network, in order to reach a sufficient number of people personally.

These characteristics will ensure that multipliers have a level of communication skills that can be built on in the preparation phase. Without these basic skills, the time available for preparation will not be sufficient.

Choosing employees from different locations as multipliers is necessary because other employees do not know the location well enough, and they are not sufficiently available to answer questions. Furthermore, we suggest a mixture of functions. In the above-mentioned project, 80 percent of the multipliers were recruiters from central or local recruiting departments, and 20 percent came from other functions in HR. This was beneficial because "recruiters are the experts [...] whereas other HR employees usually have better connections to the managers in the other departments" as the responsible change manager concluded.

With regard to the process of choosing multipliers, different approaches are available. First, the head of a unit can ask specific employees on the basis of the desired characteristics of multipliers, whether they would like to become a multiplier. Second, it is often appropriate to choose the employees who would be affected first by the new system or process. Although this choice can be very practical, implementers have to make sure that these employees have the required communication skills. Third, employees themselves can choose the multiplier because this increases the likelihood that the other employees in the unit will accept the multiplier. This approach needs to be used with caution insofar as employees tend to choose the multiplier on grounds other than those required for a successful multiplier approach. The appropriateness of the different approaches will

depend on the specific situation of the project. In the above-mentioned project, all three approaches were used because the responsible line managers at different locations had different views on the issue, and those responsible for implementation wanted to take these views into account. This is important because, in any project, choosing a multiplier requires negotiation with the potential multiplier's line manager. Can you imagine any line manager allowing an employee to become a multiplier without seeing the benefit of the multiplier approach for his/her unit or without having a clear idea about the amount of time required for the role?

### How to prepare multipliers?

Imagine the following situation: an employee asks a multiplier, "What do you think about the change?" and the multiplier says, "It's good but I haven't really understood it." This would be funny if it was not an actual statement by a respondent in an evaluation of a multiplier approach in a recent case of restructuring. A multiplier must know a lot more than the other employees. The preparation of multipliers in terms of their understanding and acceptance of the change – as well as their willingness and capability to be a multiplier – is therefore the key to success. Although there are different ways of preparing multipliers, several key points became evident in all our experience in different projects. Fig. 2 illustrates how preparation influences the behaviour adopted by multipliers during the implementation process and thus the overall success of the change project.

The responsibility of multipliers should be discussed during the selection procedure. It should be included in the invitation to the first multiplier workshop, repeated at the beginning of the workshop, and there should be enough time for discussion and questions throughout the workshop. It is important that multipliers have clear answers to questions such as "What exactly am I supposed to do?", "How does the process continue?" or "Who must contact whom to make arrangements?"

Clarifying the roles is not only important when it comes to the effectiveness of the multiplier approach but also with regard to its efficiency. In one of our projects, multipliers did not know that certain tools would be provided by the project team, so they first collected ideas for a presentation and designing an event. This duplication of work could have been avoided. Multipliers had even made appointments with colleagues to discuss this further and it took a lot of effort to clear up this misunderstanding with the respective colleagues.

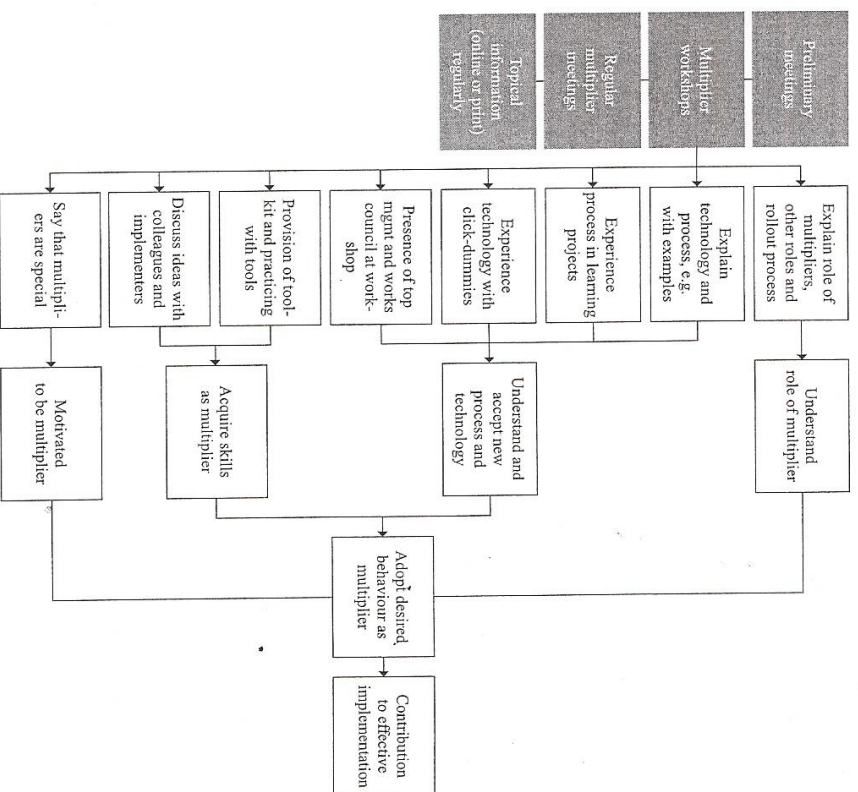


Fig. 2. Different ways of preparing multipliers and their likely effects

At least one face-to-face workshop with all multipliers is a must, with two workshops probably being the best trade-off between costs and desired effect. In the above-mentioned project, we designed two workshops with two months in-between. The first workshop focused on clarifying the role of multipliers and creating an understanding of the change. The second workshop built on the first and focused on developing the capabilities for carrying the change into the HR departments.

It is obvious that multipliers need to understand and accept the new process and technology, because they have to promote it to their colleagues in the different departments. One way to achieve this is to explain

the new process using presentations and illustrations. Another is to use experiential learning projects, so that multipliers can experience what it would be like to work within the new structure – to be an employee in recruiting, an HR manager, a manager from another department, or an applicant. When a new technology is involved, a draft version of the new technology can be another way to enable multipliers to understand and accept the new process and technology. These so-called click-dummies have limited functionality, but multipliers see the screens and learn about the most important functions. The click-dummies should be presented in a group session, and afterwards computers should be available so that multipliers can practise on their own whenever they want to.

Another factor that influences multipliers' perception of the change is their view on who supports the change. Therefore, the presence of a member of the top management team and the project leader shows that the change is important and that multipliers play an important role in the implementation of the change. Furthermore, multipliers may also want to know whether the heads of the various regional offices or the works council support the change. In the above-mentioned project, a multiplier rightly asked, "How can this work if the works council and the head of the HR department don't support it?"

The provision of a toolkit (Fig. 3) is a must to enable multipliers to learn the skills required for a successful multiplier approach. A toolkit is intended to support multipliers by providing the required background information and specific guidance for completing their tasks. A standard presentation provides an overview of the change – including the terminology to use. Appropriate answers to FAQs add to the presentation insofar as multipliers are able to present the change (one-way communication) and also answer the other employees' questions (two-way communication). Suggestions for workshop designs ensure the consistency of implementation activities across locations and save time in the planning phase. The specific tools will depend on the requirements of the respective change project. A general piece of advice is: do not be afraid of making the toolkit very detailed, because different multipliers need different kinds of support.

In addition to being provided with tools, multipliers need to practise using the tools. Multipliers are not specifically chosen for their communication skills and therefore may find it difficult to give a presentation without detailed preparation. Typical feedback we receive at the end of workshops is: "It was very important for me that I was able to give the presentation during the workshop and that I received feedback from the other multipliers." Applying the different tools not only increases familiarity with the tools but also increases understanding of the new process: after all, multi-

pliers really have to understand the new process before they can present it to their colleagues at the workshop.

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Fig. 3. Table of contents of toolkit in sample project

After initial preparation, multipliers need ongoing support throughout the change process. This is best achieved through a combination of regular face-to-face meetings and topical information about the development of the project. Regular information updates (for example, sent every two weeks by email or letter) keep multipliers informed about the change. It is useful to leave space at the end of the toolkit to insert these updates. The aims of regular multiplier meetings may vary during the project. At the beginning, multipliers may need additional guidance and to share experiences with their colleagues. Later in the process, specific interventions such as a series of road shows or a training workshop can be planned in detail to ensure consistency across locations. Even further on in the process, first reviews can be conducted and multipliers may need to be motivated to stay focused.

### How to integrate multipliers into communication activities?

The influence of the multiplier approach on the effectiveness of the communication programme depends on the integration of multipliers into existing communication activities and on the design of additional change interventions around the multiplier approach.

Multipliers can explain specific aspects of the change at the kick-off event at their location and thereby enhance the credibility of the informa-

tion. For example, they can convince the other employees that the new form of cooperation between headquarters and local departments also has a positive side, or that the new technology is better than the rumours say. In the above-mentioned project, the kick-off event was followed by a series of local events at most locations. During these events, multipliers supported the project team in their explanation of the details of the change by tailoring the information to the situation at their location. Multipliers were able to use their own experience during the multiplier workshops, saying that initial scepticism is normal but that the new process certainly has positive aspects. Furthermore, multipliers were integrated into workshops with representatives from different departments; these were organised by the project team to discuss the impact of the change on the structure in different locations.

Depending on the ratio between multipliers and other employees affected by the change, multipliers can also directly pass on information to the colleagues in their departments if enough time for presentations is reserved during the regular team meetings. Team meetings without the participation of multipliers are unlikely to be effective, because group leaders are often insufficiently informed about the change to explain it to their employees and to answer employees' questions. Ideally, multipliers attend the regular meetings of different teams on a rotating basis throughout the change process. This creates the variety of possibilities for dialogue which is important in the context of organisational change.

Multipliers can also have a beneficial effect in print and online communication. The credibility of the information provided can be increased using statements, quotes and pictures of multipliers on a poster, newsletter or website. However, the success of this approach again depends on how well multipliers are prepared. In one of our projects, implementers expected multipliers to distribute the newsletters to their colleagues, but the multipliers did not behave as intended due to a lack of preparation. As a result, the newsletter did not reach all the employees, and they were not encouraged to read the newsletter.

Finally, the use of multipliers can compensate for a lack of formal communication. In one of our projects, multipliers at different locations had to explain the need for change in endless informal discussions, because the project team had failed to create an awareness of the change during the kick-off event. Furthermore, multipliers can be the central contact for questions about the change at each location, they can actively forward topical information or refer to additional information material.

### How to measure the success of the multiplier approach?

The benefit of the multiplier approach is as difficult to measure as the effect of most communication activities. The results are hardly apparent, but are rather 'in the heads' of those affected by the change. In our projects, statements made by responsible line managers and employees affected by the change clearly indicate the benefit of the multiplier approach. I personally conducted two case studies over a period of two and a half years – including observations of workshops in which multipliers participated and over 100 interviews with employees affected by the change. Typical statements on the role of multipliers in communication activities were: "This was the first time that I understood what they want from us" and "She really represents our opinion at project meetings".

In organisational practice, there are two ways to monitor the effect of the multiplier approach. First, questions on multipliers can be integrated into evaluations of the communication activities in which they participate. For example, a questionnaire that is distributed after an event can include questions on the different speakers. The same approach can be used for workshops or seminars. Second, a change monitor that is regularly updated should include questions on how well employees understand and accept the change. If there has been an increase in understanding, this is likely to be a result of the communication activities that have taken place since the last change-monitor update – the multipliers' influence can then be deduced. If necessary, an audit of the different communication activities can be conducted, for example to justify the costs triggered by the use of multipliers. A mix of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews provides both quantitative and qualitative data on the benefit of multipliers.

### Benefits

The use of a multiplier approach can significantly increase the effectiveness of change communication and thereby facilitate the successful implementation of top-down change. Specific benefits of a multiplier approach include:

- an additional channel of personal communication
- compensation for the limitations of communication via line management
- high level awareness of the change through regular communication
- authenticity and credibility of the information
- information tailored to the requirements of the different target groups

- positive influence on the accuracy of informal communication
- money savings generated by higher motivation and less resistance

### **Lessons learned**

- Take the time to choose the right multipliers (capability + willingness).
- Prepare multipliers adequately (role + know-how + tools + skills).
- Use teams of two multipliers for the first communication activities so that they can support each other and become more confident.
- Schedule the last preparation workshop after the first activities in order to learn from these experiences and to adjust if necessary.
- Install small learning groups to ensure ongoing exchange and mutual (technical and emotional) learning between multipliers.
- Make sure that a member of the top management team attends multiplier meetings from time to time to keep the level of motivation and commitment high and to learn from the view of multipliers.
- After the first wave of communication activities, clarify the role of multipliers during the later stages of the implementation process.
- Do not use a multiplier approach if you are not willing to invest the necessary time and money into the preparation of multipliers.