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CO-CHANGE-ORIENTATED COMMUNICATION: A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO MAKING SENSE OF CHANGE

ABSTRACT

This article presents a new concept, “co-Change-orientated Communication” (co-COC), to address the need for theoretical developments beyond mainstream assumptions by drawing from contemporary, critical developments in strategic communication. A two-phased, qualitative methodological strategy was employed. Firstly, a thematic analysis of a sample of literature according to specific parameters and contextual bases was conducted. Secondly, to identify an exemplar for co-COC, a document analysis was done of selected 2016 Fortune “Change-the-World” organisations’ annual and sustainability reports. In congruence with the themes of the literature, the document analysis revealed that co-COC is a bottom-up concept and elicits the attributes of meaningful dialogue, employee engagement, collaboration and co-creation, and encourages dissent. To realise the implementation of co-COC, the document analysis indicated the antecedents of stakeholder engagement, organisational agility, leadership agility and a change-able culture. co-COC contributes to the body of knowledge on strategic and change communication and serves as a heuristic for future research. Furthermore, co-COC provides theoretical development beyond the conventional, which not only affirms the critical role of change communication in the successful management of change, but could also assist communication professionals to realise the need for the inclusion of contemporary developments in strategic communication.

Keywords: co-Change-oriented Communication; change-orientated communication; organisational change; strategic communication; concept development; stakeholder engagement; purposeful communication

INTRODUCTION

Organisations today operate in a business environment of economic uncertainty, climate change, resource constraints, rising population growth and poverty, income inequality and social movement and unrest (King & Roberts 2013: 3). These global and economic developments make change an inevitable part of organisational life (Cummings & Worley 2015: 22). Moreover, interactive communication technologies have brought

about a “collaborative turn” that allows innovative and engaging opportunities to obtain valuable information from stakeholders through two-way conversations and opportunities to listen to stakeholders (Verwey 2015a: 324). These changes in the organisational environment, largely because of advances in communication technology, stimulated a shift towards critical ideology (Overton-de Klerk & Verwey 2013: 363). In this context, the strategic communication function is no longer regarded as a tool to achieve the objectives of organisational management, but an all-encompassing process focused on purposeful communication to ensure the inclusiveness of all voices (Holtzhausen & Zerfass 2015: 4). A critical perspective in the context of organisational change is built on the notion that change is best understood through the manner in which members of the organisation construct their social reality (Graetz *et al.* 2006: 5). This arguably yields an emergent change focus in the organisation where the strategic communication professional fulfils a facilitation role of all communication processes within the organisation in making sense of change (Järventie-Thesleff *et al.* 2015: 533).

The need for organisations to change according to the demands of the volatile business environment in order to survive is indispensable, and communication plays a fundamental role in ensuring the successful implementation and management of organisational change (Christensen 2014; Lewis 2011; Helpap 2016). Although studies that focus on proposing a strategic and participatory communication approach to organisational change exist (Helpap 2016; Lines 2004; Morsing & Schultz 2006), little research has been conducted on the contemporary, more critical developments in strategic communication, specifically in organisational change. This could be ascribed, *inter alia*, to the slow incorporation of critical developments in strategic communication as practitioners are held captive by their own mainstream assumptions (Verwey 2015b: 2).

The work of Järventie-Thesleff *et al.* (2015) contributes towards closing this gap through the proposition of using the corporate brand as a tool for managing strategic communication in a multi-change environment. Their study, however, focuses on the broader role of strategic communication during change, and is not concerned with the internal communication processes of organisational members (management and non-management employees) in making sense of change.

Against this background, the aim of this article is to satisfy the need to develop theoretical approaches beyond mainstream assumptions (Overton-de Klerk & Verwey 2013: 364). More specifically, this article endeavours to develop a concept to encapsulate the specific social and communication processes of organisational members in making sense of change by drawing from contemporary, critical developments in strategic communication. This will be done through the conceptual development of “co-Change Orientated-Communication” (co-COC) according to Rodgers’ (2000) evolutionary approach to concept development. Concept development plays a significant role in the development of a knowledge foundation and entails a process of identifying a definition and key attributes (Rodgers 2000). This will not only meet the need to develop change communication approaches in line with the latest developments in the field (Appelbaum *et al.* 1998: 289), but could also simultaneously assist communication professionals to realise the need for the incorporation of contemporary developments in strategic communication in practice.

To address this conceptual development aim, this article endeavours to answer the following research question: What are the key attributes of co-COC? This will be addressed by means of a two-phased, qualitative methodological strategy. Firstly, a sample of literature will be compiled, based on a selection of online resources according to specific parameters and contextual bases. Clarke and Braun's (2013) thematic analysis approach will be followed to identify key themes from the literature sample. Secondly, an exemplar for co-COC will be identified through an exploration of the identified themes by means of a document analysis of 2016 Fortune "Change-the-World" organisations' annual and sustainability reports.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION: A CONTEMPORARY OUTLOOK

The collaborative turn brought about by, among others, Web 2.0 communication technologies has caused communication professionals to increasingly find themselves at points of inflection that have stimulated a shift towards critical ideology. In this context, the role of strategic communication as a process that sprouts from an organisation's strategic plan focused on enabling the organisation's strategic objectives is being questioned. Such a perspective was primarily promoted by Grunig's (1984) excellence study, which has been accepted as the meta-theory in public relations and communication management literature (Botan & Hazleton 2006: 21). The excellence theory is an umbrella term for an integrated collection of middle-range theories to explain the value of communication to an organisation and to identify the specific characteristics of communication that contribute towards organisational effectiveness (Grunig & Grunig 2008: 330). This mainstream definition served as a platform for two-way communication models – for instance, Shannon and Weaver's (1949) transmission model eventually evolved in discussions of two-way symmetrical and two-way asymmetrical communication in public relations literature (Holtzhausen & Zerfass 2015: 10).

A critical perspective on strategic communication questions the concept of "managerialism" where managers assign workers to authoritarian workplace activities to predominantly benefit themselves (Holtzhausen 2002: 251). Such a perspective departs significantly from mainstream approaches as it raises questions about power, persuasion and activism, which the "orthodoxy of public relations [and communication management] chooses to ignore" (Coombs & Holladay 2012: 882). Conversely, power, persuasion and activism in mainstream strategic communication is regarded as "unethical", "socially irresponsible behaviour" that should "be avoided" to sustain a balanced, two-way symmetrical communication perspective of mutual understanding between the organisation and stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay 2012: 881-882).

Overton-de Klerk and Verwey (2013: 370-376), echoed by Verwey (2015a), have identified various paradigmatic shifts in strategic communication, brought about by disintermediation; blurring of communication genres; media convergence; and organisation as communication. These shifts particularly outline the differences between mainstream and contemporary approaches to strategic communication, as summarised in table 1.

TABLE 1: PARADIGMATIC SHIFTS IN STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

| PARADIGMATIC SHIFT | DESCRIPTION |
|---|---|
| From divergence to convergence | Strategic communication now represents an all-encompassing function of purposeful communication to achieve the mission of the organisation. |
| From top down to bottom up | Interaction as opposed to information transfer is valued. Leaders should listen to organisational stakeholder by means of stakeholder engagement and co-creation strategies. Bottom-up communication, in which shared meaning is formed by the communication process itself, is favoured. |
| From monologue to dialogue | Different voices should be appreciated to stimulate creativity and innovation and to identify unique solutions to problem solving. |
| From consensus to conflict/dissent | Strategic communication is no longer aimed at achieving consensus, but at ensuring that multiple voices are heard, even if it causes conflict. |
| From communication management to communication influence | The strategic communication professional no longer acts as a representative for organisational management controlling communication. Instead, the strategic communication professional should serve as a facilitator for discourse within a climate of continuous change. |
| From control to self-organisation | Change and consensus within an organisation cannot be achieved through controlling stakeholders. Instead, the process of identifying creative solutions for business problems should start with stakeholders by means of high stakeholder engagement. |
| From corporate social responsibility to accountability | Accountability is earned by means of transparency and consistency between organisational statements and actions, which underline the power shift from the organisation to its stakeholders. |
| From integration to collaboration | Instead of communication integration, where the organisation was in control of the message, the real-time environment now necessitates organisations to work in partnership with society (which includes hostile stakeholders) to build its brand identity. |

Nowadays, strategic communication is viewed as an all-encompassing function characterised by purposeful communication with the focus on meaningful action, sharing of meaning, ideas and a deeper mutual understanding to shape organisations (Hodges & Gill 2015: 291). Strategic communication moves beyond merely providing information or building and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships to the manner in which communication could contribute to an organisation's purpose for being (Hallahan *et al.* 2007: 11). In this regard, strategic communication is insentiently shaping the organisation itself (Overton-de Klerk & Verwey 2013: 370).

ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

In defining organisational change, various derivatives of the concept have been developed over the years, of which "organisational change management", "organisational change process" and "organisational change project" are seemingly the most prominent. Organisational change management is regarded as the process of continuously revisiting the organisation's direction, structure and capabilities to meet and absorb the ever-changing needs of stakeholders (Moran & Brightman 2001: 177).

An organisational change project refers to a change initiative that necessitates either a redefinition of the organisational mission or an amendment of organisational goals to support a new direction, while the process of organisational change is built on the notion that organisations are “emergent properties of change” (Järventie-Thesleff *et al.* 2015: 533). In this regard, organisational change is accepted as part of organisational life. Organisational change could emanate from external environmental factors (e.g. competitive action; technological advances; government regulations; or economic conditions) or it could be caused by internal organisational factors. This article supports a broad perspective on organisational change, both internally and externally.

Multiple types of organisational change could be categorised according to the rate of occurrence, how it originates, and by scale (Todnem By 2015: 28). This article focuses specifically on change in the category of origin – more specifically, planned and emergent change, because it is directly related to the proposition of co-COC. Planned change, also known as a “hard systems approach” (Ströh 2007: 126), aims to highlight the processes that have to be implemented by the organisation in order to move from an unstable, indefinite state to a more favourable one (Eldrod II & Tippett 2002: 74). This definition corresponds with an “organisational change project”, as mentioned earlier. The model for planned change, which is most prominent in the literature and has served as the basis for various other planned models developed over the years, is Lewin’s (1951) three-step model of change, namely unfreezing the current situation, moving to the new level, and refreezing the new level to ensure that the change has been internalised (Todnem By 2015: 30). Other planned change models include Kotter’s (1995) eight-step model and Senge’s (1999) systems thinking model. Approaches to planned change have been severely criticised for being based on the supposition that organisations function under stable conditions and are able to move from one pre-planned stage to the next (Bamford & Forrester 2003: 550).

Conversely, emergent change or the “soft systems approach” (Ströh 2007: 126) deals mainly with the reality of the volatile organisational environment and emphasises the fact that change cannot be regarded as a series of linear events at a specific time, but as a “continuous, open-ended process of adaption to changing circumstances and conditions” (Todnem By 2015: 33). This perspective resembles the characteristics of an “organisational change process”. In line with the notion of “the organisation as becoming” (Weick & Quinn 1999; Tsoukas & Chia 2002), emergent change is concerned with how organisational members construct their social reality (Graetz *et al.* 2006: 18). Emergent approaches/models to change (e.g. Kanter, Stein & Jick’s (1992) ten commandments for executing change and Luecke’s (2003) seven steps) are criticised for their lack of coherence and multiplicity in techniques (Bamford & Forrester 2003: 550). A more practical approach to the implementation of emergent organisational change is the cycle of continuous change suggested by Lawrence *et al.* (2006), which highlights the fact that continuous change is a process consisting of four phases, each with a specific champion, namely evangelist, autocrat, architect and educator.

In order to infiltrate an emergent approach to change, organisational and leadership agility are arguably essential. Organisational agility refers to “the organisation’s

ability to develop and quickly apply flexible, nimble and dynamic capabilities” (Holbeche 2015: 11). In essence, it encapsulates the organisation’s ability to swiftly adjust, respond and flourish in a continuously changing environment. Furthermore, it is ultimately the responsibility of the leader to establish a receptive infrastructure in the organisation (Holbeche 2015: 12). An agile leader “champions the change effort and displays active change leadership aligning people around the vision” (Holbeche 2015: 219). An agile leader should listen, be open and connect with organisational members. The leader should implement “discursive templates” (Järventie-Thesleff *et al.* 2015: 535) or “frameworks for grassroots initiatives” (Ströh 2007: 133) and engage organisational members at all levels to enable change from below.

A further consideration towards the implementation of an emergent approach to organisational change is the culture of the organisation. Tsoukas and Chia (2002: 578) highlight that the manner in which organisations respond to change depends on the organisation’s “self-understanding – the historically created assumptions and interpretations of itself and its environment”. In the context of accepting change as part of organisational life, a “change-affirmative culture” (Järventie-Thesleff *et al.* 2015: 540) or “change-able culture” (Holbeche 2015: 229) should be embedded in the organisation. This points to a receptive context for change where change is viewed as “dynamic stability” (*ibid.*). Organisational members should accept change as the norm.

CHANGE-ORIENTATED COMMUNICATION

“Change communication” is the consistent effort to educate and motivate employees; encourage higher performance and discretionary effort; limit misunderstandings; and ensure employee alignment behind the strategic and overall performance improvement goals during organisational change (Barret 2002: 220). It is regarded as a “potent tool” to set direction and ensure alignment between various organisational functions during change (Sharma & Sahoo 2014: 175). Most definitions of “change communication”, however, highlight the fact that the communication process and the implementation of change are indissolubly linked (Lewis 1999: 44). Conversely, “change-orientated communication” is regarded as any communication relating to change (Zorn *et al.* 2000: 516). This definition is in line with the proposed concept as it emphasises that change communication should be regarded as a continuous process and not only during the implementation of organisational change. This perspective resonates with the work of Ströh (2007) who recognises that organisations are complex and adaptive, with the ability to adjust to the unstable, changing environment through self-organisation.

In corroboration with the paradigmatic shifts in Table 1, Ströh (2007: 128) proposes a “complexity science approach to change communication”, which underlines four important factors, namely dissent, self-organising processes, relationships and participation. Dissent is considered a daily activity that can stimulate growth, creativity and innovation through debate and dialogue. Self-organisation implies that the organisation is able to adapt itself to changing conditions by learning from previous experiences. Laszlo and Laugel (2000:10) argue that successful change is dependent on self-organised interactions between organisational members as opposed to a top-down controlled approach. Ströh (2007: 128) avers that these “interactions could

lead to relationships which create knowledge and intelligence, which in turn give meaning to the organisation". Self-organisation is thus the threefold integration of multifaceted interactions with the environment, existing organisational relationships and the history of the organisation. It is also essential that stakeholders are connected to the organisation and are afforded the opportunity to participate in the creation of organisational strategy (Ströh 2007: 130).

Communication associated with planned change projects is predominantly top-down in nature and applied during the actual change implementation. In contrast, communication associated with an emergent change context, where change is managed as an ongoing process, is bottom-up and lateral in nature. Consistent with mainstream strategic communication, the communication in planned change serves as an "instrument of management control" aimed at ensuring the successful absorption of change projects (Järventie-Thesleff *et al.* 2015: 536). It is focused on ensuring that messages are clear, participation is encouraged and that uncertainty is reduced. Communication during emergent change implies that it is a means by which the organisation is established, composed and sustained (Cooren *et al.* 2011: 1150). It is about creating "practices and policies through which change can be embedded in the deep structures of the organisation, and to make sure that all members of staff, on all organisational levels, are capable and motivated to make sense of the change process in the course of their daily activities, both individually and collectively" (Järventie-Thesleff *et al.* 2015: 537). In this regard, the significance of organisational change is negotiated within communicative interactions (Thomas *et al.* 2011: 13).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Rodgers' (2000) evolutionary approach to concept development was used as a guideline, as it is an approach to conceptual development that recognises the context of the proposed concept (in this case, contemporary developments in strategic communication in an organisational context). This approach moves away from the assumption that a concept is universal and unchanging; thus, allowing for a flexible process where the steps do not have to be followed chronologically (Rodgers 2000). Various data sources could also be used in concept development, of which existing literature is the most prominent (Rodgers 2000) and the selected data source for this article. Figure 1 provides a map of the conceptual development process that was followed in accordance with Rodgers' (2000) steps.

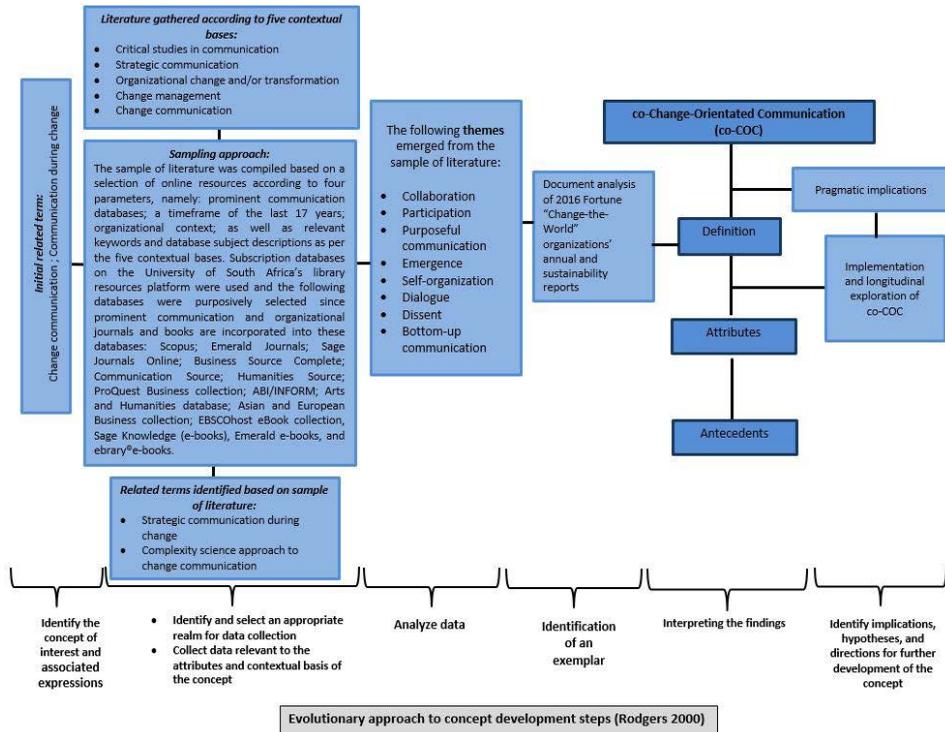


FIGURE 1: THE PROCESS MAP OF THE CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT OF CO-COC

As one of the first steps in the conceptual development process of co-COC, surrogate terms/phrases (synonyms) and related terms/phrases (concepts that seemingly relate to the concept of interest, but have different characteristics) (Rodgers 2000) had to be identified by means of an exploration of organisational literature in general. Because of the unique nature of the proposed concept, only two related terms were initially identified, namely “change communication” and “communication during change”. However, these terms, as explained earlier, relate to communication within a change project, which is contradictory to the focus of a continuous change process in this article.

A two-phased, qualitative methodological strategy was employed in accordance with the steps of an evolutionary approach to concept development. The first phase started with the compilation of a sample of literature within specific parameters and contextual bases, as outlined in Figure 1. After an initial exploration of this literature sample, two additional related terms to co-COC were identified, namely “strategic communication during change” (Järventie-Thesleff *et al.* 2015) and “a complexity science approach to change communication” (Ströh 2007). Although both these approaches propose elements in line with contemporary developments in strategic communication, these approaches do not encapsulate the specific communication processes of organisational members in collaboratively making sense of change. The focus is more on the broader

facilitation role of strategic communication or the importance of relationships in managing change. After the identification of the related terms, an in-depth analysis of the literature sample was conducted according to Clarke and Braun's (2013) thematic analysis approach. This process resulted in the identification of eight distinct themes, namely collaboration, participation, purposeful communication, emergence, self-organisation, dialogue, dissent and bottom-up communication.

The second phase of the methodological strategy focused on identifying an exemplar for co-COC. The themes identified in the first phase served as an initial coding guide for a document analysis to not only determine whether the themes in the literature resonate with the activities of high-change organisations (organisations that are at the forefront of change), but also as a starting point for the identification of new categories and codes. In this capacity, Fortune's 2016 list of "Change-the-World" organisations was used. This list consists of 50 global organisations that have made a positive social impact through activities that are part of their core business strategy (Leaf 2017). These organisations are ranked according to three factors, namely measurable social impact, business results and degree of innovation. The organisation's reach, nature and durability of one/more social problems, the economic benefit of the respective socially impactful initiative, and the degree of innovation in comparison to rivals are measured (*ibid.*). In the context of an ongoing approach to organisational change with the perspective that the identified themes should be infiltrated in the daily activities of high-change organisations, it was necessary to obtain documents that provided a summation of these organisations' business activities for the 2015/2016 financial year. In this regard, a document analysis was conducted of selected 2016 Fortune "Change-the-World" organisations' 2016 annual and sustainability reports. An organisation's annual report is the most significant formal communication that an organisation has with its stakeholders and is regarded as highly credible (Dawkins & Ngunjiri 2008: 289). A sustainability report provides an overview on the impact that the organisation's activities has on the economic, environmental and social environment and outlines the organisation's commitment to a sustainable global economy (Global Reporting 2017). The sustainability report was applicable to this article as it provided an overview on various projects of these organisations in response to changes posed by the macro-organisational environment.

Table 2 indicates that only 32 of the possible 50 2016 Fortune "Change-the-World" organisations comprised the realised sample of the second phase of the methodological strategy. In this regard, purposive sampling was applied because only organisations that had published their 2016 annual and sustainability reports online in English were used. Fifteen organisations were excluded for not having 2016 reports available online, and a further three organisations were excluded for not having information available in English.

TABLE 2: 2016 REALISED SAMPLE VERSUS EXCLUDED ORGANISATIONS

| Realised sample | Excluded organisations | |
|---|---|--|
| | <i>Documents not available in English</i> | <i>2016 annual and sustainability reports not available online</i> |
| GlaxoSmithKline General Electric Gilead Sciences Nestlé Nike United Technologies Novozymes The Coca-Cola company Intel Munich Re Walmart Bank of America Crystal Group Siemens National Australia Bank Schneider Electric Salesforce.com Unilever Accenture Johnson & Johnson Compass Group Becton Dickinson Pepsico Panasonic DSM Heineken BTPN Cipla IBM Godrej Group Grupo Bimbo Tesla Motors | Skandia Didi Chuxing Tribanco | MasterCard First Solar Fibria Celulose Paypal Holdings Olam International McDonald's CVS Health Banco de Crédito LinkedIn Gap Starbucks IDE Technologies Ito En Smart communications mPedigree |

Miles *et al.*'s (2014) qualitative data analysis steps were used to guide the document analysis process. For the purpose of this article, the entire sustainability report of these organisations was analysed, but only the following sections of the annual report were analysed: Message of the CEO and Chair; performance highlights of 2016; business review 2016; company strategy and corporate governance information. Financial information, statements and executive compensation, risk reporting, mine safety disclosures and legal proceedings of the annual reports were not scrutinised.

FINDINGS

The document analysis of the annual and sustainability reports of high-change organisations revealed categories relating to the nature of co-COC and antecedents for the implementation of co-COC. It should be noted that the information in these reports was not necessarily always applied to a change context, but provided insight into the key success factors of high-change organisations that could be aligned with the identified themes of the literature sample to build towards the conceptual development of co-COC.

The nature of co-COC

In line with some of the themes identified in the literature, specifically the identified paradigmatic shifts in strategic communication, six categories were identified that specifically point to the nature of co-COC, and thus the definition and core attributes of this concept.

Dialogue and conversation

The importance of shifting from monologue to dialogue and conversation in strategic communication to stimulate creativity and innovation was echoed in most of the reports. The Crystal Group indicated that its employee relations rest on building social dialogue: “A prerequisite for an engaged workforce is a robust communication mechanism between the company and its workers” (Crystal Group 2016). According to both Pepsico and The Coca-Cola Company’s sustainability reports, the focus is on “ongoing conversation” and “long-term dialogue” with all stakeholders (The Coca-Cola Company 2016; Pepsico 2016). To instil an environment of continuous, open discussions between employees and management, Unilever abides by “always-on conversations” in order to stimulate a culture of development and learning (Unilever 2016a).

Collaboration and partnerships

In conjunction with the promotion of dialogue and conversation, high-change organisations seemingly recognise that the real-time environment necessitates collaboration and building partnerships. The Coca-Cola Company indicated that “we recognise and embrace the idea that the collaborative idea of partnerships can achieve much greater collective impact” (The Coca-Cola Company 2016). Wal-Mart abides by “collective action” and building “shared value” to realise transformation and address business and societal challenges (Wal-Mart 2016). Cipla’s Chairperson, Dr YK Hamied, stated that “collectively we must build the best-in-class organisational capacity to make our aspired future come to life” (Cipla 2016). In congruence, Alex Gorsky, Chairperson and CEO of Johnson & Johnson, argued that “true innovations are the result of collaboration. And that collaboration is driven by a diversity of ideas, individuals and disciplines – working together towards a common goal” (Johnson & Johnson 2016). General Electric states that central to its success is “high-performance teams dedicated to winning together” (General Electric 2016).

Innovation, creativity and experimentation

As derivatives of dialogue and collaboration, innovation, creativity and experimentation among organisational members dominate in high-change organisations. According to Nestlé’s annual report, “innovation is still one of the pillars on which this company is built. We work with agility, creativity and discipline, constantly innovating and renovating our portfolio” (Nestlé 2016). Unilever implemented a change programme in 2016 called “Connected 4 Growth” (C4G) to establish a responsive and agile organisation. In its annual report it states that through this programme “we want to give our people the opportunity to experiment and encourage them to think and act like entrepreneurs and business owners” (Unilever 2016a). Furthermore, in its sustainability report it

states that “in an uncertain and volatile world, we cannot achieve our vision unless we find new ways to operate” (Unilever 2016b). Correspondingly, Johnson & Johnson asserts that “our company’s structure allows us to interconnect our breadth and depth to drive innovation” (Johnson & Johnson 2016). The Godrej Group also maintains that “accelerating the pace of innovation is a key strategic pillar and driver of our growth strategy” (Godrej Group 2016).

Employee engagement and empowerment

Synonymous with “participation” mentioned in the literature, high-change organisations value employee engagement. Recognising employees’ input in the decision-making processes of the organisation creates a sense of belonging and promotes self-discovery and, in essence, employee empowerment. This viewpoint was specifically reflected in DSM’s integrated annual report: “Our employees feel engaged and motivated both through the contribution they make to a better world and the success this creates for the company in which they work” (DSM 2016). According to Nestlé (2016), “keeping employees engaged is one of our top priorities”. Similarly, the Crystal Group (2016) declares that “the group will continue to enhance communication with our employees to keep them involved”. Unilever CEO Paul Polman states that the organisation is becoming more “agile and empowered” because of continuous employee engagement and partnership endeavours (Unilever 2016a). In congruence, GlaxoSmithKline strives “to create an environment that empowers and inspires. Our people strategy focuses on talent, leadership, performance and engagement” (GlaxoSmithKline 2016).

Diversity and dissent

One of the paradigmatic shifts in strategic communication indicates that the focus is no longer on establishing consensus, but rather to instigate conflict, because knowledge develops through continuous debate and discourse. It was evident that most of the high-change organisations promote diversity and inclusion. This does not only point to the acceptance of different ethnicities, cultures, social beliefs and sexual orientations, but also the recognition of diverse and contradictory opinions and solutions to problems as a platform for the generation of new ideas. As part of a leadership development programme, GlaxoSmithKline focuses on an organisational environment that fosters “strategic debate” (GlaxoSmithKline 2016). Indra K Nooyi, PepsiCo Chairperson and CEO, is of the opinion that “it’s inevitable that we’ll disagree on certain issues, but those disagreements need not be roadblocks to implementing solutions”. We need to “engage with one another across sectors, listen to diverse perspectives, resolve current tensions and coalesce around the latest research to find a collective path forward” (PepsiCo 2016). Equally, the Godrej Group is “committed to recognizing and valuing diversity across our teams” (Godrej Group 2016). This sentiment was shared by United Technologies: “We have a diverse and global workforce that embraces many different viewpoints” (United Technologies 2016).

Bottom-up communication

The literature reflected that interaction should be promoted and organisational leaders and management should listen to stakeholders through co-creation and stakeholder

engagement strategies. The Crystal Group advocates that “workers should be able to collectively negotiate” (Crystal Group 2016). GlaxoSmithKline believes that “listening to our people is essential for employee engagement. Responding even more so” (GlaxoSmithKline 2016). Unilever’s C4G programme focuses on “inverting the traditional structures, pushing responsibility and opportunity outwards into the organisation so people can be more entrepreneurial” (Unilever 2016a). Panasonic integrated a “bottom-up approach” in its “forward looking R&D 10-year vision”, which entails “starting with researchers and engineers working in the field” towards identifying new innovations (Panasonic 2016).

Antecedents of co-COC

In congruence with the literature discussed earlier, a further four categories emerged from the document analysis, which specifically serve, in the context of this article, as antecedents or foundational prerequisites for the implementation of co-COC.

Organisational agility

The integration of leadership agility and a change-able culture towards accepting change as part of organisational life, necessitates organisational agility. In support of this perspective, IBM contends that the organisation is “dynamic, adapting to the continuously changing industry and economic environment” (IBM 2016). In accordance, Grupo Bimbo “work[s] every day to be an agent of change” (Grupo Bimbo 2016). As stated earlier, Unilever’s C4G programme focuses on, inter alia, building organisational agility to facilitate new ways of thinking and an entrepreneurial culture. With reference to organisational agility, Munich Re Chairperson Nikolaus von Bomhard states that “Munich Re is also a company in transition. Innovative business models and partnerships that would previously not have been taken into consideration are now being set up” (Munich Re 2016).

Leadership agility

Leadership agility is essential to realise change from below. It is important that the leader creates a receptive infrastructure in the organisation by listening, being open, and truly connecting with employees. In alignment with this perspective in the literature, Unilever states that the C4G programme allows the leader and managers of the organisation to “better support employees who are encouraged to experiment, fail, learn and collaborate” (Unilever 2016a). The CEO of the Crystal Group, Andrew Lo, asserts that it is a top priority for the organisation to keep employees informed and to communicate openly: “The Group management uses different channels to enhance and maintain close relationships with their teams”. Various platforms are also employed “to share information and keep employees abreast of the latest Group happenings” (Crystal Group 2016). Similarly, General Electric Chairperson and CEO Jeffery R Immelt argues that “leadership, now more than ever, is about embracing the new and bringing people with you” (General Electric 2016).

Change-able culture

According to DSM, its organisational culture “aims to support the company’s strategic objectives and to equip employees to respond the needs of the ever-changing world” (DSM 2016). This specifically points to the necessity of a change-able culture or change-affirmative culture highlighted in the literature. Similarly, the Godrej Group promotes an “agile and high performance culture” (Godrej Group 2016). This implies that the group is never satisfied with the status quo and fosters an incessant awareness of the opportunities brought about by the changing business environment. Grey Hayes, Chairperson and CEO of United Technologies, states that “in today’s competitive business environment, it is essential that we have a workforce that can adapt quickly and recognise the opportunities that a changing business environment brings” (United Technologies 2016). In congruence, Wal-Mart President and CEO Doug McMillon maintains that its employees have a “willingness to change” (Wal-Mart 2016).

In support of fostering a culture receptive to change, most of the high-change organisations recognise that their employees are their most important asset and a contentious effort is made to instil employee wellness. This is specifically done by creating a work-life balance and opportunities for leadership and career development. Pepsico CEO Nooyi states that “the extraordinary men and women who make up this company are – and always have been – our most valuable asset” (Pepsico 2016). The company preserves its most valuable asset by “fostering a healthy workplace”, “learning and development programmes”, and “making sure that men and women are represented equally in management roles” (Pepsico 2016). According to the National Australia Bank’s annual report, “The success of our business is driven by our people. We focus on building capability, nurturing talent and having great leaders” (National Australia Bank 2016). Similarly, DSM “aim[s] to provide rewarding career opportunities, high levels of employee engagement and a healthy work-life balance” (DSM 2016).

Stakeholder engagement

From the document analysis it was evident that these high-change organisations not only place high regard on employee engagement, but also stakeholder engagement as a whole. This is specifically in line with the concept of “self-organisation” in the literature, where the focus is no longer on generating consensus with stakeholders but the establishment of engagement opportunities. The starting point for identifying creative solutions is now with the organisation’s stakeholders. In support of this viewpoint, The Coca-Cola Company “engages with stakeholders around the world” (The Coca-Cola Company 2016). In congruence, the Crystal Group “focuses on becoming a boundaryless organisation – the support and engagement of various stakeholders are actively sought. Our collaborations with our stakeholders create social and environmental benefits, develop synergy and result in widespread positive impacts throughout society” (Crystal Group 2016).

co-COC: A definition and attributes

The findings from the initial thematic analysis of the sample of literature and the document analysis of the annual and sustainability reports of selected high-change organisations culminated in a definition and attributes for co-COC.

co-COC could be defined as the “daily communication and social processes of organisational members to collaboratively negotiate and co-create innovations and experiments towards identifying creative solutions to evolve with changes posed by the volatile business environment”. The “co” prefix encapsulates the collaborative nature of this process. It should also be noted that although co-COC specifically refers to how organisational members collectively make sense of change, this process also promotes collaboration and co-creation with external strategic organisational stakeholders. Figure 2 provides a graphical illustration of the core attributes and antecedents of co-COC.

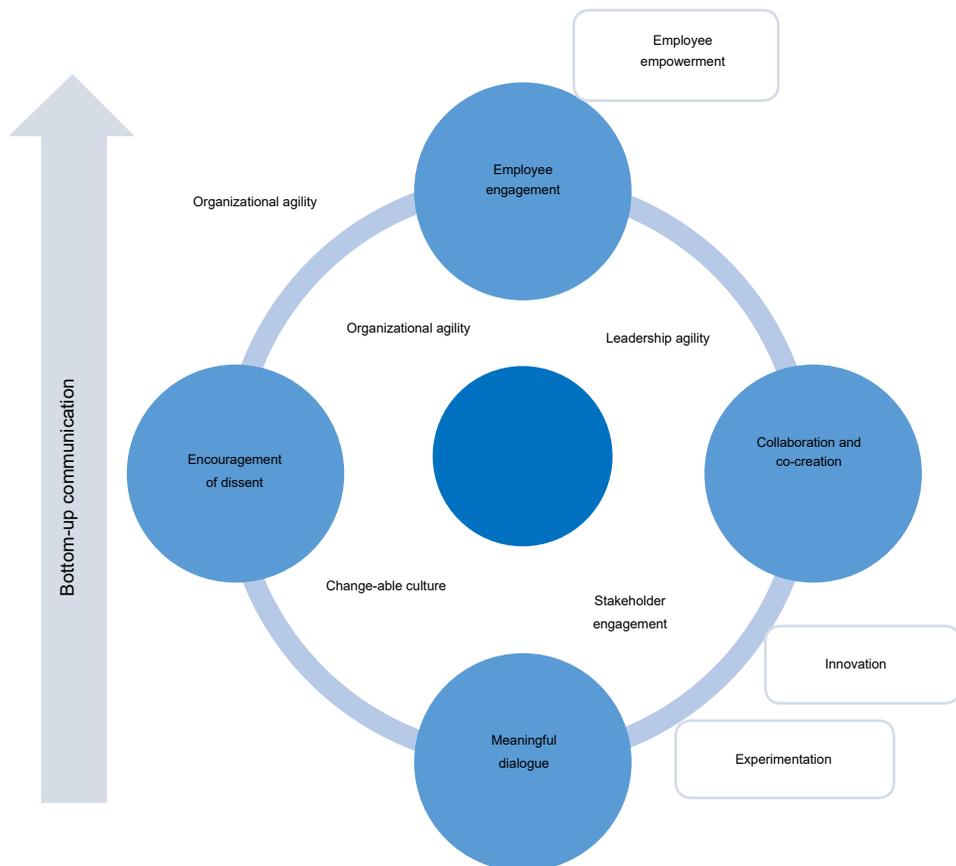


FIGURE 2: CORE ATTRIBUTES AND ANTECEDENTS OF CO-COC

Figure 2 illustrates that against the acceptance of change as part of organisational life, co-COC is bottom-up in nature and elicits the attributes of meaningful dialogue, employee engagement, collaboration and co-creation and encouragement of dissent. These attributes are enabled by the antecedents of organisational agility, leadership agility, a change-able culture and stakeholder engagement.

An emergent approach to organisational change, which focuses on how organisational members construct their social reality, where change becomes part of organisational life, necessitates organisational agility. This implies a flexible, open organisational structure to quickly respond and adjust, but ultimately evolve with the changes posed by the volatile business environment. This necessitates leadership agility, where the leader and managers connect with employees and truly value their input and participation to enable a receptive context, or change-able culture. Such a context stimulates the opportunity for organisational members to have meaningful dialogue to collaboratively make sense of change and co-create innovations and experiments in response to the volatile business environment. co-COC should not be focused on the mere transfer of information, but on employee engagement, where the leader and management involve employees in organisational decision-making. This could, in turn, elicit a sense of self-discovery and employee empowerment regarding the value of their inputs towards organisational sustainability.

Change from below requires members of an organisation to learn how to effectively and constructively talk to one another at all levels of the organisation during the process of building a collective understanding of change. Such a perspective naturally allows for the encouragement of dissent because knowledge develops through continuous debate and discourse. Furthermore, there should be meaningful dialogue across the entire organisation to allow for the sharing of meaning and ideas. This also entails engaging with other external strategic stakeholders as a starting point towards developing creative solutions.

PRAGMATIC IMPLICATIONS

In addition to the antecedents of co-COC, some pragmatic implications, specifically pertaining to planned change projects and the role of the strategic communication professional, need to be considered.

Top-down communication and planned change projects

It could be argued that some change projects might require a planned approach within an overall emergent change process. These projects will necessitate top-down change-orientated communication. However, the emphasis here should be on the fact that organisational leaders should facilitate the change process as opposed to merely inform; follow a charismatic, as opposed to authoritative, leadership approach; and implement employee engagement in all units, departments and teams at multiple levels of the organisation, instead of simply enrolling collaboration among organisational members (Järventie-Thesleff *et al.* 2015: 36).

The role of the strategic communication professional

The role of the strategic communication professional is no longer to control communication and to encourage participation towards resolution. Instead, strategic communication professionals should act as facilitators to instil continuous discussion forums among organisational members where opinions can be liberally expressed and dissent instigated (Ströh 2007). In the role as facilitator, the strategic communication professional should create “platforms for discourse and participation within and between the organisation and its stakeholders ... which necessitates both relational and dialectical strategies to ensure marginalised voices are also heard” (Overton-de Klerk & Verwey 2013: 373). To ensure critical reflection, strategic communication professionals can no longer be too closely aligned with the organisation (Overton-de Klerk & Verwey 2013: 374). Most importantly, Ströh (2007: 133) emphasises that building and sustaining relationships lie at the heart of effective change initiatives, which could be achieved through “participation that builds trust and openness, not merely paying lip-service to involvement”.

LIMITATIONS, CONTRIBUTIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Drawing from critical developments in strategic communication, this article presented a new concept, co-COC, which contributes to the body of knowledge on change communication and management literature, reaffirms the critical role of communication in the change process, and serves as a heuristic for future research. This concept addresses the need for theory development beyond mainstream assumptions, which could in particular assist strategic communication professionals to realise the need for the incorporation of contemporary developments in practice.

Although an analysis of organisational documents is regarded as highly authentic and meaningful, it could involve issues pertaining to credibility and representativeness (Bryman & Bell 2014: 275). Organisational documents might not be an accurate representation of how different organisational members perceive situations within the organisation, or they might not be an objective reflection of the current situation. Notwithstanding these limitations, the methodological strategy employed in this article should be considered as the foundation towards further development of co-COC as a fully-fledged concept at high-change organisations.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary organisations are in a continuous state of flux and have to be able to adapt to the demands of an interactive society in order to survive. The CEO and Chairperson of General Electric states that “no company can escape the waves of change” (General Electric 2016). Strategic communication from a contemporary, critical perspective “actively contributes to and shapes the processes and practices through which change emerges in the day-to-day of organisational life” (Järventie-Thesleff *et al.* 2015: 535). The need for communication approaches that are change orientated to sustain the organisation as part of the ever-changing environment, with the conceptual development of co-COC as the foundation, is self-evident.

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