# 10 Tips for Communicating a Big Benefits Change

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*November 2018*

Empower Results®

Jimi Hendrix once said, “In order to change the world, you have to get your head together first.” The same can be said about communicating a big benefits change. It starts with getting your head together. What do you need to think through to give your change the best chance for success—for your company, your employees, and you? Consider these 10 proven tips.

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| 1. | Start Early | All too often, we spend most of our time figuring out the change itself—and leave little time to focus on how to help employees understand and navigate the change. That’s a big mistake. Instead, create a communication and change workstream that parallels the benefits change workstream. And, apply learnings from past organizational changes. |
| 2. | Consider What Else is Going On | What’s happening with your business results? What stories have been in the press about your company lately? What other changes—big and those seemingly small—will be happening around the same time? Make a list of internal and external factors and announcements—like record earnings and flat merit pay increases while you’re rolling out only high-deductible medical plan options for the first time. Then position your benefits change in the broader context, and prepare for worse case scenarios and potential media stories. You may not be able to adjust what you’re doing, but you can address potential issues in advance. |
| 3. | Get Agreement on Key Messages | It may seem like extra work to create and get agreement on a set of key messages that answer who, what, where, why, and how—but it’s worth the additional effort upfront. This step will significantly reduce the amount of rework and out-of-control versions once you start writing the actual communication materials. Plus, disciplining yourself to create clear, succinct messages will help you fully understand all the nuances of the change early on. |
| 4. | Insist Leaders Be Visibly Involved | Aon’s leadership research shows that nearly 75% of organizational change initiatives fail to achieve their stated objectives! There’s one common reason for these failures: leaders did not visibly and actively involve themselves in the change initiative from start to finish.* Prepare both leaders and managers to understand, support, and communicate the basics of the change. Equipping them to share information openly and honestly will increase trust and increase the likelihood that your key messages are communicated clearly and accurately. |
| 5. | Test Approach with Employees | Many communication campaigns gone bad could have been saved by simply testing messages with employees first. With manager approval, ask a group of employees affected by the change to sign a confidentiality agreement and give input on your messaging and drafts. You can also ask this group to share real-time feedback during and after the rollout. Log their input and questions so you keep a pulse on whether you need to communicate more about certain topics. |

**Source: Aon Top Companies for Leaders Research: 2011 - 2017*

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| 6. | Create Foundational Communications | Particularly when your lead time is short, focus on creating a core set of foundational communications like a high-level summary, fact sheet with frequently-asked questions, and brief presentation. Creating a few excellent resources—filled with your key messages and delivered through your most effective channels—will yield better results than trying to do too much and losing the continuity. Remember, those key messages in tip three are saving you time and reducing your stress now! |
| 7. | Lead with the Honest "Why" | Employees can detect a made-up reason for a change. And, it doesn't make them happy. They want the straight scoop. And trust matters.<br>Avoid spinning the reason to oversell the positives. Instead, be as honest as you can about why you are making the change without revealing confidential details. If you present the change honestly, employees will be more inclined to accept the change and trust those communicating the change. |
| 8. | Put Employees at the Center of the Story | Too often we communicate a lot of blah-blah-blah about what the company is doing. That approach leaves employees trying to read between the lines and figure out what they really want to know: "How will this change affect me?" Put yourself in your employees' shoes to understand what they really need. Address the emotional aspect of the change. Then share the logical rationale and examples of how others have navigated the change. This approach shows them respect and makes the change easier for them to understand and accept. If the change is particularly complex and varies by target audiences, personalize the message. |
| 9. | Go High Tech and High Touch | Only a few employees want all the details on the change—and, you often hear from them. Most only want the basics along with just-in-time, self-service resources with a dose of compassion. In other words, they want digital tools they can access at their convenience, as well as a real human to talk to who can empathize and help them personally. Include both high-tech and high-touch channels in your communication campaign. |
| 10. | Position the Decision as Final | Unless you are open to negotiation, state that the decision is final. Period. When you get push back (and you will), rely on your key messages to anchor you. To the team that will receive benefits appeals and requests for exceptions, script and train them so they can stand firm on the decision. Then continue to reinforce the key messages in future communications and adjust the messages as you learn what works and what you can improve. |

## What Do You Think?

Which of these tips resonate most for you? What else has worked for you?
Reach out to us at health@aon.com with your feedback and experiences.

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