The impact of internal communication on engagement and resistance to change[1]

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Abstract

In the last decades, several empirical studies have revealed the importance of internal communication, both for the performance of the organization and for the satisfaction of its employees. The present study analyzes the impact of internal communication on two fundamental aspects for the success and even survival of organizations: engagement and resistance to change. More specifically, the study analyzes the impact of different types of internal communication (organizational, with superiors and with peers) in different dimensions of engagement (absorption, dedication and vigor) and in different dimensions of resistance to change (routines seeking, emotional reaction, cognitive rigidity and short-term focus). In contrast to previous studies, where communication with superiors was the most important variable, the results of this study emphasize the importance of organizational communication and communication with peers. These two variables have the highest explanatory power for the variance of engagement at work ($R^2 = 36\%$). Communication with peers and educational level are the variables with the highest explanatory power of resistance to change ($R^2 = 11.3\%$).

Keywords: Engagement, Resistance to Change, Internal Communication, Organizational Communication, Communication with Superiors, Communication with Peers

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Introduction

Internal communication is a mechanism of great relevance in any organization, so it is not surprising that its study has become increasingly important both in academia and in the business world (Welch, 2012). Several studies have revealed the positive effects of a good internal communication for both employee satisfaction and organizational performance (White, Vanc, & Stafford, 2010). As regards employees, studies have demonstrated the effects of communication on aspects as diverse as motivation (Bambacas & Patrickson, 2008), organizational commitment and organizational identification (Punjaisri, Evanschitzky, & Wilson, 2009), and cooperative and collaborative organizational climates (Men & Stacks, 2014). For organizational performance, studies show that a good internal communication improves productivity, reduces operational costs, and enhances creativity and innovation (Clampitt & Downs, 1993).

The present study intends to analyze the impact of internal communication in the particular case of Portuguese organizational context. It focuses on two variables considered fundamental for organizational performance: engagement (by the positive) and resistance to change (by the negative) of the employees of the organizations. Some previous studies have demonstrated the importance of organizational communication for engagement (Karanges, Beatson, Johnston, & Lings, 2014, Lee & Ok, 2015, Mishra, Boynton, & Mishra, 2014) and for resistance to change (Duque, Ocampo & Velasquez, 2013; Fedor, Caldwell, & Herold, 2006; Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979). In this study we will analyze the relationship between these three variables in the specific case of an organization of the Portuguese Public Sector.

Literature revision

Internal Communication

According to Bovée and Thill (2013), internal communication is a mechanism that allows the exchange of information and ideas within an organization. In the same line of thought, Vercic et al. (2012) consider that organizational communication is characterized by an ambition to share information through the structure of the organization in a systematic, coordinated and efficient way.

Since internal communication is a concept that includes multiple aspects, some authors have tried to identify different types of internal communication. As early as 1984, Snyder and Morris emphasize the existence of two types of communication: communication with superiors and communication with peers. More recently, Welsh and Jackson (2007) argue that there are four fundamental types of internal communication: organizational communication, communication with line managers, peer communication and communication between project teams. For the operationalization of the internal communication in this study we will use the Welsh and Jackson taxonomy, excluding communication among project teams since the organization where the study is being carried out rarely works with project teams. Thus, we will analyze three types of communication:

• Organizational Communication on the flow of information about the organization, including its objectives and policies, the current financial situation and the change projects that are intended to be implemented (Clampitt & Downs, 1993).

• Communication with superiors regarding the frequency, accuracy and timeliness of information provided by superiors, as well as their openness to the ideas of subordinates. The content of this type of communication mainly concerns the tasks and roles to be played by the subordinates and how they are integrated into the general objectives of the organization (Karanges et al., 2014).

• Communication with peers, which analyzes the degree of openness and friendship in peer contacts. The content of this type of communication is mainly about work problems and ideas for improvement, but may also include personal issues (Christensen, 2014).

Engagement

Kahn (1990) is generally regarded as the pioneer with regard to the concept of engagement. According to this author, engagement is "the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively and emotionally during role performances"(p. 694).

Although engagement is closely related to employees' physical and psychological well-being (Kahn, 1990), the growing importance of this concept is not only due to humanitarian reasons. Research has shown that engagement is related to outcomes that are important to organizations, such as organizational growth and productivity and consumer loyalty (Welch & Jackson, 2007).

Schaufeli et al. (2002) argue that engagement is a multidimensional concept and identifies three dimensions: Vigor, dedication, and absorption. According to these authors:

- "Vigour is characterized by high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one's work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties" (p.74).
- "Dedication is characterized by a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride and challenge" (p.74)
- "Absorption is characterized by being fully concentrated and deeply engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work" (p.75)

Several authors have argued that internal communication enhances engagement at work (Balakrishnan & Masthan, 2013, Lee & Ok, 2015, Mishra et al., 2014, Welch, 2012). A brief review of the literature shows that the type of communication that is emphasized is communication with superiors, both with regard to direct hierarchy superiors (Balakrishnan & Masthan, 2013, Lee & Ok, 2015) and senior managers (Welch, 2012).

Resistance to change

Resistance to change is a critical psychological state of employees, which affects organizational change initiatives and generally aims at maintaining the status quo (Garcia-Cabrera, Álamo-Vera, & Hernandez, 2011). Resistance change is often considered as the main reason for failure to implement change (Simões & Esposito, 2014).

Following the notion that resistance to change is a multidimensional concept, Oreg (2003) developed a four-factor scale of resistance to change (pp. 682-683):

- Routine seeking, reflecting the inclination to adopt routines, preference for low levels of stimulation and reluctance to put aside old habits.
- Emotional reaction to the imposition of change, reflecting the level of stress and uneasiness of the individual when confronted with change, and related to psychological resilience and reluctance to lose control.
- Cognitive rigidity, reflecting the ease and frequency with which individuals change their minds.
- Short-term focus, reflecting focus on immediate inconvenience or the adverse effects of change, despite knowledge of the potential benefits that change will bring in the long run.

Although there is a large number of antecedents of resistance to change, there is widespread consensus that internal communication - or lack thereof - is one such reason. Already in the 1970s, Kotter and Schlesinger (1979) proposed six techniques for overcoming resistance to change, of which communication is the first. According to the authors, resistance to change can be overcome through effective communication that explains the rationale behind the need to change. Lack of communication can lead to lack of trust on the part of employees and lack of credibility of the organization. Although the authors are not very precise at this point, it can be deduced from their arguments that the type of communication that they refer to is organizational communication. More recently, several other authors have identified, as the main reason for resistance to change, the lack of communication about the change process, its objectives and the strategies to achieve them (Duque et al., 2013; & Yazdanifard, 2012). In all these studies, it is possible to once again find a focus on organizational communication.

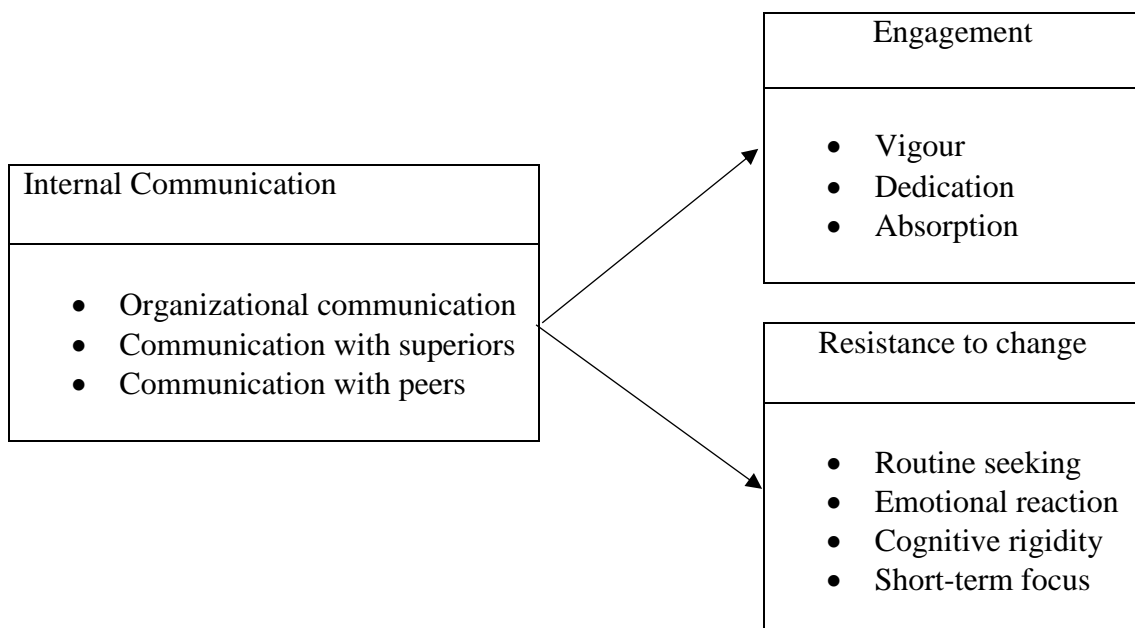The model depicted in Figure 1 shows the variables and the relationships under study:

Figure 1. Conceptual model

Method

Collection of data and participants

The data were collected in a Portuguese Public Sector organization. The questionnaires were distributed by internal mail and sent back directly to the research team. Of the 252 questionnaires sent, 147 were returned, corresponding to a response rate of 58.3%

In the total sample of 147 employees, 24 (16.3%) were male and 123 (83.7%) female, the average age being 45.5 years. Most of the participants (n = 96, 65.3%) had a bachelor's degree and only a small number (n = 26, 17.8%) did not complete compulsory education (9 years). Top managers and intermediate managers represent 19% and 16.3% respectively of the sample, while highly skilled and skilled workers account for 28.6% and 19.7% respectively of the sample.

Measures

The instrument used included five measures, for which a 5-point Likert scale was used (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree):
• Organizational communication - measured through the 7-item scale developed by Clampitt and Downs (1993).
• Communication with superiors - measured through the 13-item scale of Karanges et al. (2014).
• Communication with peers - measured through the 5-item scale of Christensen (2014).
• Engagement - measured through the 8-item scale of Schaufeli and Bakker (2002).
• Resistance to change - measured through the 18-item scale of Oregon (2003).
The instrument also included a final part on demographic variables such as gender, age, educational level and hierarchical level.

Results

The reliability of the scales was analyzed to verify the internal consistency of the items. Reliability is considered adequate when Cronbach's alpha is higher than 0.7 (Maroco & Garcia-Marques, 2006). As far as internal communication scales are concerned, Cronbach's alphas were always above this value, ranging from .808 (communication with peers) to .971 (communication with superiors). For engagement, the full scale had a Cronbach alpha of 0.912. When the subscales were analyzed, the absorption scale was found to have an alpha slightly lower than the acceptable level (0.672). The other two subscales had good levels of reliability, ranging from 0.830 (dedication) to 0.872 (vigor). The total Scale of Resistance to Change had a Cronbach's alpha of, 889. However, the cognitive rigidity subscale had an alpha well below the acceptable level (<0.6) and therefore was excluded from the analysis. The remaining subscales had adequate Cronbach's alphas, ranging from 0.743 (short-term focus) to 0.872 (emotional reaction).

The analysis of correlations (Table 1) shows that the three communication variables (organizational communication, communication with superiors and communication with peers) are all significantly and positivelycorrelated with engagement and its three subscales. This result indicates that the higher the perceived good internal

communication, the higher the level of engagement. This result indicates that the higher the perception of good internal communication, the higher the level of engagement at work. Table 1 also shows that only peer communication is significantly correlated with resistance to change and one of its subscales (short-term focus). The correlation is negative, which indicates that the higher the perception of a good communication with the peers, the less resistance to change and the shorter the focus in the short term. The correlation is negative, indicating that the higher the perception of good communication with peers, the lower the resistance to change and the lower the short-term focus.

Table 1 – Correlations

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.
1.Com. super.	1										
2.Com. org	0,70**	1									
3.Com. pares	0,42**	0,44**	1								
4. Engagement	0,48**	0,56**	0,44**	1							
5. ResMudança	-0,06	-0,02	-0,21**	0,01	1						
6.E_Absorção	0,47**	0,53**	0,39**	0,86**	0,05	1					
7. E_Dedicação	0,41**	0,50**	0,40**	0,32**	-0,05	0,67**	1				
8. E_Vigor	0,43**	0,48**	0,39**	0,30**	0,03	0,67**	0,74**	1			
9.RM_Rotinas	-0,05	0,01	-0,04	0,07	0,73**	0,14	0,01	0,06	1		
10.RM_Emoc	-0,11	-0,06	-0,13*	-0,03	0,73**	-0,05	-0,13	-0,07	0,53**	1	
11.RM_CPrazo	-0,07	-0,04	-0,25**	-0,04	0,33**	0,020	-0,10	-0,03	0,65**	0,65**	1

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Subsequently, stepwise regression was used to analyze which of the variables had the highest predictive power of engagement and resistance to change. The model for the regression with engagement as a dependent variable (Table 2) retained two variables - organizational communication and communication with peers - and explains 36% of the variance (R^2). The model with resistance to change as a dependent variable (Table 3) retained two variables - level of education and communication with peers - and explains 11.3% of the variance (R^2).

Table 2 - Stepwise regression for engagement

Preditor	R^2	Beta
Organizational communication	0,360	0,457
Communication with peers		0,237

Table 3 - Stepwise regression for resistance to change

Preditor	R^2	Beta
Education Level	0,113	-0,283
Communication with peers		-0,163

Conclusion

This study analyzed the effects of different types of internal communication in two aspects closely related to the success and survival of organizations: engagement and resistance to change. While previous studies on communication and engagement focused almost exclusively on communication with superiors, the results of this study indicate the importance of organizational communication and communication with peers. Similarly, while previous studies on communication and resistance to change focused mainly on organizational communication, the present study emphasizes the importance of communication with peers to reduce resistance to change. An unexpected result was the impact of the level of education on resistance to change, indicating that the higher the level of education the lower the resistance to change. These results present some contributions to the state-of-the-art and may be developed in greater detail in previous studies.

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