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Plain Language and Organizational Challenges

Karsten Pedersen[1]

Abstract

Changing the language in an organization is a major organizational change. In this article, I discuss some of the organizational challenges for one specific language change implementation, taking the stance that language change must be treated as any other organizational change for it to have an effect. I work with the case of the Danish tax authorities' language project aimed at producing more readable letters. The empirical data that I work with are two qualitative informant interviews. One recorded at the language project's headquarters where they lay out the general lines for the project, and the other at the payment center where they use the revised letters.

Keywords

organizational communication, human communication, communication studies, communication, social sciences, interpersonal communication, business communication

Introduction

Under headings such as "Plain Language," "Plain English," Clarity," and so on, there exists an endeavor to make organizational language more easily comprehensible to costumers and citizens. While a change to a more comprehensible language practice seems quite sensible, the organizational challenges should not be underestimated.

James (2010) argues that the introduction of plain language is an organizational endeavor.

In the following, I will discuss language changes as organizational changes.

The Danish tax authorities (called SKAT from the Danish 'skat' meaning 'tax') are in the middle of a large language change program, which includes a centralization of the language in standard letters as well as occasional letters. Among other things, this means that the central language unit (in collaboration with local offices) is responsible for language change in a substantial number of letters. I interviewed a representative for the central language unit (D. Piil) and two representatives for the changed letters (L. Pallesen and D. Poulsen). The names used in this article are fictitious.

All template-based letters are being changed and occasional letters exceeding a thousand in numbers have to be sent to the language unit (D. Piil, interview, L. Pallesen and D. Poulsen, interview). The language project is a kind of plain language project, although not referred to as such, nor affiliated with any of the plain language organizations.

Head of the language program states the goal of the project to be to save time and money: "There may be any number of reasons to work systematically with language in companies. At SKAT we do it because it pays" (Holdgaard, 2012, my translation).

In the following, I will take a look at the SKAT project and use the SKAT language project as a case, trying to illustrate how the language changes in SKAT are reflected in organizational changes to support and maintain the language changes.

Literature Review

Plain Language

To begin with, let me just say that here I discuss organizational change in relation to language change. That means that I will not discuss reception. This is done by Krone (2013) in a sense-making approach to how citizens receive letters, and by Bell (2007) who discusses research methodology when dealing with the reception of plain language.

Kimble (1994-1995) defines plain language:

> Plain language has to do with clear and effective communication—nothing more or less. It does, though, signify a new attitude and a fundamental change from past practices. (p. 52).

Kimble's definition makes plain language sound as if it is the most logical of approaches to communicating with customers and clients, but he also includes a few words on why changing language from hazy and convoluted to clear and

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effective can be a daunting task, because sometimes people just do not accept plain language as a language practice that they can adopt even if it can be shown to work. But even if it does seem counterintuitive that one would prefer a text that does not work, over a text that does, we must not disregard factors such as tradition and professional identity when we talk about the use of language in organizations (Becker Jensen, 2006; Lund, 2004; Pedersen, 2012). For us to find out what it takes for a text to work, we will have to discuss the organizational settings as well as the actual and desired (organizational) functions of the text. Also we will have to acknowledge the existence of communication culture as a reflection of the degree of openness and dialogue to which an organization wants to dedicate itself. In such an understanding, organizations that seek secrecy over openness will have and maintain a culture of secrecy, and organizations that seek openness over secrecy will have and maintain a culture of openness. Therefore, an organization that adopts a plain language approach must realize that it entails openness and dialogue.

Organizational Changes

Bolman and Deal (2008) identify four issues that they claim are present in all organizational changes or innovation processes:

> First, it affects individuals' ability to feel effective, valued, and in control . . . Second, change disrupts existing patterns of roles and relationships . . . Third, change creates conflict between winners and losers—those who benefit from the new direction and those who do not . . . Finally, change creates loss of meaning for recipients of the change. (p. 396)

So change, in the eyes of Bolman and Deal (2008), means that an organization loses some of the stability that it used to have and that means that any change process must have something to offer the employees to make up for the loss. In the case of language change, it means that old ways of addressing the public are no longer valid, that a more direct or perhaps inviting way of writing will change the role of the SKAT employees from that of the keen controller to that of the friendly advisor. As we shall see later, there will also be people who find the new ways wrong and hard to live with. They will be the losers. Those who find the new ways interesting and challenging will be the winners. And all of the above adds to a loss of meaning that was attached to the traditional way of writing.

Some of central problems in organizational change processes are addressed by Bolman and Deal (2008) in their reinterpretation of Kotter's (1995) change stages. Bolman and Deal emphasize a number of elements in change processes and list Kotter's change states adding their own four frames (see Table 1).

Kotter's change states (on the far left of the schematic) are an attempt to find and isolate the crucial elements in organizational change processes. The model is a top-down model, and therefore it applies very well to my case in which the management has decided to implement language changes and to have them distributed to the entire organization. The eight change states are not an exhaustive list, but should be regarded as the eight most important aspects of organizational change (Kotter, 1995).

Bolman and Deal's (2008) four frames represent an identification of four perspectives on organizational change. The perspectives can be seen as separate in the way that each of the four perspectives can be the main focus point in change. At the same time, the four frames must be seen as complements to each other:

> Multiframe thinking is challenging and often counterintuitive. To see the same organization as machine, family, jungle and theatre requires the capacity to think in different ways at the same time . . . Success requires artistry, skill, and the ability to see organizations as organic forms in which needs, roles, power, and symbols must be integrated to provide direction and shape behaviour. (pp. 437-438)

Bolman and Deal's (2008) four frames, it could be said, lend Kotter's eight stages more detail and make it possible to systematically talk about quite different initiatives applicable at each stage.

They say,

> Kotter's stages depict a dynamic process moving through time, though not necessarily in a linear sequence. In the real world, stages overlap, and change agents sometimes need to cycle back to earlier phases. (Bolman & Deal 2008, p. 394)

This counters, according to Appelbaum, Habashy, Malo, and Shafiq (2012), Kotter's own idea of the stages' implementation:

> Kotter argues that the eight steps should be followed in sequence and that extended overlapping of the steps will compromise success, implying that steps are requisite of one another. Therefore, not implementing the first step will make it difficult or impossible to implement the subsequent steps. Burnes (1996) argues that such a prescriptive approach does not correlate well with studies that suggest that organizations prefer to use approaches to change that stems from their culture and thus cannot easily be amended or replaced (Cummings and Huse, 1989; Schein, 1985; Burnes and James, 1995). (p. 775)

Table 1 is made with organizational change in mind. Therefore, it might be fruitful to compare it with James' (2010) list of success factors in dealing with a transition to plain language.

James (2010), in contradistinction to Kimble (1994-1995), takes organizational matters into account and identifies six "critical success factors" for implementing plain language in an organization. Below, I list James' six factors together with the corresponding terminology according to

Table 1. Reframing Kotter's Change States (Bolman and Deal 2008, p.395).

Kotter's stage of change	Structural frame	Human resource frame	Political frame	Symbolic frame
1. Sense of urgency		Involve people throughout organization, solicit input	Network with key players, use power base	Tell a compelling story
2. Guiding team	Develop coordination strategy	Run team-building exercises for guiding team	Stack team with credible, influential members	Put commanding officer on team
3. Uplifting vision and strategy	Build implementation plan		Map political terrain, develop agenda	Craft a hopeful vision of future rooted in organization history
4. Communicate vision and strategy through words, deeds, and symbols	Create structures to support change process	Hold meetings to communicate direction, get feedback	Create arenas, build alliances, defuse opposition	Visible leadership involvement, kickoff ceremonies
5. Remove obstacles and empower people to move forward	Remove or alter structures and procedures that support the old ways	Provide training, resources, and support		Stage public hangings of counterrevolutionaries
6. Early wins	Plan for short-term victories		Invest resources and power to ensure early wins	Celebrate and communicate early signs of progress
7. Keep going when going gets tough	Keep people on plan			Hold revival meetings
8. New culture to support new ways	Align structure to new culture	Create a "culture" team, broad involvement in developing culture		Mourn the past, celebrate heroes of the revolution, share stories of the journey

Kotter (as quoted in Bolman & Deal, 2008, p.395). All of James' six success factors seem to overlap or partially overlap with one or more of Kotter's change states:

1. Example of other agencies

   Kotter: Sense of urgency
   Bolman and Deal: Compelling story

2. Training

   Kotter: Guiding team
   Bolman and Deal: Remove obstacles and empower people to move forward

3. Evaluation

   Kotter: Early wins
   Bolman and Deal: Plan for short-term victories, invest resources and power to ensure early wins, celebrate and communicate early signs of progress

4. Internal champions

   Kotter: Guiding team
   Bolman and Deal: Communicate vision and strategy through words, deeds, and symbols; new culture to support new ways

5. Executive support

   Kotter: Guiding team
   Bolman and Deal: Remove obstacles and empower people to move forward

6. Reform of templates and procedures

   Kotter: Remove obstacles and empower people to move forward
   Bolman and Deal: New culture to support new ways

As we can see, only Success Factor 6 (Reform of templates and procedures) specifically has to do with language. The five previous success factors are organizational activities.

In terms of plain language, it should be noted that where James (2010) talks about evaluating the plain language effort, this is not the focus for Kotter and Bolman and Deal. They are interested in anchoring change in the organization and therefore are not necessarily interested in external factors such as readability but more so in internal ones such as acceptance of the changes. The challenge for the proponents of plain language, then, is to unite these two different approaches and make external success a criterion for internal ditto.

Plain Language and the Organization

James (2010) says,

> Seeing plain language as just a skills problem for junior staff is bound to fail. It is equally about changing the underlying culture that staff have about the way they communicate and how that communication represents them. It is also about changing the underlying systems and processes that determine how they will communicate. (p. 18)

For us to understand the scope of the changes involved in language change, it is fruitful to view it as organizational change. So what I discuss here are the prerequisites for a change in an organization's approach toward writing practices, not whether or not these practices support plain language. Because this is not a question of whether or not plain language is recommendable, but a question of how organizational change is implemented.

As we shall see below, making people accept organizational change seems very dependent on communication that will make change acceptable and relevant to the employees affected by the changes. This is why the actual change is as important as the management's ability to show that new practices are preferable to the old ones.

Method

My empirical data come from informant interviews. The interviews were designed to provide me with new knowledge about the change process and therefore I chose to interview a representative for the language center as well as representatives for the daily users of the letters:

> An important use of informant interviews concerns the exploration of a less well-understood topic of interest. Informants are selected on the basis of their knowledge, experience, or understanding of a given topical area (Johnson, 1990). In such cases, the interviewer takes on the role of student and directs the interview in such a way as to learn from the informant, who is an expert in the area. (Johnson, 2004, p. 493)

I performed two interviews. One with D. Piil, spokesperson for the language project, and the other with two employees at the payment center, L. Pallesen and D. Poulsen. The interviews were semi-structured and both lasted slightly more than an hour. To secure the informants' reliability, I rephrased some of my questions to give the informants an opportunity to change their minds. Also I asked for elaborations and for the informants to explain some of their answers. To make sure that the interviews were valid, I explained my purpose for the informants to give them an impression of the context in which I would use the interviews.

Results

The schematic that I introduced and commented on above is made with organizational change in mind. Therefore, I found it fruitful to compare it with James' (2010) list of success factors in dealing with a transition to plain language. Below, I will show how the Danish SKAT project deals with these factors.

1. Example of other agencies

a. Sense of urgency, compelling story

There are two elements at stake here. First (the creation of), a necessity for change; if people can see that other agencies, other organizations, have changed and gained from the change, there is a better chance that they will see a planned change in their own organization as something positive. Second, change might not seem as too daunting a task if other organizations have already made similar changes.

It is not clear from my interview with SKAT (D. Piil, interview) whether or not they tried to create this sense of urgency. The informants in the payment center, however, state that they found some of the letters used before the language project started, were "embarrassingly hard to understand" (L. Pallesen and D. Poulsen, interview). That means that there has been the feeling that it was necessary to do something about the letters. This feeling did not come from outside examples. When I ask L. Pallesen and D. Poulsen if they have been presented with examples of other parts of government making similar changes, they say that that has not been the case.

Sense of urgency regarding language practice could take as its point of departure that if the organization is supposed to communicate adequately with its costumers, clients, or partners, a change to different language practices is necessary. Reference to similar organizations that have gone through the same kind of changes could serve as inspiration for skeptics. SKAT does not seem to have used reference to other government agencies with similar projects (L. Pallesen and D. Poulsen, interview) as a way of creating a feeling of urgency. In fact, L. Pallesen and D. Poulsen said that as SKAT is such a large organization, there is no comparison (L. Pallesen and D. Poulsen, interview).

2. Training

a. Provide training, resources, and support, run team-building exercises for guiding team

Training is central to change, for it creates the framework for understanding why change is necessary and what the outcome of the change is supposed to be. Team-building can be an important part of the training, because not only might it support the general training efforts, it might also give colleagues an opportunity to align their views on the changes. In changes that involve language practices, training is absolutely imperative for the organization to be able to get rid of what could be perceived as well-proven practices.

In my case, SKAT has done exactly what 2 (Training) Prescribes. The central language unit trains and builds teams, so that language workers are dispersed all over the organization (D. Piil, interview).

This is confirmed by L. Pallesen and D. Poulsen (interview) who state that there have been local as well as central courses and that the courses have focused upon the letters, rather than on general writing principles. They emphasize that they find the local anchoring a central part of the training.

So training is important, but so is prior education. As noted by Lund (2004), education is a key element in letter writing, as any letter writing employee in an organization draws on his or her general and/or specialized education to do their job. Drawing on education also means drawing on any writing norms and traditions implanted therein. But one's original educational background might also be a conservative factor counterbalancing the changes aimed at. And that is why Bolman and Deal's schematic emphasizes the training aspect of organizational change. If an organization can further educate its employees, they will have the possibility of drawing on new organization-specific knowledge, rather than profession-specific norms. And therefore a change in language or writing norms is essential, if an organization does not want several profession-based writing norms to exist throughout the organization. Writing norms may come from a strong writing tradition, such as legal writing (Pedersen, 2006, 2007), but they may also belong to the organization. If an organization wants its employees to follow a specific writing norm, such as plain language, it will have to change any already existing writing norms that are in conflict with its own goals. L. Pallesen and D. Poulsen are also aware of this aspect. They tell me how some of their colleagues still use what they call "drawer letters". These are letters that the colleagues in question use instead of the new letters, because the "drawer letters" conform to tradition rather than the new principles. The reason they give for this behavior is that the colleagues have been with SKAT for quite a number of years and they even say that "it is easier for us, because we come from the private sector" (L. Pallesen and D. Poulsen, interview).

3. Evaluation

a. Plan for short-term victories, invest resources and power to ensure early wins, celebrate and communicate early signs of progress

There are several reasons why one would want to evaluate organizational changes. The most important one is that it enables you to monitor the development in the change processes, so that you might change approach if necessary. Also, positive evaluations (early wins) might add to the elements mentioned under 1 (Example of other agencies) above, thereby giving the process more stamina, as now the positive stories are coming from within the organization itself.

Also in terms of evaluation, SKAT has done some of the things that are suggested in 3 (Evaluation) above. What they did not do was plan for early successes, but instead they were quite swift to change strategies if there was a reason to do so (D. Piil, interview).

So evaluation is not only a tool to find out if what you are doing actually works, it is also a way of convincing employees of the value of the change. The experience from SKAT is that one has to be very careful when preparing evaluations, because one of the experiences was that one specific letter had prompted the receivers to phone the tax office sending the letter. This did not happen with the corresponding old letter and SKAT's assessment of the reason for this is that the reformulated letter was much more inviting than the old one (D. Piil, interview). L. Pallesen and D. Poulsen do not recognize the experience that D. Piil talks about when I confront them with what D. Piil said. They do, however, say that there was quite some editing going on with the first letter changes and that some of the changes did come about as a result of reactions from the receivers of the letters (L. Pallesen and D. Poulsen, interview). But they are not, as is D. Piil, able to point to one specific letter and say that it was changed as a result of more phone calls than they were aiming at. What this means is that the episode with the letter referred to by D. Piil seems to have been less significant to L. Pallesen and D. Poulsen.

Also, according to L. Pallesen and D. Poulsen, there are generally fewer phone calls now than before the changes in the letters began. There are, however, no data to substantiate the claim.

Seen from a plain language perspective, this is a good thing, but if the promise in the organization has been that the use of plain language would diminish the time used on the phone, because receivers now understand the letters, this increase in the number of phone calls could be counterproductive in the change process.

4. Internal champions

a. Create a "culture" team, broad involvement in developing culture, put commanding officer on team, involve people throughout organization, solicit input, stack team with credible, influential members

Internal champions are what communication theorists would call opinion leaders; people who are important in an organizations' construction of reality and interpretation of results. These are the people who will make sure that results are communicated throughout the organization, and by making them part of the process chances are they will communicate a positive take on the changes.

SKAT identified a number of language project ambassadors, so that they have a contact within the various departments, and that the departments themselves have a contact with the project. The contacts in the departments are "somebody interested" within the various parts of the organization. There are various functions of the local contacts. Two very important ones are to make the local colleagues part of the process and to give the central task force knowledge about rules, regulations, and so on,. that are special to the various departments (D. Piil, interview). In the payment center, the approach to this has been exactly as D. Piil outlined with local steering committees responsible for the development in the different offices in the payment center (L. Pallesen and D. Poulsen, interview).

L. Pallesen and D. Poulsen point out that the local committees have been in contact with various central offices to make sure that the new letters meet communicational as well as legal (central) standards.

5. Executive support

a. Put commanding officer on team, stack team with credible, influential members

This is where the difference between on one side James and on the other Kotter/Bolman and Deal becomes most clear. Where the latter seems to take for granted that organizational change is initiated at executive level, the former finds it relevant to stress the point, to emphasize that changes of something as basic as an organization's use of language must be taken seriously, also by its executives.

The SKAT language project was initiated by management and backed by management. Also management members have traveled with the language task force to show that they do back the project. New rules such as mailings with more than a thousand receivers must be approved by the language task force have shown that management backs the project (D. Piil, interview).

Locally, the involvement of commanding officers varies. In D. Poulsen's office, the head of the office was also the local head of the language project, whereas in L. Pallesen's office the head of the office was merely "supportive" of the changes (also the latter office holds significantly more employees than the former). It was in L. Pallesen's office that some of the colleagues used "drawer letters."

6. Reform of templates and procedures

a. Align structure to new culture, remove or alter structures and procedures that support the old ways

The structures must support the new ideas, and a way of securing that, for example, letters are written according to new principles is to update the stock letters and letter templates, so that everybody has no choice but to use the new formulations.

I already mentioned SKAT's implementation of new rules for sending out mass letters, but the most profound language change was accomplished by simply replacing old letter templates in various computer systems with new ones (D. Piil, interview). This ensures that the letters sent to the public are the letters that management wants to send out. It does not, however, ensure that the senders of the letters feel comfortable with the reformulated letters. That, however, can be dealt with by a targeted approach to change organizational communication practices. And communication practices are that mix of organizational, educational, and traditional approaches to communication that must be addressed in any strategic language change in an organization.

In my interview with L. Pallesen and D. Poulsen, we saw that some of the older colleagues still used some old letters, the so-called "drawer letters." L. Pallesen and D. Poulsen offer the explanations that this is possible in the office in question (a) because of the nature of the letters and the fact that it is possible to bypass the computer system in which the letters are supposed to be conceived, and (b) because the colleagues responsible for bypassing the system are uncomfortable with the new letters. In D. Poulsen's office, this would not be possible at all, because all the letters they send out must be accessed via a computer system, so even if they wanted to use the old letters, that would not be possible.

Organizational and educational changes are addressed in Bolman and Deal's schematic. But tradition and profession-based norms will be altered as a combination of organizational change and time. That means that, given enough time and effort, an organizational (or a communication practice) change can become a lasting change in the attitude toward organizational communication. This is emphasized by the success factors identified by James (2010).

Discussion

The above findings suggest that if plain language practices are supposed to catch on in an organization, education, evaluation, local anchoring, management involvement, among other initiatives, are crucial. That means that even if plain language reforms are the goal, they do not have to be in focus, organizational change does. The interviews seem to suggest that plain language can actually be accepted and seen as a relevant and desirable development by most staff as a result of it being seen as organizational change.

From my interviews, it is clear that what happened in SKAT was not a point-by-point implementation of Kotter's change state, but rather a recursive process in which the local employees were quite instrumental. When asked if they were listened to and felt that they had a genuine influence on the letters, L. Pallesen and D. Poulsen both said that they definitely found that to be the case. But deeming from the existence of the "drawer letters," it is also clear that had I had the possibility to talk to other colleagues at the payment center, I could have heard quite a different take on the project.

The SKAT language project seems to indicate that Bolman and Deal's interpretation of Kotter's stages as recursive rather than sequential is the more fruitful approach; as it lets the changes find local as well as central ownership in the organization.

Furthermore, the data seem to indicate that there has been an organizational anchoring of the project, and that, even if there is the odd "drawer letter," the payment center staff accept the language changes and adopt the language project.

It is quite clear from the interview with D. Piil that even if it can be shown that the language project seems to fit nicely with Bolman and Deal's interpretation of Kotter, they did not implement the changes by following a model.

This article began with Kimble's (1994-1995) claim that "plain language has to do with clear and effective communication—nothing more or less." (p. 52) James (2010) argues that there is more to language change than language change. And that the introduction of such measures as plain language is also very much an organizational project. James' claim certainly seems to be confirmed in the case of SKAT in the sense that many of the initiatives taken by the project group are language change initiatives backed by organizational initiatives. The corollary for other plain language projects could very well be to focus much more on organizational changes than on arguments for the logical reasoning behind the changes.

Beyond the scope of this organizational investigation lie investigations to unveil whether or not the organizational endeavors to convince employees and colleagues of the usefulness of plain language or plain language like projects can be shown to be fruitful in the contact between government organizations and citizens.

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