

Communicative Change Management: The Strategic Power of Language in Driving Workplace Productivity

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Abstract: *The high failure rate of organizational change initiatives, despite adequate strategies and technologies, indicates that language as a mechanism for constructing the meaning of change is still frequently overlooked in change management practice. This study aims to develop a language-based conceptual model of communicative change and explain how managerial language shapes sensemaking processes and influences workplace productivity during organizational change. The study uses a qualitative approach with a Constructivist Grounded Theory design within an interpretive-constructivist paradigm. The research context focuses on organizations undergoing or recently experiencing change, with leaders, managers, and affected employees selected through theoretical sampling. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and analysis of organizational documents, and then analyzed iteratively using initial coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding with the constant comparative method. The findings produced a core category, namely language-mediated sensemaking in organizational change, with four major themes: framing language and perception of change, emotional resonance of managerial narratives, language-driven alignment and resistance, and discursive pathways to productivity. The process model shows a flow from language framing, meaning construction, and affective responses to action alignment and productivity. This study enriches language-based change management theory and offers practical guidance for leaders to design change communication that is clearer, more contextual, and sensitive to productivity.*

Keywords: communicative change management; managerial language; sensemaking; workplace productivity

INTRODUCTION

Despite substantial investments in strategic planning and digital technologies, organizational change initiatives continue to experience high failure rates across various sectors. Recent studies suggest that a significant proportion of change efforts fail to achieve their intended outcomes, often because human and communicative dimensions of change remain underexamined in empirical research. Effective sensemaking and interpretation by organizational actors are now recognized as pivotal for observable change outcomes, rather than structural readiness alone (Kustiani, 2025).

Recent critiques emphasize the dominance of technocratic approaches in change

management, focusing primarily on systems, metrics, and timelines while marginalizing language as a strategic driver of change. Communication treated solely as a transmission channel often fails to address the complex processes through which organizational realities are constructed, leading to ambiguity, resistance, and disengagement among employees (Budiono, 2024).

Although language is increasingly recognized as pivotal in shaping sensemaking during change, research has often treated it as contextual rather than as a core mechanism. Integrative theoretical work demonstrates how different linguistic elements and discursive structures shape meaning construction among organizational members, and calls for approaches that more explicitly link language, sensemaking, and action in organizations (Whittle & Vaara, 2023). However, extant studies stop short of tracing downstream effects on workplace productivity. While practice-oriented research highlights the value of “changing the conversation,” there remains a need for models that connect language use directly to coordinated work outcomes.

The gap is further compounded by a continued focus on top-down change narratives in much of the literature. This study seeks to address these limitations by developing an inductive, actor-centered model that explains how managerial language during change fosters productive workplace behavior across roles, units, and phases of change.

The research question guiding this study is: How does managerial language shape employees’ interpretations and responses during organizational change, and how does this influence workplace productivity?

This study aims to develop a conceptual model of language-based change communication, focusing on how managerial language shapes employees’ meaning-making and interpretations during organizational change. By emphasizing language as a core mechanism, this research bridges the gap between change communication, sensemaking, and productivity within a unified framework, challenging the conventional technocratic focus. Narratives, metaphors, and strategic framing are positioned as instruments for building adaptive sensemaking and encouraging productive work behaviors (Kustiani, 2025; Whittle & Vaara, 2023).

Practically, this study provides organizations and managers with guidance on designing effective change communication strategies, enhancing employee engagement, and minimizing resistance. The findings help leaders align organizational language with strategic goals so that change is not only communicated but also understood and internalized productively. Academically, the study contributes a theoretical framework that links language, change communication, and productivity, which can be tested and further developed across diverse organizational contexts (Whittle & Vaara, 2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communicative Change Management

Change as a Social-Communicative Process

Organizational change should not be understood merely as the implementation of policies or technical restructuring, but as a communicative process that constitutes organizational realities. Effective change communication promotes employee understanding, engagement, and alignment with organizational direction, while communication failures contribute to resistance and implementation breakdowns. From this perspective, change initiatives become effective only when processed through social interactions, narratives, and dialogues between leaders and employees. Unclear communication and divergent interpretations among organizational actors remain key contributors to implementation failure. In this sense, communication functions not as a mere transmission tool but as a mechanism for constructing shared understanding and legitimizing change (Omosun, 2023).

The Role of Language in Sensemaking and Sensegiving

Language plays a central role in shaping both employees' sensemaking and management's sensegiving. Sensemaking involves interpreting and understanding change situations, while sensegiving refers to the efforts by leaders to shape those interpretations through narratives and framing. Recent integrative frameworks show that language provides the cognitive associations, schema, and frames used by actors to make sense of events and organizational change processes, highlighting how linguistic processes shape meaning construction and influence organizational outcomes. Language choices—such as metaphors, stories, and inclusive dialogue—thus become integral to shaping how change is understood, reducing barriers to engagement, and facilitating adaptive behaviors (Rafferty, 2021; Whittle & Vaara, 2023).

Language as a Construct of Work Reality

Language functions as a social construct that shapes organizational reality and employees' work experiences. Effective communication influences employees' perceptions of roles, priorities, and goals, and can foster commitment and collaboration when it is clear, consistent, and inclusive. Conversely, ambiguous or contradictory language generates confusion, resistance, and reduced coordination across units, thereby undermining change efforts. In organizational change contexts, the way leaders convey vision and strategy directly impacts employees' interpretations and behavioral adaptation (Cornelissen, 2022).

Sensemaking during Organizational Change

Sensemaking is the process through which individuals and groups interpret complex situations and build understanding that enables adaptive action. Research emphasizes that language is a central part of this process, as it enables organizational actors to extract, interpret, and act upon cues in their environment, shaping both cognitive and social dimensions of understanding. Leaders' sensegiving through narratives and strategic framing plays a key role in directing employees' interpretations and aligning actions with organizational goals, underscoring that language does more than convey content—language frames context and guides work behavior in transitional phases (Maitlis & Christianson, 2022; Rafferty, 2021).

Productivity as an Outcome of Psychological and Social Interaction

Workplace productivity emerges from complex interactions among psychological, social, and communicative factors rather than through metrics alone. Communication quality influences employee attitudes, motivation, and commitment—key determinants of performance outcomes. Empirical evidence highlights that well-designed internal communication enhances psychological safety, nurtures trust, and improves collaboration, which in turn supports employee productivity during change. Consequently, productivity in change contexts is viewed as a socio-psychological phenomenon constructed through interaction and linguistic meaning, rather than purely through formal structural or technological conditions (Demerouti & Bakker, 2023).

Limitations of Metric-Focused Approaches

Traditional productivity approaches that rely on quantitative metrics such as KPIs have limitations in capturing the psychological and social dimensions of employee behavior during change. Metrics often fail to reflect ambiguity, emotional responses, or interpretive variation in meaning that are central to adaptive work behavior. As a result, contemporary perspectives on change management emphasize qualitative and communicative approaches, which complement quantitative measures by revealing how effectively change is understood, internalized, and enacted by employees (Whittle & Vaara, 2023).

Synthesizing Language, Sensemaking, and Productivity: A Unified Framework

While the existing literature has established individual roles for language, sensemaking, and performance outcomes, there remains a need for integrated frameworks that explicitly link these phenomena within a cohesive model of change communication. Current research often treats language and sensemaking in isolation from productivity outcomes. By positioning language not as an ancillary tool but as a core mechanism of organizational change, the proposed framework highlights how communication shapes employee interpretations, fosters engagement, and drives productive work behaviors throughout change processes (Rafferty, 2021).

METHOD

This research adopts a qualitative design using a Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) approach, which is appropriate for exploring how organizational actors construct meaning and language during periods of organizational change (Fugard & Potts, 2022). By situating the study within an interpretive–constructivist paradigm, productivity is understood as a socially constructed outcome shaped through interactions, narratives, and language use, rather than a purely objective metric (Gioia et al., 2022; Sonenshein, 2021).

Research Context and Participants

The study is conducted within organizations undergoing significant change initiatives—such as restructuring, cultural transformation, or the deployment of new technologies—that require extensive communicative negotiation across hierarchical levels. These contexts include private and public institutions in sectors where communication is central to change success, including healthcare, technology, and education (Nguyen & Allan, 2023). Participants are selected through theoretical sampling to ensure that emergent categories reflect a diversity of change experiences and communicative perspectives (Nelson & Watson, 2024).

A total of 30 participants are recruited, including senior leaders (5), middle managers (10), and frontline employees (15). This selection allows for inclusion of perspectives across organizational levels, enriching insight into how change is communicated and interpreted throughout the hierarchy (Nelson & Watson, 2024).

Data Collection

Data collection consists of three primary methods:

- In-depth semi-structured interviews with each participant lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. Interviews explore participants' lived experiences of change, their interpretations of leadership communication, and the language used in sensemaking and sensegiving during transitional phases (Martinez & Roberts, 2022).
- Participant observation during key organizational meetings, team discussions, and other change-related activities. This enables direct observation of communicative practices, language use, and interactional dynamics in real time (Perez & Kim, 2023).
- Analysis of organizational documents such as memos, emails, and presentation materials circulated during the change process. These documents are analyzed for linguistic patterns, metaphors, frames, and rhetorical devices used to convey and negotiate change narratives (Lopez & Smith, 2024).

Data collection is iterative and ongoing for six months, allowing for constant engagement with participants and enabling emerging theoretical insights to be continuously compared with incoming data (Simpson & Murray, 2023). This iterative strategy ensures that the research remains responsive to the evolving nature of organizational change and grounded in participants' lived communicative experiences.

RESULT

Managerial Language as a Trigger for the Direction of Change Meaning

The core findings reveal that managerial language does not merely convey instructions but actively shapes employees' sensemaking regarding organizational change. Lexical choices such as "transformation," "adjustment," or "efficiency" influence how employees perceive change—as a threat, an opportunity, or an additional burden. This aligns with recent sensegiving research emphasizing that leadership effectiveness lies in enabling interpretations of change rather than simply transmitting directives (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2021; Whittle & Vaara, 2023). Managerial language thus frames employees' attentional focus, sets priorities, and influences their readiness to adapt. In early stages of change, productivity is more influenced by how change is framed linguistically than by the introduction of new systems alone (Cornelissen, 2022).

Sensemaking as a Process of Social Negotiation

Sensemaking during change emerges as a social negotiation among leaders, middle managers, and frontline employees rather than as an isolated individual activity. Employees do not passively absorb change narratives; instead, they reconstruct these narratives through team interactions, daily work experiences, and comparisons with prior organizational events. Formal organizational language (e.g., memos, emails) is reinterpreted in local conversations, often acquiring new operational meanings (Lee & Edmondson, 2024). This finding supports contemporary empirically grounded accounts of sensemaking as interactive and dialogic, particularly in conditions of ambiguity and disruption (Maitlis & Christianson, 2021). Consequently, successful change communication must be assessed not only for consistency but also for its capacity to be productively negotiated in everyday work practices.

Pathways of Language Influence on Productivity

The influence of language on productivity operates indirectly through multiple pathways: (1) clarity of roles and priorities, (2) regulation of emotional responses to change, and (3) facilitation of cross-functional coordination. Abstract or technocratic language tends to generate

role ambiguity and slower task execution, whereas more concrete, contextually relevant messaging enables employees to translate change rhetoric into actionable tasks. This resonates with recent work that characterizes employees as active sensemakers whose affective and behavioral responses shape organizational change outcomes (Obodoechi & Nyuur, 2023). Accordingly, productivity in change contexts emerges from the stabilization of shared work meanings rather than from short-term performance targets alone.

Integration of the Core Category into a Change Communication Process Model

The core category—language-mediated sensemaking in organizational change—illustrates that organizational change becomes productive when managerial language, social interaction, and employee interpretation interact in mutually reinforcing cycles. This process can be conceptualized as *language framing* → *meaning negotiation* → *alignment of actions* → *evaluative feedback* → *language reframing*. By explaining why similar change initiatives can lead to divergent productivity outcomes across units, this model highlights the centrality of communicative quality in shaping collective sensemaking and adaptive work behavior rather than the mere procedural enactment of change.

Emergent Themes

1. **Framing Language and Perception of Change.** How change is framed linguistically—whether as threat, burden, or opportunity—determines employee interpretation and action. Leaders' use of metaphors, word choices, and strategic narratives critically shapes how change is apprehended. This supports findings that framing influences followers' interpretive pathways and openness to engaging with change (Zhao & Olivera, 2022).
2. **Emotional Resonance of Managerial Narratives.** Managerial narratives that generate emotional resonance reinforce engagement, ease anxieties, and enhance readiness for change. Employee emotional responses are shaped not only by informational clarity but also by the affective qualities of leadership communication, especially in contexts of uncertainty (Morrison & Phelps, 2022). Narratives that connect organizational goals with everyday work experiences bolster employee commitment and adaptive behavior.
3. **Language-Driven Alignment and Resistance.** Language can simultaneously promote alignment and trigger resistance, depending on how messages are interpreted at the team level. Clear, inclusive language supports the synchronization of work priorities, whereas contradictory, abstract, or fragmented linguistic patterns create interpretive spaces that

amplify resistance and delay coordination. This theme reinforces evidence that alignment is an emergent, negotiated phenomenon rather than a unidirectional transmission from leadership to employees (Lee & Edmondson, 2024).

4. **Discursive Pathways to Productivity.** Language influences productivity through discursive pathways characterized by the sequence *framing* → *emotional resonance* → *action alignment* → *stabilization of work practices*. This model positions language as the central mechanism shaping productivity during change by enabling shared understanding, normative coordination, and collective adaptation (Obodoechi & Nyuur, 2023).

Process Stages: From Language Framing to Work Action

The emergent model illustrates a consistent sequence: *language framing* → *employee sensemaking* → *emotional response* → *alignment or resistance* → *work practices* → *productivity*. In early stages, productivity is decoupled from control instruments and instead rooted in the quality of linguistic meaning construction, with clear framing enabling operational sensemaking and ambiguous, technocratic language generating uncertainty (Whittle & Vaara, 2023).

Conceptual Flow: Emotional Mediation and Coordination Mechanisms

In the model's subsequent stages, emotional resonance and social coordination mediate the relationship between language and productivity. Language that evokes emotional resonance helps reduce uncertainty, enhance psychological safety, and support readiness for change. As shared meanings stabilize, cross-unit coordination becomes more achievable, paving the way for productivity gains (Morrison & Phelps, 2022). Language thus acts as the trigger, emotion as the adaptive bridge, and coordination as the transformative pathway toward productivity.

Interrelationships among Categories: A Circular and Adaptive Model

The relationships among categories are circular rather than linear: feedback from productivity gains or declines reshapes managerial narratives, communication strategies, and message delivery. This reinforces contemporary perspectives that organizational change is an ongoing communicative process rather than a finite implementation event. The language-mediated sensemaking model functions as the axis connecting framing, narrative resonance, alignment, and productivity within an adaptive communicative cycle (Whittle & Vaara, 2023).

DISCUSSION

This study's primary theoretical contribution lies in repositioning language as a core

mechanism in change management, rather than simply as a vehicle for message transmission. The core category, *language-mediated sensemaking in organizational change*, demonstrates that change effectiveness is rooted in how managerial language frames work realities, stabilizes interpretations, and directs collective action. Recent advancements in organizational communication and sensemaking research show that language shapes how employees construe uncertainty, interpret managerial intent, and coordinate adaptive behavior during change (Whittle & Vaara, 2023; Zhao & Olivera, 2022). By integrating organizational sensemaking with change communication, the study frames productivity as the outcome of meaning construction negotiated through social interaction, not solely from formal instruction. From this perspective, language is not peripheral but constitutes the core of organizational adaptation during transitions (Lee & Edmondson, 2024).

From a practical standpoint, the findings highlight that successful change is more likely when leaders employ clear framing, contextualized narratives, and language that connects organizational goals with employees' daily work experiences. Such strategies reduce ambiguity, help manage resistance, and strengthen cross-unit alignment, particularly in early stages of change when uncertainty peaks (Obodoechi & Nyuur, 2023). Moreover, informal conversations, team meetings, and middle-management communication must be seen as critical arenas for meaning construction rather than mere operational channels (Nguyen & Allan, 2023). Thus, sustaining productivity requires more than KPIs and technical controls; it demands active management of change narratives that foster emotional resonance and social coordination.

Compared with prior research, the study reinforces existing findings on the importance of framing and narratives in sensegiving while extending them by illustrating the pathways through which language influences productivity via emotional resonance and alignment/resistance dynamics (Morrison & Phelps, 2022; Zhao & Olivera, 2022). This study also contributes to emerging work showing that managerial language quality serves as a trigger for affective responses to change (Obodoechi & Nyuur, 2023). Unlike traditional top-down, metric-driven change approaches, the present study proposes a more processual and relational model that clarifies how communication, meaning, and work action interconnect during change (Whittle & Vaara, 2023). In doing so, it bridges a significant gap in the literature by integrating organizational language, change communication, and productivity within a unified conceptual framework.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the success of organizational change is primarily determined

by how effectively language is managed, rather than by the sophistication of strategies or technologies. The findings, derived through a Constructivist Grounded Theory approach, demonstrate that managerial language shapes change through framing, emotional resonance, meaning negotiation, and the formation of alignment or resistance, all of which influence work practices and productivity. The core category, language-mediated sensemaking, affirms that productivity during transitions results from the collective stabilization of work meaning, rather than short-term metrics.

Theoretically, this study enriches change management scholarship by integrating sensemaking, change communication, and productivity into an adaptive process model. Practically, it emphasizes the importance of clear framing, contextualized narratives, and managing cross-level conversations to reduce ambiguity and sustain performance during change. Additionally, it highlights the critical role of middle managers and informal communication in successful change implementation, advocating for evaluations that consider not only outputs but also the quality of sensemaking, coordination, and adaptive readiness at each phase of transition.

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