The communication dynamics of Turkish CEOs as strategic leaders in change management

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Abstract

Many organisations targeting continuity will look to their leaders who hold the highest positions, namely, Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) or General Managers (GMs), to overcome problems surfacing during change processes. In so doing, we argue in this study that leaders must be first skilful in managing change, whereupon a leader's communication skills must rise to the occasion for a successful organisational change and the language used by CEO must positively influence and motivate employees.

This study focuses on discovering whether a specific language is used by top executives of corporations in Turkey during an organisational change process. We endeavour to ascertain the communication dynamics of CEOs who have managed change in a private corporation, in Turkey and to note whether these CEOs engaged a different communication style and exceptionally pinpointed language to build readiness for change in their organisations. The research took the form of an in-depth study, conducted with ten CEOs from various sectors, with data gathered through conversation analysis, which was subsequently evaluated. We concentrated on the words themselves as used by CEOs to define the components of change management.

Our findings indicated that the use of some words have a direct relationship to the components of organisational change. Turkish CEOs and GMs emphasized that mastering communication and language will be the most crucial characteristic of a successful leader and the readiness for change depends on the degree of openness and flexibility within an organisation.

Introduction

In a century with unprecedented rapid developments and unstable economical conditions, organisations must vigilantly keep up to date to ensure durability and sustainable growth. In this context, the main priority of today's companies is arguably change management since change ultimately permeates organisations with uncertainty accompanied by possible reactionary resistance.

CEOs themselves, while they are among the factors instigating global crisis, also align with the leaders ruling countries, or specifically their economies. Nevertheless, the profiles and characteristics of leaders in the business world are going through change just like the characteristics of current political leaders that are shaped by the conditions of globalisation. Leaders of the business world in the 21st century are expected to have many characteristics: the capacity to develop visionary thinking reflected by their teams through inspiration and a global mindset; the ability to be continuously innovative, to take risks; to use technology efficiently; to follow technological developments closely and to learn new things continuously while adhering to the principles of ethics. In the 21st century business world, where globalisation-related chaos and competition is intensifying, we argue that one of the most paramount characteristics of a successful leader is his or her ability to manage change. In leadership studies, change leaders are also called as transformational leaders.

Movements towards organisational change in the corporate world also bring about resistance. While there may be several reasons behind this resistance, uncertainty is one of them. Therefore, in change management, communication should be used in a very careful and effective way to overcome the obstacle of uncertainty. In this context, the CEO, occupying the top position in a company, has a tremendous responsibility. We assume in this study that CEOs managing a change process also use a different communication dynamic than the one applied during normal processes.

In this study, we analysed the change management approach that details how to manage this process in harmony with organisational structure; internal organisational communication, which is one of the core management processes and corporate communication areas at any level of organisation that prevents undesirable behaviours and resistance of employees. Especially, in change process, the workers need to receive information that is meaningful to their work and their commitment to the organisation. The purpose of internal communication is not merely to inform, but to effect change in attitudes and behaviour. Good communications encourage innovative action in pursuit of strategic objectives.

The motto of today's organisations: Change management

Organisations are part of different environments, in other words, "organizations are subsystems of a broader supra-system which is the environment" (Kast & Rosenzweig, 1979, p.98). People in organisations coordinate, cooperate, and communicate; while doing so, they form groups and build relationships not only with each other but also with the organisation itself. In this respect, the behaviour of individuals plays an important role in sustaining the effectiveness, but at the same time, the external and internal environmental conditions create a dilemma between change and stability in organisations. This dilemma is scrutinised in change management, "addressing the effective implementation of planned change and concerning the sequence of activities, processes, and leadership issues that produce organisation improvements" (Cummings & Worley, 2001, p.3).

Approaches to change management which are planned and emergent dominated organisations from the 1940s to the 1980s onwards in parallel to the developing environmental conditions. With the influence and expansion of Japanese competition in the Western industry from the late 1970s, organisations realised the necessity to reconsider their structure and management style. During this period, researchers and practitioners questioned the applicability of the planned approach in such a turbulent market environment. The emergent approach suggests that change is a continuous and "emerging" process of organisational transformation which generates unpredictable situations (Burnes, 2000).

Any type of change initiative is certain to meet with resistance; therefore, organisations must assess their readiness for any transformation process. According to Krause (2008), openness to change is directly related to employee perception towards leadership behaviour and the environment created by the leader. In this respect, Krause signals the importance of leadership behaviour as a situational factor indicating whether the culture is 'change ready' or not.

Uncertainty is the most recurrent reason for resistance. People feel insecure in a changing environment, and this evokes feelings of anxiety and anger.

Organisations dealing with resistance should also expect to deflect conflict that is derived from resistance to change. In a survey conducted by the American Management Association in 1976, it was found that managers spend up to 20 percent of their time dealing with conflict issues whereas CEOs averaged 18% (Thomas & Schmidt, 1976, pp.315-318). Early theory on conflict management proposed that collaboration is the only answer. Today's researchers admit that

collaboration may be one of the answers, but not necessarily the most important (Brown, 1992). Cummings and Worley introduced a model for effective change management, tapping the key elements of the transformational process. The model contains five key activities which are: motivating change; creating a vision; developing political support; managing the transition; and sustaining the momentum (Cummings & Worley, 2001).

Leadership and role of change leaders

According to Zaleznik (1981), business leaders have psyches in common with artists, scientists, and other creative thinkers in the way that they tolerate chaos and excite and inspire people. Bennis (1992, p.5) summarised the combined workmanship of management and leadership: "Management is getting people to do want to do what needs to be done. Managers push. Leaders pull. Managers command. Leaders communicate".

The leadership of today's business world has been shaped following the study of four comparative approaches that started in the 1940s, which are respectively the Trait approach, focusing on personal characteristics of leaders; the Style approach suggesting that the behaviour is the key variable that can be identified as that which affects differences in leadership strategies and success; The Contingency approach, which dominated during the 1960s until 1980s, emphasising the relationship between leadership styles and specific situations, in other words, the situational variables are the key drivers of effectiveness in leadership and of determining outcomes; and finally, the New Leadership approach "depicting leaders as managers of meaning rather than in terms of an influence process" (Bryman, 1977, p.277). Charismatic, visionary, and transformational define the main aspects of leadership, which was conceptualised in the New Leadership approach. Before all these labels emerged in the 1980s, Burns studied leadership in the political perspective and divided those in leadership positions as being transactional

and transformational leaders. In 1985, Bass carried out an in-depth study of Burns and interpreted his work. For Bass, transactional leadership is similar to traditional leadership approaches: the leader focuses on the quality and quantity of performance and is keen on goals and actions and on how to break resistance and to implement decisions (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987). In contrast to transactional leadership, "transformational leadership is defined as the leadership that goes beyond ordinary expectations by transmitting a sense of mission, stimulating learning experiences, and inspiring new ways of thinking" (Griffin, 1993, p.409).

CEO as change leader

Being at the top means taking the responsibility for both success and failure. According to Senge et al. (1999), CEOs are great leaders and heroic figures, talented with the capability of command and influence.

Kotter (2005) suggested that the key challenge in change management is to transform people's behaviours. To do so, successful change leaders must build an emotional bond among followers through generating inspiration by telling vivid stories and creating images in people's minds. In order to build familiarity with these criteria, a study conducted by Nadler and Tushman (1990) is referred to: Nadler and Tushman suggested that charismatic leadership is the special picture which arises during the organisational change, characterised by three key actions: envisioning for a clear vision; energising for personal excitement; and enabling through effective organisational structure and rewarding systems.

Mastering communication for change

The effectiveness of organisational communication in the transformational period is critical to the success of achieving good results. To this end, the main reason of distortion in communication should be carefully analysed and minimised by change leaders. Language is one of the critical barriers to effectiveness since "words mean different

things to different people" (Robbins, 1986, p.227).

Mai and Akerson (2003, pp.14-15) featured two dimensions of leadership communication: relation building and an instrument of strategy and strategy itself.

The exploratory study of Putti, Aryee and Phua (1990, pp.44-52) endorses Welch's speech – where the former CEO of General Electric underlines the importance of a leader's communication in organizational change (Sherman, 1993, pp.82-90) - in the way that the level of satisfaction in an organisation is in direct relation to the amount of information delivered to its members. Pavitt (2008, pp.61-78), who examined the confidence of followers in an organisation, concluded that when the vision is effectively communicated the level of confidence rises accordingly. May and Kettelhut (1996, pp.4-11) highlighted the role of communication and collaboration in reducing the ambiguity during the reengineering process of an organisation and claimed that "open communications clarify expectations."

Marshak and Grant (2008) argued that the discourse is the key leverage in the application of change. In order to create change in social systems, the change in discourse involving rationales, stories, metaphors, conversations, and contents should be considered as a preliminary action along with strategies.

The words, metaphors and language style used by CEOs reflect their inner world and ideology as well as the conditions of the environment they lead (Amernic & Craig, 2007). Weick (1995, p.5) defined CEO discourse as "a sense-making window on CEOs' innermost selves." Words are influential and the main tools of CEOs to create awareness and readiness for change. According to Stephen Denning (2007, p.27), successful leaders follow a hidden pattern of communication starting with getting the attention of the audience, then stimulating the desire and finally reinforcing with reasons. In addition to this, Wittgenstein (Barrett, Thomas & Hocevar, 1995, p.358) illustrated

words as "tools and ― navigation devices rather than pictures which correlates the relations between members of a culture". Derrida explained the established meaning of words as "Words develop meaning in relation to other words. Meaning is never final but always deferred in relation to other terms that themselves are evolving" (Barrett, Thomas, Hocevar, 1995, p.358).

Methodology

This paper focuses on discovering whether a specific language is used by top executives of corporations who have managed change in Turkey during an organisational change process. Top executives are defined as managers in the highest positions of the company, i.e., chief executive officers (CEO) or general managers (GM). It is imperative, therefore, that CEOs or GMs possess communication skills that reinforce leadership qualities necessary to drive their teams in shifting not only what they think but also what they execute.

We focused on leaders of corporations that went through transformation incorporating four programmes of change. Explicitly, change in this research infers planned changes without considering unplanned changes perceived as crisis management rather than change management. Planned change initiatives may be categorised under four programmes (Beer, 2003): Structural Change: the model targeting higher performance through mergers and acquisitions, consolidations, and the like; Cost Cutting: elimination of nonessential cost items to improve profitability; Process Change: redesign of systems and the way tasks are executed; and, Cultural Change: conversion of values, norms, and behaviour of an organisation.

Based on these criteria, we listed possible candidates for the interviews and decided to focus on a qualitative study, following the suggestion of Sandberg (2000), who claimed that small samples are adequate for qualitative research. Since this research mainly focuses on discovering the communication dynamics of CEOs or GMs and whether they use a specific

language, we chose the qualitative approach because of our face-to-face dialogue. Sandberg (2005, pp.41-68) interpreted the assumption that "language is a mirror" in the sense that the relationship between language and reality is like correspondence, whereby "it is treated as a representational system available to researchers in their endeavours to describe reality objectively". In this regard, we conducted a content analysis to evaluate the actual words CEOs or GMs used during an organisational change process.

We conducted in-depth interviews with nine CEOs and/or GMs from various sectors. Participants were asked 10 questions which are categorised and analysed under the following eight subjects.

Findings

The workplace of the 21st century

We aimed to discover how CEOs associate the word change with the future business environment. First of all, the dominant view suggests that change is a continuous fact rather than an act occurring at a point in time. The word dynamic expresses the continuity of change. More pointedly, the word dynamic exists in Turkish vocabulary in the same context as the English language. The continuity and dynamism of change is linked to the relationship between producer/seller and customer/buyer.

CEOs stated that the new generation consumers/customers are becoming more demanding and less loyal compared with consumers of the 20th century, which creates the primary cause of continuous change in working environments. Words such as new generation, consumers, customers, buyers, producers, all reflect the human element. Understandably, CEOs anticipate more focus on people in the workplace of the 21st century. In other words, human values or 'intangible assets' will become more important than tangible values such as production, profitability, stakeholder shares, and so on.

The CEOs articulated the words flexible and transparent to describe both the physical and cultural structure of organisations. The word transparency has nothing to do with the architectural design of the office but with the organisational structure of the future workplace; that is to say, that 21st century organisations will be flat rather than hierarchal. The word flexibility is used to explain not only the mindset of people, both as workers and consumers, but also their way of working. Employees in the 21st century will be fast, competitive, and individual.

Change drivers

We can see that CEOs in Turkey focused on two main themes regarding the driving forces for change: globalisation and information technologies. Globalisation itself connotes the emergence of the Eastern hemisphere, immigration, cultural diversification, and cultural imperialism, interpreted as the main reasons for globalisation. With the emergence of the Eastern hemisphere, CEOs meant the entry of new economies in Asia Pacific region (countries like China, Taiwan, India, Korea, etc.) They stated that the emergence of the Eastern hemisphere with Western happens through industrial progress and market expansion, which stimulates competition and change in the global economy.

CEOs cited information technologies as the second important force driving change. The word internet is generally used together with information technologies. The rapid growth in information technologies and the internet has resulted in easy accessibility to knowledge and speed.

Although CEOs focused on the internet as one of the forces to drive change, some of them identified television as a tool for globalisation by giving the example of the 9/11 attack to the Word Centre in New York. We can link this example to the Watergate Scandal which was used by McLuhan to describe how the confidentiality in the electronic age is demolished by the medium.

Globalisation

Globalisation is conveyed as a dichotomy between its effects on human happiness and its benefits to the global economy. The dichotomy is expressed with the words reverse equation and dilemma. The majority of the respondents concluded that the objectives of globalisation are primarily materialistic rather than humanistic. Other words and phrases such as 'a trend', 'a development which is a must', 'rational', 'it is unavoidable' and 'the base of everything' might be interpreted as CEOs perceiving globalisation as a reality of the 21st century.

It should be noted that all CEOs who participated in the survey are the local leaders of global companies. In this respect, we need to point that their words seem to be a reflection of their global networks. According to McLuhan (Rigel, Batu, Yücedoğan, & Çoban, 2005), these global companies rule the world; they influence people's lifestyles, interfere with their thinking structure, dominate the governments on behalf of their strategies, and naturally, they govern the consumption habits.

Vision in future

Responses varied on what the vision in the future would be. Some of the CEOs claimed that the human element will be the key to the vision while the others focused on profitability. It seems that the wording of the vision mostly depends on the nature of the business as well as on the organisational culture, but mainly depends on a leader's understanding of the business itself.

Successful change management

The words need and approval show the awareness of CEOs on how to start a change process. Creating readiness for change is explained by phrases such as motivation of your employees, team game, and start with a plan. As Lawrence suggests (Lawrence, 1969, pp.166-176), participation is an important "device for solution". Participation is expressed as "we must connect people to change" wherein the word "connect" signals the importance of language in change management.

We might suggest classifying the views of the respondents on effective change management under four categories as shown in Table 1 (over the page).

Looking at the words of CEOs interviewed, we can note that the words "motivation", "visioning" and "planning" are used in the same context of Cummings and Worley's (2001, p.155) model. As the word "motivation" has been recalled frequently, we can make an assessment that CEOs perceive the motivation as a gate keeper to a successful change management. The CEOs, who participated to our research, meant that they must create a bond between their employers and the reason for change, herewith; according to our findings, the meaning of bond is in the same context with the emotional bond.

Table 1: Definitions for successful change management

Visioning	Planning	Motivating	Communicating
Give clear objectives	Action plan	Loyalty / ownership of the team	Connect people to change
Show the need for change	Incorporate flexibility in plans	Acceptance of the majority / approval / assure the acceptance	Walk the Talk: build credibility and trust
Openness	Draw a picture or a map	Get the commitments from every layer	Repeat the message

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Resistance to change

CEOs concentrated on two main aspects to explain the ways to overcome resistance: openness and communication. The openness concept is expressed with the word transparency while the communication concept is strengthened with the adjective effective. These two aspects, transparency and effective communication, are linked to each other through feedback to describe the 'how to' process. We have come to understand that CEOs associate effective feedback to its continuity by using terms like 'feedback loop' and 'listening and asking for feedback'.

In addition to this, two metaphors are used to refer to the role of the leader in overcoming resistance as shown in **Table 2**.

Table 2: Metaphoric expression of the correlation between the leader and resistance

Leader	Resistance
Captain of the boat	Swings of the rudder
Orchestrates / chief of the orchestra	Orchestrates the process / manage the orchestra

Leaders of the future

In this question, our intention was to understand how CEOs define change leadership. Although the question was asked directly, we also requested examples of global leaders who could be nominated as change leaders to better analyse their perceptions of the qualifications of a transformational leader.

The required characteristics of change leadership were described by these words and phrases: 'out of box mindset', 'flexible mindset', 'entrepreneurial', 'visionary', 'follow the trends', 'adaptive', 'strategic thinker', 'team player', 'foresight', 'convert the business', 'changing', 'turnaround leader', 'knowledgeable'. The salient words depicting change leadership are 'visionary' and 'flexible'. We suggest classifying the other attributes under these two words (**Table 3**, over the page).

Table 3: The characteristics of change leadership

Visionary	Flexible
Foresight, Strategic/Strategic thinker, Out of box mindset, Follow the trends, Live in the future.	Convert business, Changing corporate cultures and business results, Turnaround Leader, Talented to balance the conceptual thinking with execution

Language practised

A communication strategy for effective change management is expressed by these terms: clarify the question of why; explain the need for change; rationale; clear; direct; establishing a bond; transparent; continuous; consistent; open; sincere; credible; creative and adaptive to the local culture.

And the applications of this communication strategy is explained with these words and phrases: with symbol and gestures; by using special tools; through face-to-face contacts; controlling the body language; use of feedback; use of special terminology; establishing bonds between the company and the employee.

Discussion

This study has provided insight into the change management correlating with organisational studies (see Kast & Rosenzweig, 1979). Considering that organisations are influenced by the environment, we studied the perspectives of change and how to manage it. Our paper focused on planned change, arguing that unplanned change is the part of crisis management studies. This argument is supported with the view of Niklas Luhmann (1995, pp.350-351) on structural change and environment in his book "Social Systems".

The findings of this study contribute to the existing literature on the role of communication in organisations and its importance for leaders who manage change. As McLuhan (2001, p.80) said "As an extension or uttering (outering) of all our senses at once, language has always been held to be man's richest art form, that which distinguishes him from the animal creation", language reflects our thoughts and the language used by the leader helps the members of organisation to overcome the uncertainty and visualise the future during a process of change.

Our findings about the qualifications of CEOs who are faced with the challenges of the turbulent environment in the 21st century build on the work of Bass (1993, pp.112-120) and provides evidence to support the importance of being a transformational leader to stimulate learning experiences and inspire new ways of thinking.

In our research, we proposed that transformational leaders use their language as a vehicle to drive successful change management. Thus, the effectiveness is likely to result from a properly designed communication strategy. The present study was a preliminary examination of the relationship between language and change leadership. Our findings indicated that the use of some words have a direct relationship to the components of organisational change. CEOs emphasised that the readiness for change depends on the degree of openness and flexibility within an organisation, thereby promoting the importance of the human element. CEOs anticipate that the 21st century will be an era of continuous change where tomorrow's competition will be harder than today's. In such a world, mastering communication and language will be the most crucial characteristic of a successful leader.

Because of its limitations, this paper opens the door to future research in other directions. First of all, the research included only a small sample; therefore, the data collected through conversation analysis was restricted. Secondly, we did not take into consideration the language style; instead, we concentrated on the words themselves as used by CEOs to define the components of change management. A useful addition to the present research would be to compare the language CEOs use in press releases with their language in face-to-face interviews, differentiating two styles of communication. Overall, we hope this study will stimulate the study of language in the field of change leadership.

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