The case for internal communication: an investigation into consortia forming

Laura L. Lemon and Nathan A. Towery
University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, USA

Abstract

Purpose – The present study investigates the nature of newly formed organizations and how internal communication influences these entities, where change is inherent. Organizational life for government contractors is unusual in that employees experience routine changes to upper management, company values, goals and objectives every few years, which leads to the creation of a new consortium that is loosely coupled. Such research provides insight beyond the single-entity organization, which tends to dominate most public relations and internal communication literature.

Design/methodology/approach – Given the lack of research exploring consortia and internal communication to get beyond the homogeneous organization, an in-depth case study methodology was the most appropriate approach. A multi-site government contractor was chosen as the research site, relying on interviews and focus groups (n = 77) to collect data.

Findings – Effective internal communication practices are even more important for consortia, like government contractors, since employees of these organizations are guaranteed to experience frequent change. Therefore, communicating to the unknown audience, building trust in the absence of a prior connection, and preparing for the unintended consequences are imperative to navigating the complexity surrounding consortium forming and cultivating employee buy-in.

Originality/value – This study presents new, transferable knowledge of internal communication during consortia forming, where to be successful, internal communication needs anticipate the unintended consequences and develop a strategy around the uncertainty. Such strategy is about welcoming diverse voices and actively listening to their preferred needs. In addition, a definition of the unknown audience is provided.

Keywords Case studies, Change management, Consortia, Internal communications, Government contractor

Introduction

Communication is a core trait required for all organizational members, and scholars have started to acknowledge and pay close attention to the importance of internal communication (Andersson, 2019). Internal communication leads to organizational effectiveness as it is the critical function of internal relationship development (Welch, 2012) and a primary driver of employee engagement (Verčić et al., 2012). As the workforce becomes more dynamic, internal communication is necessary to cultivate employee engagement and foster support during organization change (Lee and Yue, 2020). Internal communication is essential during organizational change because such communication can help eliminate anxieties by keeping employees informed throughout the change process (Ruck and Welch, 2012).

Previous research has studied various contexts in which internal communication is integral to organizational success including, but not limited to, healthcare (Seltzer et al., 2012; Stein, 2006); institutions of higher education (Welch, 2012); and international organizations (Kim and Rhee, 2011). More recently, the role of internal communication was explored alongside health information disclosure in the workplace (Lee and Li, 2020). Although internal communication...
has been examined across various disciplines including marketing, advertising, human resources and business management (Lee and Yue, 2020) and has been positioned within the disciplines of public relations, human resources and marketing (Verčić and Sporiš, 2020), this study focuses on internal communication as a function of public relations.

One context that has received little to no academic attention from the public relations discipline as well as internal communication scholars is the consortium, a temporary organization made up of two or more companies with the objective of pooling resources to achieve a common goal. Examples of consortia include political organizations, financial institutions and medical groups; even a multi-university research team could be considered a consortium. Consortia are unique in that the entities could be classified as loosely coupled organizations, where organizational components are connected below a parent organization while each organization’s autonomy and identity are maintained (Orton and Weick, 1990). Loosely coupled organizations create opportunities for innovation and productivity despite the unique separation (Weick and Sandelands, 1990).

Organizational success is often supported and facilitated by strategic internal communication. However, most of the internal communication literature assumes a single entity view of the organization, which may limit understanding of complex organizational processes related to communication. To expand knowledge and theory development, scholars need to examine more complex organizational settings, where change is a frequent occurrence, not simply an occasional event (Salem, 2002). One such setting is the loosely coupled consortium.

An example of a loosely coupled consortium in the United States is a government contractor, which is the focus of this case study. The government contractor research setting featured in this paper provides an opportunity to further explore and understand the unique and complex situation of a consortium or loosely coupled organization that is bound by an umbrella organization yet remains somewhat autonomous and independent. Therefore, the present study investigates how internal communication influences the formation of these entities. Based on the research in this study, organizational life for government contractors is unusual in that employees experience routine changes to upper management, company values, goals and objectives every few years, which leads to the creation of a new consortium that is loosely coupled. This study provides insight beyond the single-entity organization, which tends to dominate most of the internal communication literature, and shifts the focus to the loosely coupled, complex organization and the role of internal communication.

Literature review

Investigating complex organizations

Loosely coupled organizations showcase mechanisms commonly found in high-reliability organizations (HROs): Preoccupation with failure, reluctance to simplify interpretations, sensitivity to operations, commitment to resilience and fluidity of decision-making structures (Weick et al., 1999). HROs are often found in industries that would be described as hazardous, where safety is paramount because the implications of errors are severe (Baker et al., 2006). Examples of organizations in such industries include military institutions and nuclear power and chemical plants (Carroll and Rudolph, 2006). Given the emphasis on safety, even health organizations like hospitals would be considered HROs (Baker et al., 2006).

Weick et al. (1999) provided an overview of how HROs mindfully function using the preceding mechanisms. HROs learn from failure and encourage the reporting of failure and in some cases, reward the reporting of failure. By nature, humans attempt to simplify complex situations, but HROs use a high level of skepticism and encourage the development of interpersonal skills and trust to avoid simplification. Maintaining a heightened awareness among all members of the organization through group interaction and communication increases everyone’s sensitivity to complex operations. HROs use resilience as a way to learn from negative events or failures as a way to prevent future errors. Lastly, HROs develop fluid
decision-making structures by using expertise and experience as a source of knowledge and not the organization’s hierarchy. For example, in the face of a crisis, the expertise may come from the bottom up, informing top management teams about the issue at hand.

The specific consortia relevant to this study are private entities hired by the US government to serve a specific department. The nature of contract work is complex, and change is inherent, which may occur every 5 to 10 years. The first major change is the loose coupling of organizations, where different companies partner together to form a consortium to bid on the government contract. If won, each individual organization is faced with additional changes, which include organization name and identity, senior management, goals and objectives, benefits and potentially even daily responsibilities. This change could happen overnight. Although this may seem extreme, it is the nature of an industry managed by contracts. Despite being under the umbrella of the consortium, the organization itself still remains as does the purpose of the organization and the employees that support that purpose. For example, if the company’s purpose was to make bottle caps, it will continue to make bottle caps, even after joining the consortium. Therefore, to navigate such constant changes, strategic and effective internal communication programming is crucial. Without it, organizational culture may become compromised with employee engagement and productivity suffering, which impacts organizational success. With frequent organizational change, culture and employee engagement become even more dependent upon internal communication to navigate the change. Given the interconnectedness, the following sections discuss internal communication and its connection to organizational culture, employee engagement and organizational change.

**Internal communication**

Many scholars have argued for the importance of internal communication as a strategic element under the umbrella of public relations that impacts workplace efficiencies and operational success (e.g., Dolphin, 2005; Kim and Rhee, 2011; Welch and Jackson, 2007). Lee and Yue (2020) identified that the most recent trends in internal communication research focus on description of practices, issues and crisis management, employee communication behaviors and employee engagement, showing the diverse range of topics found in the literature. However, limited research has investigated the role of internal communication in consortia forming, and how that communication can potentially impact success.

Internal communication can range from informal office exchanges to formal communication to employees from senior management (Welch, 2012). Welch and Jackson (2007) defined internal communication as “the strategic management of interactions and relationships between stakeholders within organizations across a number of interrelated dimensions including, internal line manager communication, internal team peer communication, internal project peer communication and internal corporate communication” (p. 184). The preceding stakeholder-centric definition emphasizes the social actors within internal environments, and moves beyond the simple sender/receiver process. Furthermore, the stakeholder approach shifts from management-centric communication to focusing on all social actors within an organization. In this way, internal communication becomes a process shared by all employees to create meaning and to construct organizational culture (Mazzei et al., 2019), which is discussed next.

**Internal communication and organizational culture.** The culture of an organization provides an identity for employees within an organization to relate to and connect with, which also aids in establishing organizational norms. Sriramesh et al. (1996) defined organizational culture as “the rules of the game for getting along in the organization or as the ropes that a newcomer must learn in order to become an accepted member” (p. 232). In other words, organizational culture establishes the actions and beliefs amongst organizational members that generate an organization that operates smoothly. In many cases, executive leaders are the primary establishers of organizational culture (e.g., Meng, 2014; Porter and Nohria, 2010).
Along with input from executives, other components go into determining those actions and beliefs that make up an organizational culture, such as the ability for an employee to work cooperatively in a team setting. This fosters a participative organizational culture (Glaser, 1994), which is essential for loosely coupled organizations.

One of the most essential aspects of organizational culture is internal communication (Meng, 2014). Effective internal communication has a direct influence on employee trust, engagement and morale (Cheney and Christensen, 2001), which in turn shapes and defines the organizational culture. When internal communication creates a feeling of belonging, the result is a culture that is rooted in transparency, where employees are encouraged to share information with colleagues and supervisors and know how their role connects to the overall mission and vision (Mazzei et al., 2019). Meng (2014) also argued that a strong and effective internal communication strategy can improve “organizational communication climate, relationships with publics, and enhance quality, revenues, and earnings of the corporation” (p. 365). Thus, internal communication stems as one of the key components to establishing a well-defined organizational culture, and could be leveraged into maintaining employee engagement amidst a large-scaled organizational change like forming a consortium. The connection between internal communication and employee engagement is discussed next.

**Internal communication and employee engagement.** Internal communication is often discussed and studied in tandem with employee engagement, since the primary value of internal communication is to drive employee engagement (e.g., Karanges et al., 2014; Reissner and Pagan, 2013; Welch, 2012). Subsequently, scholars continue to investigate the ways in which internal communication increases employee engagement (Ewing et al., 2019). Employee engagement is defined as the “harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances” (Kahn, 1990, p. 694). Internal communication nurtures employee engagement by supporting “internal stakeholders’ core (trait) communication needs, as well as surface (state and attitude) communication needs” (Welch, 2011, p. 336). Internal communication facilitates interactions in the workplace, which lead to meaningful relationships and optimized employee engagement (Karanges et al., 2015). Specifically, internal communication that encourages employees to share their thoughts leads to greater engagement, especially when feedback is prompted by a supervisor (Karanges et al., 2015). Recent investigations have explored the role of internal social media in creating feedback opportunities with the hopes of increasing engagement (e.g., Ewing et al., 2019; Palomares et al., 2018).

Given the interconnectedness between internal communication and employee engagement, such communication would be paramount during times of organizational change, like consortia forming, to safeguard engagement throughout the change process. The discursive process of employee engagement involves a give and take between management and employees through communication activities (Reissner and Pagan, 2013). When internal communication is geared toward strengthening organizational identification and group membership, it builds perceptions of support, and inadvertently leads to employee engagement (Karanges et al., 2014), making both identification and membership vital during times of organizational change, which is addressed next.

**Internal communication and organizational change.** In addition to internal communication and employee engagement, organizational change and internal communication have also been closely studied together (e.g., Lies, 2012). Internal communication plays a role in fostering successful organizational change (Sliburytė, 2004), because such communication can cultivate support and cooperation among employees (Neill et al., 2020). Therefore, organizational change calls for new approaches to assess internal communication content and dialogue, rather than the volume of content and channels used (Ruck and Welch, 2012). Consortia forming would also require an assessment of the internal communication strategy. Kotter (1995) explained that a major reason changes do not succeed is because of a lack of
communication. Without effective communication from practitioners, employees will not understand the content and rationale for the change (Yue et al., 2019). Although employees tend to be a highly valued audience for organizations, they tend to be assumed and overlooked, which results in minimized strategic communication efforts during an organizational change (Barrett, 2002).

Accurate and effective communication can be a key factor for successful organizational changes (Bordia et al., 2004). Schweiger and De Nisi (1991) offered that effective communication will likely result in employees embracing the change. Strategic internal communication should be timely, accurate, include information about the events surrounding the change, and the new roles the employees might potentially adopt (Van Dam et al., 2008). Communication that contains these aspects can help employees reduce anxiety and uncertainty about the change, and increase their levels of trust with the leadership conducting the change (2008). Luo and Jiang (2014) suggested that public relations staff should facilitate communication and change oversight by coaching middle management on how to communicate the change rationale to their employee.

Despite investigations into the relationship between internal communication and organizational change, one area of change management that has received little attention in the literature is the forming of consortia and the role of internal communication throughout that process. Given the opportunities to investigate this unique and understudied research setting to better understand loosely coupled consortia experiencing frequent organizational change and the role of internal communication, we propose two research questions:

1. How do employees of a consortium perceive the role of internal communication during a consortium’s formation?
2. How do barriers or enablers influence internal communication in a newly formed consortium?

Methods

Given the lack of research exploring consortia and internal communication to get beyond the single entity organization, an in-depth case study methodology was the most appropriate approach. When it comes to communication research, case studies help answer research questions that focus on applied contexts (Levenshus, 2016). The case study followed Yin’s (2014) protocol for a single-case study design, where the goal was to achieve “analytic generalization,” search for new evidence from emerging concepts, or corroborate existing theoretical concepts (p. 41, 2014). Noteworthy, new generalizations can emerge from a single case (2014), and in this instance, allowed the researchers to establish a deeper understanding of the lived realities of government contractor employees who are faced with constant organizational change.

About the case

A multi-site government contractor was chosen as the research site to better understand how employees at both sites perceive internal communication during organizational change. The government contractor has two sites, both of which are production focused and are working towards the same goal. The contract is made of member organizations that partnered together and created a limited liability company (LLC) to respond to the government’s request for proposals. A limited liability company is a private, US-specific company made up of member organizations; in other words, a loosely coupled consortium. Each member company is an expert in a particular area and by combining forces, the companies were able to win the contract. The latest contract welcomed a new leadership team including senior communication staff, organizational objectives and structure, and new internal audiences at the respective sites. The contract requires the management of the two sites, one in the
southeast and the other in the southwest. This means that the internal communication staff now has to create messaging for audiences at both sites, one of which is new. The multi-billion-dollar sites were founded in the 1940’s and have established reputations in the cities in which each resides as well as rich organizational cultures. The work accomplished at both sites is highly sensitive and top secret, which requires ambiguity in the case description to ensure confidentiality. Therefore, to protect the confidentiality and anonymity, the site in the southwest will be referred to as Peworks, and the southeast site will be called Yeworks.

Participants

The initial sample relied on a purposive approach to identify those participants who served as information-rich sources (Merriam, 2009). The preliminary participants included members of the communication team who oversee the internal and external communication for both locations. Following the communication staff interviews, respective site managers were included in the study. Sampling then transitioned to include many employees from both sites in various positions with varied tenure; they served as the participants for the focus groups. Next sampling took a theoretical approach, where the data collected determined who else should be included in the study (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). In this case, sampling continued by incorporating the C-suite executives and middle management.

In total, 77 people participated in the study, which demonstrates the depth of data collection. The focus groups had 56 participants, including 27 men and 29 women, in seven focus groups at the two sites with employee tenure ranging from two to 48 years. For the racial breakdown of focus group participants, 84% identified as white, 9% identified as Hispanic, and 7% identified as African American. Yeworks had four focus groups with 35 participants with an average tenure of 16 years, and participant positions included engineers, administrative staff, laborers, project managers, advisors, firefighters, technology directors and management specialists. Peworks had three focus groups with 21 participants with an average tenure of 18 years, and participant positions included schedulers, administrative staff, analysts, project managers, security specialists, safety officers, laborers, engineers and inspectors. Some participants were paid hourly including craftsmen and others received a salary like administrative staff and lower management. For interview data collection, there were 21 participants, including 10 men and 11 women with tenure ranging from three to 30 years. Given the size and variance of the total sample, it met maximum variation by including participants with varied ages, genders, positions, locations and tenures.

Data collection

Data was collected over three months in 2018 and included both interviews and focus groups to provide multiple evidence sources and triangulate the data. Both the focus groups and interviews used guides approved by the researchers’ Institutional Review Board. The questions for both guides were formulated from the research questions. Both guides used questions that prompted participants to share their personal experiences with internal communication during organizational change. Data collection terminated once saturation was achieved.

Interviews followed an informal process that began with rapport-building. The next portion of the interview included asking grand tour questions such as, “tell me about your professional background.” The questions then transitioned to ask more specifics regarding organizational change experiences and perceptions of internal communication. At many points, prompts were used to elicit more particulars from the participants. Of the 21 interviews, 17 were conducted in person at the organization, and four were completed over the phone. Two participants refused to be audio recorded, and in which case, the researchers took notes throughout the discussion to include their experiences in the study. Twelve members of the communication team, three site managers, two middle managers and four executives
The average interview was 50 minutes, and the range was 33–100 minutes. A professional, who was required to sign a confidentiality agreement, was hired to transcribe the 260 pages of data.

The focus groups also followed an informal process that began with rapport building through the use of an icebreaker activity. Questions then transitioned to more specifics about experiences with organizational change and internal communication during such times. Prompts were used to ask participants to expand on their personal stories or to contribute more to the conversation. All focus groups were conducted on site and lasted one hour to fit within the employees’ lunch break, which meant food and drinks were served. No other benefits were presented. Every focus group was audio recorded and later transcribed by the same professional who transcribed the interviews. The focus groups resulted in 144 pages of data. Once the transcripts were received, the researchers removed all organization identifiers from the data and used pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. In addition, data collection focused solely on the research questions regarding internal communication and organizational change and did not address any proprietary, top-secret information.

Data analysis
Data analysis followed an inductive approach, where all the transcripts were analyzed for developing themes, and the emergent categories were then adjusted and collapsed through additional analysis (Haley, 1996). Five stages were included in data analysis, and throughout, a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), NVivo for Mac, was used. In addition, the researchers relied on Excel to visualize theme development. Both software programs and transcripts were housed on a personal, password-protected computer. Using software ensured the trustworthiness of the data given its size. Stage one was where the researchers listened to the audio recordings alongside the transcripts to confirm accuracy. Stage two relied on open coding, where individual words and sentences were treated and analyzed equally (Miles et al., 2014), and those pertinent to the research questions received a code. Stage three focused on recognizing patterns in the codes and collapsing any codes that were repetitive. Stage four was where thematic development took place by building out the patterns in the codes. Stage five concentrated on asking questions of the data to certify that themes were not neglected and overlooked. Only one researcher completed stages two through four to ensure the quality of the data analysis. Stage five was completed by both researchers in debriefing sessions to enhance the confirmability of the findings.

Findings
Several themes emerged when it came to answering the two research questions: (1) How do employees of a consortium perceive the role of internal communication during a consortium’s formation? (2) How do barriers or enablers influence internal communication in a newly formed consortium? All major themes and subthemes are subsequently discussed and supported by participant quotes.

The perception of internal communication
The first research question focused on how employees perceive internal communication during a major change like forming a new consortium. Several participants in the interviews and focus groups discussed the role of internal communication content and personnel before, during and after the change. Most of the perceptions surrounding internal communication in the midst of such change were negative. For example, a focus group participant from Peworks said, “We have a lot of frustrated employees because of the communication issue.”

Yet, internal communication is paramount to work through forming a consortium. For example, a member of the executive team said, “We drive change in silos... and do not do a
good job planning for change. Have we planned these change initiatives to address the personal side? We’ve been terrible at it to date. Comms is a huge part of the people side.”

A focus group participant at Yeworks said, “We have to change the culture to value organizational change, which a big factor is communication.”

To modify some of the complaints and issues with internal communication during the forming of a consortium, participants suggested that instead of pushing information, the staff should consider listening. A Yeworks focus group participant said, “I think communication, this is almost trite, but needs to start with listening.” A member of the leadership team said, “I think we need to tap into them better, we need to convince them that they are part of the solution.” One communication team member suggested, “Communications ought to make sure employees are aware of the change that’s coming, give them any resources they need to do what they need to do after the change. I love it when we can provide a face/a name for questions, contacts, follow-up.” Another communication team member had a suggestion about when they should be involved in the change process and said, “So usually we are called about a week before they want to make the change. They tell us how they want to communicate. I do not think we are brought in early enough in the process.” In providing opportunities for listening, trust can be built throughout the formation process.

Managing internal communication to build trust. Trust emerged from the data as something that needed to be established at the beginning of forming the consortium via internal communication. As other studies have suggested, trust is vital before and during an organizational change (e.g., Morgan and Zeffane, 2003; Rousseau and Tijoriwala, 1999; Tucker et al., 2012), but these sources do not highlight the change context of consortia forming. One public affairs specialist said, “To improve the strategy for internal communication, is where I can see making great strides to build the trust...trust is the foundation.” According to the participants in this study, a foundation of trust creates emotional safety for employees, and without trust, that emotional security does not exist. One leadership team member articulated this and said, “Well that is something we are not good at, we do not give emotional safety. People do worry about their jobs a lot.” The communication errors made while establishing the consortium led to employees’ distrust of management and the organization, which created a disengaged workforce. One focus group participant from Peworks said, “[The errors] pulled me back and I said, you know what, I’ll go to work every day, do what is expected of me, and I’ll go home, that’s it.”

However, establishing trust is even more difficult in consortia because employees are expected to trust a management team that is new with a relationship that has yet to be established. Trust is built and earned over time. Yet, these changes happen more frequently than in other types of organizations. A member of the communications team for both sites described the experience of such change and said:

And it’s hard too, when contractors come in, right, and they say, “Gosh you guys have been doing things so wrong this whole time, this is how you should do it.” They want to change everything, right? These people have developed these things [Laugh] and then they just come in and say you’re doing it wrong. I'm sure that feels terrible every ten years, you know.

With the necessity of frequent change because of contract limitations, many employees experience several changes over the course of their career. Despite the inevitability and frequency of change, it is never easy, and often enough, trust can be lost throughout the process because of poor internal communication and the expectation that employees need to trust new colleagues and management as a result of the new loosely coupled consortium with little information. A focus group participant at Yeworks said, “There’s an emotional burden to every change.” Another focus group participant at the same site said, “They did not even show me on an org chart. Nobody could even tell me when I was going to see it, who I was going to work for.” One focus group participant from Peworks said, “And trust is not there.
Trust is almost gone.” The loss of trust among employees was an unintended consequence of consortia forming. Further discussion of internal communication and unanticipated consequences is next.

**Internal communication needs to anticipate unintended consequences.** The chance for miscommunication is inherent in all internal communication. Therefore, the internal communication strategy needs to anticipate the needs of audiences, especially during the change experience because room for misunderstanding exists. Misunderstanding can result in negative opinions of and experiences with the communication. For example, a member of the leadership team said, “You know, just however you think somebody can read something. There will be yet another way they can read it. . . . It never occurred to you that they could get that out of it. So, it’s a big challenge.” Another member of the leadership team recognized the chance for miscommunication, but clarified that the poor communication was not the intent. He said, “Not with any ill intent, it’s just that the good intention does not follow through to the extent that we have that effective communications.”

However, what is unique to the case of consortia is that the miscommunication is a result of an unknown internal audience. The unknown internal audience is a result of the loosely coupled consortium being formed from multiple organizations, where a segment of the internal audience is new. As mentioned previously, change happens quickly and frequently, sometimes overnight. This means, that the very next day, internal communication staff are tasked with communicating to internal audiences from the other consortium member organization(s) that have yet to be researched and understood, which means abstract communication is disseminated that may not meet employees’ needs. The unknown audience forces the internal communication staff into “survival mode” as described by a communications manager. To navigate this survival mode, unintended consequences need to be anticipated by being proactive. One participant from Peworks summed it up well and said, “If you’re afraid of what the consequences are for being proactive, you’re never going to be able to get out of the reactive stage.” Part of being proactive would be immediately welcoming in diverse voices and perspectives across the organization to start defining the internal audiences and crafting messages that are employee-centric.

Given the negative perceptions and experience with internal communication, it is only appropriate to explore the reasons why consortia face so many barriers and what resources or enablers are available to overcome those issues.

**Barriers and enablers of internal communication**

The second research question addressed the inhibitors and enablers of internal communication while forming a consortium. In this case, the two major barriers include communicating about the loosely coupled company culture and handling rearward-looking employees. One enabler that emerged from the data included providing information as to why the change was taking place, which could serve as a resource to overcome the aforementioned barriers. All themes are discussed next and supported by participant quotes.

**Communicating company culture.** The complexity of this specific case was compounded by the fact that two sites, in two locations, became one in the change process. In other words, the organization went from a single entity and independently operating to a loosely coupled consortium almost overnight. Interestingly enough, employees are very loyal to the sites, not the parent companies that manage the sites. As one communication manager explained, “They say, ‘I work for [Yeworks]. I do not work for [government contractor].’” This could be explained by the frequent turnover of contractors every five to ten years, which leads to the development of a new consortium. When the two sites were placed under the umbrella of one contractor, many employees felt as though their site had an identity crisis. For example, one focus group participant at Peworks said, “There are other things that I thought at transition
we did poorly and, if I may, we did not have an identity.” This made adapting to the change difficult for employees at both sites. A member of the management team said, “The main thing on the communications with them is just getting people over the culture change.” A focus group participant at Yeworks referred to the new company as being “a forced marriage...now we have a stepfamily.” Therefore, the first barrier to overcome was managing and communicating about two deeply-embedded cultures that were different and site specific to an audience that was unknown and lacked familiarity.

From an internal communication perspective, this required taking both sites into account when drafting content to try to meet employees’ needs. As a communication manager for Yeworks said:

So, it’s this kind of change at [Yeworks] and this kind of change at [Peworks]. So, cannot just have one size communications. You have to have site-specific communications because there’s a lot, I think, there’s a lot of “I do not care what [Yeworks] is doing” and [Peworks] is saying, “I do not care about what [Yeworks] is doing.” So, that can be challenging.

Similarly, a public affairs specialist said, “You’ve got to understand how people are processing it. They would tell us things and you maybe do not understand, some of them might be offensive to a [Peworks employee] but not to a [Yeworks employee] just because of our different cultures, and I’m not sure that was considered.”

**Rearward looking employees.** The second barrier for internal communication was a tendency for some employees to be rearward looking. One member of the leadership team described this group and said, “They will talk about, ‘how much better it was 5 years, I remember when, or we used to, or why cannot we, or it was so much better when.’” Another leadership team member referred to this demographic as the “we-bes.” Specifically, he said, “We call it the we-be syndrome. We’ve been here since before you came and we’ll be here when you go.” This group will “hold out the entire time we’re here, knowing someone else is coming,” said a communications manager. Because of the amount of change this group has experienced as career employees, they attempt to not assimilate to and engage with the current changes by outlasting the current consortium. Therefore, this we-be syndrome is a challenge for the internal communication staff who are trying to create employee buy-in.

**Providing the why.** Both management and non-management employees shared that the most meaningful content during consortium creation is providing “the why” instead of describing “what” is going to happen, which is an internal communication enabler. From the non-management employees’ perspective, the why is not well communicated? This is an issue of addressing an unknown internal audience; the communication staff does not always know who they were talking to so it is difficult to craft meaningful messages. A focus group participant from Peworks said, “I do not know what’s coming. Why are you doing that? Could it be better?” Another participant from Peworks said, “After the transition, things are done and just announced once in [the intranet] and it’s gospel.” A focus group participant from Yeworks said, “We’re very intelligent and if they had explained why it was important to make certain changes, if they had done it in a timely manner...We’re part of the team, so we want to understand why certain plays are being called.” Another focus group participant from Yeworks said, “We’re told mostly what to do but not why we’re doing it, and we need to change that.”

The paradox is that while employees crave to better understand the why, and management knows that is important, the leadership team admittedly does not communicate the why message effectively. One leadership team member said, “We jump to the what and not the why, and we do not get the buy-in.” Other leadership team members shared similar thoughts by saying, “The ‘why’ is the most important part. We do a terrible job of that,” and “you have to explain the why. But we are so new at it; we are not very good. So, we usually stub our toes when we make a change; we surprise people with it.” To compensate for others’
lack of skills in this area, one leadership team member suggested, “I choose to provide the perspective of the why because it seems like many are not comfortable doing that. They are very comfortable writing what...the power is in the why and not the what.”

Successfully communicating why changes are occurring is essential to enabling internal communication and ensuring the newly-formed consortium will be successful. If not, the rumor mill begins to churn and employees start to fill in the gaps. As one member of the management team said, “If there is a lack of information, they will make it up, and if the message isn’t clear, they will interpret it in the most negative way possible.”

Discussion
The findings from this case study provide insight into the role of internal communication through the process of forming a consortium. Successful internal communication practices are imperative during major organizational change because they inform employees of the events surrounding the change and about what to expect, which helps reduce the anxiety and uncertainty that naturally underpin such unsettling times (Van Dam et al., 2008). Effective internal communication practices are even more important for consortia like government contractors since employees of these organizations are guaranteed to experience frequent change. Therefore, communicating to the unknown audience, building trust in the absence of a prior connection, and preparing for the unintended consequences are imperative in navigating the complex forming a consortium and cultivating employee buy-in.

Communicating to the unknown audience
Overall, most the participants’ views in this case were negative regarding internal communication, which illustrates the issues that accompany poorly executed internal communication. Although internal communication is required to navigate consortia forming, it can be a hindrance if it is not strategically executed. The negative sentiment around internal communication was attributed to the lack of employee-centric communication. Employee-centric communication was not possible because a segment of the internal audience was undefined and unknown. This issue led to the dissemination of broad and simple information that was not meaningful. When internal communication is crafted and dispersed to everyone, the messages reach no one.

In addition, internal communication needs to strategically address the new culture. When employees identify with the organization and its culture, it not only leads to believing in the change but also supporting and advocating for the change (Neill et al., 2020). Even though both sites still operate as they did before the contract change, the sites are now under one parent consortium, which means a new culture is created with new rules and norms, and internal communication should be used to create transparency and understanding about the new culture. This means listening and taking into consideration audience preferences for channels and content. When listening is valued, internal communication transitions to meaningful content and dialogic exchanges versus the actual processes, which tend to champion the volume of communication and channels used (Ruck and Welch, 2012).

Although listening is considered best practices, Vercić and Sporičarić (2020) found that most organizations take a one-way approach and still do not dedicate time and resources to better understand employee channel preferences, and the consortia setting is no exception. However, the process for identifying employee communication preferences is complicated by the unknown internal audience, where research cannot be conducted on the front end due to lack of time and resources available during the consortium forming.

The complexity of the unknown internal audience is unique to consortia since the majority of other organizations do not experience the same frequency and depth of change. We offer a definition of the unknown internal audience. Specifically, we define the unknown internal
audience as a group of employees who need to be communicated with, yet they are difficult to address since it is hard to assume who they are, what they know, what they need to know, and how they will respond. Defining this audience is the first step for practitioners to learn how to develop and disseminate meaningful internal communication.

Building trust is hard in the absence of connection

Trust was not built for two reasons. First, a connection with management was not established due to a leadership that was new and unfamiliar. In forming consortia, management do not have the ability to leisurely establish relationships. Instead, the change happens quickly, limiting the building connection time. Second, there were issues with poor and ineffective internal communication. Yue et al. (2019) found that employees rely heavily on what their managers and organizations’ say and do to navigate the change; when trust is present, the more open employees will be toward the change. Contrarily, when words and actions are not just, fair, and competent, trust is hard to build, and employees have a negative reaction to the change (2019). The aforementioned issues led to a lack of trust, where employees lost psychological safety and became fearful of all changes thereafter, which threatened their willingness to engage. Kahn’s (1990) original employee engagement model discussed the psychological conditions that determine whether someone is willing to engage. Specifically, psychological safety results when employees feel enough trust that leads them to show their true selves without fear of potential negative repercussions.

This study demonstrates the value of establishing psychological safety through internal communication to create a trusting environment in the midst of establishing a consortium is paramount for employees to continue to engage. One specific suggestion for building trust is adapting Tucker et al’s (2012) social accounts to this context. Specifically, incorporating ideological accounts, which were argued to be the most effective in improving trust because the focus is on explaining “why” the change occurred. Social accounts have been taken into consideration in the field of psychology, but would also provide benefit to public relations practitioners who are tasked with communicating about organizational change, and therefore, need to understand the value of expressing why a change occurred in all internal communication. Communicating messages regarding the why also provides an opportunity to deliver meaningful content to an unknown audience. The why content will help fill in the gap while diverse voices are being welcomed into the conversation and strategic communication is developing. Such insights contribute to the growing body of knowledge around teleworking (Walden, 2019), where traditional ways of building connection and trust are hard to create.

Preparing for the unintended consequences

The above discussion highlights that using internal communication to build trust and communicate culture is necessary throughout the process of forming a consortium. If this does not occur on the front end of the process, then the newly formed organization may have an internal crisis on its hands. Despite being classified as a loosely coupled organization, the consortium in this case lacked the mechanisms of HROs, demonstrating a need for stronger internal communication programming to ensure resiliency and fluidity in the midst of change.

Therefore, we argue that consortium forming should be about preparing for the unknown. In doing so, the loosely coupled organization would adopt the mechanisms found in HROs. These mechanisms would prompt the consortium to ensure resiliency, learn from mistakes, and become fluid in decision-making (Weick et al., 1999). By nature, government contractors will be averse to welcoming the unknown since the nature of the work often involves a higher level of risk. Resources are dedicated to intense safety measures to eliminate risk to the
greatest extent possible. The shift to preparing for unintended consequences during the formation of a consortium will require a shift in management perspectives and actions. In welcoming a fluid strategy, internal communication practitioners prepare for the unknown. This includes addressing the unknown internal audience since the organizational restructuring resulted in new employee audiences. This also means that practitioners need to welcome diverse perspectives throughout the organization. Although management leads and oversees the change, diversity in opinions and insights from the entire organization is needed to navigate the unknown. When listening is valued, internal communication transitions into meaningful content and dialogic exchanges, where the goal is to come alongside employees before, during, and after the change journey.

Conclusion
This paper adds insight into the interdependence of internal communication and organizational change by providing insight into an understudied context, consortia. This study presents new, transferable knowledge of internal communication during consortia forming, where to be successful, internal communication needs anticipate the unintended consequences and develop a strategy around the uncertainty. Such strategy is about welcoming diverse voices and actively listening to their preferred communication needs. This approach helps build connection, which leads to trust. Due to the limited research that exists in embracing an unknown audience and how to develop a corresponding internal communication strategy, more studies are needed to further investigate this unique context. Specifically, studies that capture the practitioners experience in communicating to unknown internal audiences would be helpful in moving internal communication scholarship forward. From a practical standpoint, for those organizations faced with repeated change, the internal communication staff need to be prepared to manage the unknown by creating internal communication strategies that focus on situations where employees may not be receptive to the change or the content surrounding the change.

References


Further reading

Corresponding author
Laura L. Lemon can be contacted at: lemon@apr.ua.edu

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