

The Role of Indigenous Languages in successful Change Management: The Igbo Language Example

By

Chinweude N. Ugochukwu & Christian E.C. Ogwudile

cn.ugochukwuchinweude@unizik.edu.ng/ cec.ogwudile@unizik.edu.ng

Department of Igbo, African and Asian Studies

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Abstract

Life is all about change. Accomplishing anything great in life requires significant change that pushes one beyond comfort zones. In an era of uncertainty, the capability to change is now the difference between surviving and thriving. Organisations and people that do not embrace change are bound to lose ground and stagnate. Change management is an organisational process aimed at helping employees to understand, commit to, accept and embrace changes in their current business environment. Change is important in organisations to allow employees to learn new skills, explore new opportunities and exercise their creativity in ways that ultimately benefit the organisation through new ideas and increased commitment. Change is often resisted by organisational members. Resistance to change is normal and inevitable and management must be ready to respond to it. The primary reason for resistance is that change requires employees to alter their existing individual and organisational identities. It is not easy to change attitudes and relationships; they are deeply rooted in organisations and people. Hence, this paper investigates the role of indigenous language in successful change management; it also explores the impact of the use of indigenous language on subordinates. The paper presented and interpreted one creation story. The result shows that Igbo creation stories embedded in Igbo folklore is a veritable instrument for successful change management. The study advocates the use of stories embedded in Igbo language for effective change.

1.1 Introduction

Change is the process of replacing something with something new or different. It is the process of becoming different. It is to form a new opinion or make a new decision about something that is different from the old one. Change could also involve improving the bad parts of one's behaviour. It is the process of causing a function, practice, or thing to become different somehow compared to what it is at present or what it was in the past. Philips (1992) observes that everything in the universe, from human relationships to high energy particle interactions is participating in a ceaseless process of change guided by simple, yet universal patterns. We deal with changes every day and in different ways, it affects each of us differently. Change is important for any organisation because without change, business would likely lose their competitive edge and fail to meet the need of what most hope to be a growing base of royal customers (Leigh 1980).

Change management is a systematic approach to dealing with change both from the perspective of an organisation and the individual. It involves thinking and planning for the future, whilst giving a realistic assessment of the present. Basically, it refers to an approach for planning, guiding, and executing the process of change from where organisations are to where they want to be. To successfully implement change initiatives, organisational leaders must identify the need for change and communicate it throughout the organisation (Rick 2014). This is to say that successful change management involves the employee and one of the key strategies that can be used to overcome employees' resistance to change is clearly and consistently communicate about the change well in advance of its implementation. Communication is one important step in change management that must not be neglected. It is the exchange of information by speaking, writing or by using other means. Language is a method of human communication, either spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in a structured and conventional way.

An indigenous language is a language that is native to a region and spoken by indigenous people often reduced to the status of minority language. Indigenous languages are tribal, native or local languages spoken. It is a language from a linguistically distinct community that has been settled in the area for many generations.

The study explores and advocates the use of indigenous language in communicating the vision of change in a simple and clear manner in order to appeal and influence the people strongly in implementing decisions. The study collected and interpreted one creation story to justify its capability in generating successful change management.

1.2 The need and benefits of Change

Wilson and Tozzi (2012:13) believe that the great constant in the universe is change; and it will happen whether we want it or not. Change is part of life and one can learn and grow from it. Life will always be changing; we face something new every moment of the day. We need to embrace the changes life has in store for us.

Change is inevitable and necessary these days in order for business and organisations to survive and thrive. Accomplishing anything great in life requires significant change that pushes one beyond ones comfort zones. Many times, the only way to improve one's life is to force one to undergo difficult change. If one doesn't change, one does not grow, when one doesn't grow, one is not really living (Sheely 2017). The need for change starts with a familiar problem diagnosis and solution content section that neatly describes the key problems facing almost every business and how to address them.

Corrigan (2012) identifies the following as pointers to the need for a change in an organisation: The rise of the complaint culture; the growing risk of reputation exposure; declining staff moral; the growing demand for instant gratification. Corrigan is of the view that when an organisation is experiencing two or more of the points above, it is clear evidence that there is urgent need for a change. Change should be viewed as a positive aspect of life which is unavoidable and necessary for tangible progress.

Individuals, if they are to survive, need to adjust to circumstances and events around them. To go beyond mere survival, to grow and develop, they need to make major adjustments to

overcome challenge. Groups on the other hand need to develop, mature and adjust to both internal and external changes. For organisations, it is much the same; unless they adapt to changed circumstances and take on new directions, they are likely to fail and fade away. Changes are mandatory as they help the organisation to stay competitive. Change brings about personal growth and development.

At times of change, employees learn a number of new things and they grow new insights, improvements can be achieved through changes which include flexibility in job descriptions, cross-training employees and formulation of work teams in a specialized manner are ones that enhance the productivity of the organisation. New skills are mastered by the employees in order to accomplish new duties after changes are introduced. Employees can also involve themselves to take classes on specific skills where they can obtain tuition reimbursement for the same. Change is beneficial, so employees must be prepared and ready to face the battle that happens regarding change

1.3 Resistance to Change

Despite the fact that change is implemented for positive reasons like adapting to volatile environment conditions and remaining competitive; Boohene & Williams (2012) observe that organisational members often react to change efforts negatively and resist change. Murphy (2016) opines that one of the biggest obstacles in getting people to move with the change into the future state is that the present state is usually fairly comfortable. If people don't understand why they need to change, they would not change. People differ with regard to their perception towards change; some of them may consider change with a lower tolerance; some others will embrace change initiatives readily and move it while others will fight the change to the death with denying its necessity (Carnall, 1999 & Burke 2008).

People fear change at workplace for variety of reasons. Armenakis & Bedeian (1999) maintain that the main reason behind the negative reaction is due to pressure, stress and uncertainty coming with change. These fears are often associated with fear of failure, fear of success, fear of rejection, fear of criticism and fear of the unknown. Stressing further, Weston (2015) reiterates that it is perfectly normal to feel fear and be unsettled with change; it is normal human behaviour when one does not feel totally in control and certain about the future. People resist change because they don't have sufficient input in shaping those initiatives. Most times they lack the tools, the language and the forums in which to express legitimate concerns about the design and implementation of change projects. Sravani (2016) identifies the following reasons as why people resist change: Fear of failure, habituation to that same routine, seeing change as unnecessary and disruptive. Concurring to the afore mentioned views, Mullins (2005) affirms that people may exhibit fear and anxiety over such matters like job security, employment levels, loss of job satisfaction, different wage rates, loss of individual control over work and changes to work conditions. Elaborating on why organisational member resist change, Adenle (2011) identifies twelve reasons why people resist change : loss of job, bad communication strategy, shock and fear of the unknown, loss of control, lack of competence, poor timing, lack of reward, office politics, former change experience, empathy and peer pressure, lack of trust and support. Fine (1986) concludes that human beings tend to resist change even when change represents growth and development...[and will lead to] greater efficiency and productivity. From the ongoing, it is

clear that change is part of life process and people react to change in different ways. Most of the reasons why people resist change are justifiable.

1.4 Models of change

Change management models are useful as they describe and simplify a process for a better understanding and application of the principles. There are different change models namely: ADKAR- the Prosci change model, Kotter's-8-Step Model, Stephen Covey- 7 Habbit Model, Kobler Ross-Stages of Change, Kurt Lewin- freeze phases, Beckhard-the change equation etc. Here two models are presented to highlight the need to focus on the people affected by the change hence the need for proper communication.

Prosci's ADKAR model

A - Make each individual **Aware** of the need to change.

D - Ensure each individual has the **Desire** to change.

K - Ensure each person has the Knowledge in order to implement the change.

A - Ensure they have the **Ability** to change.

R - Ensuring the change is **Reinforced**; sustain the change by making sure that people are continuing to implement the changes.

The second model is **John Kotters' 8 steps to successful change**:

Step 1- Establish a sense of urgency. If we don't change, we will fail.

Step 2- Create a guiding coalition. "We can decide how this change will happen."

Step 3- Create the vision of the change. "This is what the change will accomplish."

Step 4- Communicate the vision, "Hey every one! This is what the change will accomplish."

Step 5- Empower and enable action for the vision. "I'm giving you the authority and resources necessary to accomplish the vision".

Step 6- Get quick wins. "Look at what we've accomplished so far! We're on the right track!"

Step 7- Build on the change and consolidate wins "let's take what we've done so far and make it even better."

Step 8- Institutionalize the change (Make it stick).

This change has really improved our project/service/organisation. Let's continue to do this.

It is clear that with both models, there is quite a bit of communication and more emphasis on the people involved rather than the technology involved.

1.5 Change Management and Communication

Part of the fear of change is the unknown. There is need to communicate change effectively. In order to accept change in the work place, the employees must be communicated about the vision and strategies. It requires motivation and communication to take on another perspective than the existing one.

Bolin (2017) observes that despite all different approaches, there is a high rate of failure in change projects. Kotter (1993) attributes the reasons for failure to lack of visions, failure in making the employees committed and to underestimate the role of culture. Communication can serve many functions during change initiatives including: information sharing, participation, vision and motivation, social support, evaluation.

For implementing a change programme successfully, communication is the key and one of the most complex parameters as it involves an exchange of ideas and feelings with people in an organisation through mediums. Communication is an important aspect to be considered in times of change. Fear vanishes when people communicate well.

According to Grafton (2017) when it comes to change, there is nothing like over communication. It is the duty of the manager to discuss changes in a positive aspect and in an exciting manner. Changes such as new structures, policies, targets, acquisitions, disposals, etc all create new systems and environments, which need to be explained to people as early as possible, so that people's involvement in validating and refining the changes themselves can be obtained (Rick 2014). Emphasizing the need for communication, Rick stresses that whenever an organisation imposes new things on people, there will be difficulties. Participation, involvement and open, early, full communications are the important factors.

Change can make people uncertain and anxious causing them to lose sight of planned benefits. This is why Grafton underscores the importance of the consultation process, ensuring that leaders work to develop peoples understanding of change, as well as gathering valuable insights in their teams. Going further he argues that people need to know what a project will mean to them personally, how it will make their life better or more interesting or yes even whether it may result in their losing their job. With that level of personal impact on the line, it is crucial for leaders to talk with and listen to their people as early as possible, using carefully considered channels and languages to actively seek their input and feedback. Effective Change Management enables one to keep communications flowing, during and after implementation and across all levels of one's business.

1.6 Language and Effective Communication

Language has a huge role to play in the bedding-in of new ways of doing things. Language is a system of communication based upon words and communication of words into sentences. It is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols (Sapir 1921). Language is a means of communication which allows greater flexibility in expressing information and discussing ideas. It gives one the ability to be far more informative and expressive. Language is the ability to acquire and use complex systems of communication, particularly the human ability

to do so and, a language is any specific example of such system. Language is a construct of communication. It is a system of grammar, meaning, sounds, that is standardised enough to be used by two people to convey information to one another. Languages are humankind's principle tools for interacting and for expressing ideas, emotions, knowledge, memories and values.....(UNESCO). It is language that gives our thinking form, sequence and coherence and it is by means of language that we give substance to our thought. We think in language and effective thinking is not possible unless linguistic competence is adequate enough to realise and express ideas. The key difference between language and communication is that language is a mode of communication. In other words, language is a medium used in transforming the message from one to another.

From results of research, it is clear that one if not the best strategy to successfully implement change is communication. Also the two models of change presented in this paper shows that communication is an important step in change management process. Communication itself is all about passing and receiving of information and effective communication is only possible through language. Language, as Kiya (2008) views it, is used to communicate ideas, to put questions, to process their answers, to provide feed backs, to elaborate... etc. It is also used to comprehend, to follow instructions, to convey ideas, to relate to others, to demonstrate understanding.

In order to accept change in the workplace, the employees must be communicated about the vision and strategies. For maximum comprehension, the vision and strategies should be communicated in a language that the employees (those affected by the change) understand very well.

Based on research results, this paper advocates the use of indigenous language in communicating the message of change in an organization. This is based on the potentials of indigenous language. When Indigenous languages are used as research results have shown, many scholars have contended that it is capable of enhancing cognitive understanding and removing pedagogical barriers in learning. Some of these researches include:

1. The Native American Language Research
2. The University of Bradford Research.
3. The Ife six year primary project and
4. The Swahili Research.

As suggested in Management Study Guide (2017) "For implementing a change program successfully, communication is the key and one of the most complex parameters as it involves an exchange of ideas and feeling with people in an organization through various mediums". The message which is being sent by the individuals must be clear and vividly presented. The recipient of the message must listen attentively, ask questions for clarification and share feedback on the interpretation of the message. Heathfield (2016) sees the people side of change as the most important in a change process hence she suggests "Deal with the people involved in the change process with patience, gentle humour, grace, persistence, pragmatism, respect, understanding and support." For a successful organizational change management programme, the stakeholders involvement and acceptance in the entire change process is very important. For this, the stakeholders must be made well informed about the purpose or the objectives of change and they should be provided an opportunity to share their own ideas in the process of implementation of a change program. Ezeikeojiaku (2007:114) observes that

people think more productively in their indigenous language. Also research has proven that if a change is implemented in a consultative and open manner it results in much effective outcomes in the entire programme. On this note, the paper views indigenous language as the best instrument for passing the message of change across in an organizational setting.

1.7 The role of Igbo language in successful change management

Igbo language is one of the indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria. The language abounds in different figurative expressions such as idioms, proverbs, folktales. These figurative expressions can be subtly used to appeal to people to buy into any change. The study shares Kotter (1993) view that one major reason for high rate of failure in change project is due to failure in communicating the vision and failure in making the employers committed. To achieve commitment and engagement from people in change projects one need to focus much more on what motivates people intrinsically. The change management facilitator must therefore inspire and create intrinsic motivation among people by building on their own values.

Folklore is the traditional beliefs and stories of a community that have passed down from one generation to the other through word of mouth. In every culture, folklore plays a significant role in the preservation of the norms and values of traditional societies. It incorporates folktales, myths, legends, beliefs, practices, superstitions. People make sense of their surrounding world through the usage of folklore, thus the various superstitions, stories, beliefs all add up to the creation of their cultural heritage. Igbo folklore, embedded in the Igbo language can conveniently be used in motivating the people intrinsically thereby arousing commitment and engagement. They embody value systems and norms which are used in the traditional Igbo society to inculcate values in their children. The language of folklore can be used to influence, entice and engage the people affected by the change. Some folktales portray animals gathering and discussing issues which affect them as a group with argument and discussion used to highlight democratic process and the importance of unity and agreement in society (Shoniwa 2013). They demonstrate the importance of making difficult decisions under challenging circumstances. Change can make people uncertain and anxious, causing them to lose sight of planned benefits. That is why Grafton (2017) emphasizes the importance of consultation process, ensuring that leaders work to develop people's understanding of change, thus in his words; "It is crucial for leaders to talk with and listen to their people as early as possible, using carefully considered channels and language to actively seek their input and feedback." This paper shares the same view adding that the use of folklore which abounds in Igbo language is capable of making the desired impact on the people involved in the organisational change. In the present paper, only one creation story in the Igbo language will be presented and interpreted to justify their credibility in successful change management.

The origin of death (English version of Igbo creation story)

One day God threatened to destroy the world. All mankind was afraid and assembled to decide how to prevent this disaster. During the meeting there arose two opposing groups. One group said that men should not die at all. The other group said that Death was necessary as long as people died one after another. After endless arguments on both sides, God rose in

anger and said that He would destroy everybody unless mankind reached an agreement within the next two days.

It was clear to mankind that they could not agree. Each group decided it would present its case to God. The group that did not want Death at all decided to send their memorandum through the Dog. The opposing group chose the Tortoise as their agent.

It would be a long journey for the Dog and the Tortoise. To reach God's kingdom they had to travel across seven seas and seven deserts. Those who did not want Death were confident that the Dog would be the first to reach God since he was faster than the Tortoise.

As soon as the signal was given, the Dog dashed off amidst the cheers of those who did not want Death. At midday he entered the bush where he sought animal dung for his belly. The Tortoise went slowly but steadily. Not once did he stop to eat or drink.

The Tortoise reached God's kingdom before the Dog. He tapped at God's door and as soon as he was greeted delivered his message. God accepted it and agreed that Death should take people one after another.

Meanwhile the Dog, who had fallen asleep after a heavy lunch, had stirred and was hurrying to God's kingdom. But he arrived after God had decided that Death should take men. No matter how he begged, God would not accept his message.

Since that day Death has been taking men one after another.

Lessons from the story:

1. There will always be disagreement where there are two or more people but one should always learn to accommodate each other. The issue of change is capable of raising dust in an organisation, but it can be managed and settled through proper communication of the vision of change.
2. Matters of urgency should not be treated with laissez-faire attitude. The dog did not understand the urgency of the message he was carrying, that was why he decided to satisfy his personal desire first. That was also why, despite his being a fast animal, the tortoise that is very sluggish got to God first and delivered his message. The issue of change in most cases demands urgent attention, just as God gave men two days to agree on something. If the issue of change is not urgently handled, it may result in serious problems (see 1.2).
3. The failure of one person can bring serious negative effect on the society in general. An organisation is like a body with different parts. If one part fails, other parts will also feel the negative impact.
4. Patience and endurance exhibited by the tortoise are good values to imbibe. Relating this lesson to organisational need for change, change may bring some level of pain and discomfort but it does not always last. One should be prepared to cope with the demands of change when the need arises.

The above stories can be used in an organisational setting to gain attention, motivate and engage members of organisation in a time of brainstorming. Sharing the stories in Igbo language will lead to critical thinking which according to Ezikeojiaku (2007) is best done in

one's mother tongue. The use of these stories allows people to share their views and make their contributions towards the success of the organisation based on the lessons in the story.

1.8 Conclusion

Change is part of life and inevitable. Change programmes are most successful when a strong sense of commitment and urgency to deliver real and lasting change has been developed. The study explores and advocates the use of indigenous languages in communicating the vision of change in a simple and clear manner in order to appeal and influence the people strongly in implementing decisions. As Murphy (2016) rightly predicts, "When people know why they need to change, where they are going and how they can get there they are going to be a lot more likely to buy-in and join you on the journey". The paper concludes that using Igbo folktales in communicating the vision and strategies of change leads to people oriented approach and it enables more flexibility, innovation and creativity among the stakeholders. Workers get more involved in the implementation of the change process thereby boosting workers potentials and liberty to express themselves freely.

References

- Adenle, C. (2011) 12 reasons why employees Resist change in the workplace. <http://catherinescareercorner.com/2011/07/26/12-reasons-why-employeee-resist-change-in-the-workplace>.
- ADKAR: A Model for change in Business, Government and our community by Jeffrey Hiatt Prosci Learning Center Publications; 1 Aug. 2006. <https://www.prosci.com>. Accessed 19/04/2017
- Armenakis, A & Bedenian, A.(1999) Organizational change: A review of theory and research in the 1990s. *Journal of Management* 2(3) 293-315.
- Bolin, M., (2017). "A narrative approach to change management. https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/wbs/conf/olkc/archive/oklc5/paper/b-3-bolin_pdf. Accessed 19/04/2017.
- Boohene, R & Williams A.A. (2012). Resistance to organizational change: A case study of Oti Yeboah Complex Limited. *International Business and Management*, 4(1), 135-145.
- Burke, W.W. (2008). *Organizational change: Theory and practice*. London: Sage.
- Carnall, C. (1999). *Managing change in organization* London: Prentice Hall.
- Corrigan, S. (2012). The need for change. www.triarchypress.net/the-need-for-change.html. Accessed 12/04/2017.

- Ezikeojiaku, P.A (2007). "Indigenous languages for science and technology". In B.N. Anasiudu et al (eds). *Language and literature in developing countries*. Onitsha: African- First Publishers Ltd.
- Fine, S.F. (1986) Technological innovation diffusion and resistance: A historical perspective. *Journal of Library Administration* 7(Spring) 83-108.
- Grafton (2017) "Change Management: Strategies, Frameworks, Plans. Change Management-Grafton.html. Retrieved 19/04/2017.
- Heathfield, S.M. (2016). Change management tips. <https://www.thebalance.com>. Retrieved 19/04/2017
- Kiya, B. (2008). The language gap: The role of indigenous languages in schools. www.qilac.org.au. Retrieved 12/5/2017.
- Kotter, J.P. (1995). Leading change: Why transformation effort fail. *Harvard Business Review* 1995: 59-67. <https://www.kotterinternational.com>. Retrieved 19/04/2017.
- Kreitner, R. & Kinicki , A. (2010). *Organizational behaviour* (Ninth edition). New York: McGraw-Hill Irwin.
- Leigh, R. (1980). Why is change important in an organisation. [http:// small business. Chron.com/change-important-organisation- 728.Html](http://smallbusiness.chron.com/change-important-organisation-728.html). Retrieved 29/3/2017
- Mulins, L. J. (2005). *Management and organizational*. Harlow, England: New York: Prentice Hall/Financial Times.
- Murphy, M. (2016). 3 stages of successful change management. [www.forbes.com/sites/markmurph/.../3 stages of successful-change-management](http://www.forbes.com/sites/markmurph/.../3-stages-of-successful-change-management). Accessed 12/04/2017.
- MSG - Management Study Guide: Importance of Communication in Change Management 2017. [https://www.managementstudyguide.com/importance-of-communication in-change-management.htm](https://www.managementstudyguide.com/importance-of-communication-in-change-management.htm). Accessed 12/04/2017.
- Philip (1992) Universal patterns of change. <https://www.spiriteye.com>. Accessed 19/04/2017.
- Rick, T. (2011). Top 12 reasons why people resist change. <https://www.torbenrick.eu/blog/change-management/12-reasons-why-people-resist-change/> Retrieved 19/04/2017.
- Rick, T. (2014). Successful change management involves the employees. Accessed from <https://www.torbenrick.eu/t/r/xcr>. Accessed 19/04/2017.
- Sapir E (1921). *Language: An introduction to the study of speech*. Harcourt, Brace and company.
- Schein, E.H. (1980). *Organizational psychology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Sheely, G. (2017). https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/gailsheehy_161346.html. Retrieved 29/03/2017.

- Shoniwa, K. (2013). Why folktales are important. [www.herald.co.zw>why-folk-ales-are-important](http://www.herald.co.zw/why-folk-ales-are-important). Accessed 24/6/2017.
- UNESCO - Extinction of languages, erosion of cultures. <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/~alvar22n/Disappearing-Languages/Welome-Home.html>. Retrieved 29/03/2017.
- Weston, B. (2015). 10 tips for Dealing with change positively in your workplace. Accessed 12/4/17 from <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/10-tips-dealing-change-positively-your-workplace-ban-weston>.
- Wilson, A.P.,and Tozzi, R. (2013). Continuous change management. *Army logistician*, Vol.34, Issue.