Effect of Communication Skills on Acceptance Level of Change Management Strategy in Organizations: A Case Study of MTN and Coca-Cola Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of communication skills as a critical component in determining the acceptance level of change management strategies in organizations, with a case study focus on MTN and Coca-Cola Nigeria. In today's dynamic and competitive business environment, organizations continuously embark on changes across nearly every dimension of their operations, from leadership transitions and structural restructuring to technological upgrades and policy shifts, in order to remain relevant and maintain competitive advantage. While the rationale behind such changes is generally aimed at improving organizational performance, many change initiatives encounter significant resistance from employees and other stakeholders due to poor or inadequate communication. This study argues that effective communication skills are not merely supplementary to change management but are foundational to its success.

Through a qualitative and exploratory approach drawing on both primary and secondary data, the research examines how MTN and Coca-Cola Nigeria have leveraged internal communication tools and established change management frameworks, including Lewin's Change Management Model, Kotter's 8-Step Model, the ADKAR Model, and the Shannon-Weaver Communication Model, to foster transparency, reduce resistance, and enhance organizational cohesion during periods of change. It is acknowledged that communication operates alongside other important factors including organizational culture, leadership effectiveness, employee trust, and resource availability, all of which interact with communication practices in shaping change acceptance outcomes. The findings reveal that strategic communication facilitates smoother transitions by aligning organizational objectives with change initiatives, reducing uncertainty, and building employee confidence. The study concludes that organizations investing in structured, transparent, and timely communication during change processes achieve significantly higher rates of employee buy-in, reduced operational disruption, and sustained performance improvements.

Keywords: communication skills, change management, acceptance level, organizational resistance, operational efficiency

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

In today's fast-paced and competitive business world, organizations face constant pressure to adapt, whether through leadership transitions, structural restructuring, technological adoption, or strategic reorientation. While such changes are generally designed to improve performance and achieve strategic objectives, they frequently generate uncertainty, resistance, and disruption among employees and other internal stakeholders if not managed with deliberate care. Change, in any form, carries inherent risks: without effective coordination and communication, even well-intentioned organizational transitions can lead to confusion, reduced productivity, and damaged morale.

The management of change is therefore not simply a technical or procedural exercise; it is fundamentally a human and communicative one. Organizations that fail to communicate the purpose, scope, and benefits of change clearly and consistently to those affected tend to encounter far greater resistance than those that invest in transparent and empathetic communication strategies. Employees who understand why a change is happening, what it means for their roles, and how it will be implemented are substantially more likely to cooperate with and actively support the transition. When communication is absent or inadequate, employees rely on informal channels, rumors, and speculation, which tend to amplify anxiety and resistance.

This reality is particularly evident in large, complex organizations like MTN Nigeria and Coca-Cola Nigeria, where changes must be communicated across multiple levels of hierarchy, diverse employee demographics, and geographically dispersed operations. Both organizations have undergone significant structural and operational transformations in recent years, making them instructive cases for examining how communication practices shape employee responses to change. It is important to acknowledge upfront that communication is one among several factors shaping change acceptance. Organizational culture, leadership credibility, employee trust, and resource availability all independently influence whether employees embrace or resist change initiatives. This study focuses specifically on the communication dimension while recognizing these broader contextual factors.

Statement of Problem

Despite the laudable intentions behind most organizational change initiatives, confusion, resistance, and reduced performance are frequently reported outcomes. These outcomes often trace directly to failures or gaps in communication rather than to the substance of the change itself. Communication breakdowns during change processes create information vacuums quickly filled by rumor and anxiety. The problem this study addresses is therefore clear: how significantly do communication skills influence the acceptance level of change management strategies in organizations, and what practical lessons can be drawn from the experiences of MTN and Coca-Cola Nigeria to guide other organizations facing similar challenges?

Research Question

To what extent do communication skills influence the acceptance level during change management strategy implementation in organizations?

Research Objective

To examine the influence of communication skills on the acceptance level during change management strategy implementation in organizations, with specific reference to MTN and Coca-Cola Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Framework

The study is anchored on six core concepts: communication skills, change, acceptance level, change management, strategy, and operational efficiency. Communication skills are the essential abilities that enable individuals to express ideas, share information, and build productive relationships. Adler and Proctor (2023) describe communication as a transactional process in which individuals create shared meaning through verbal and non-verbal exchanges, emphasizing clarity and mutual understanding [3]. Effective communication further requires active listening, emotional intelligence, and contextual adaptability [8]. In organizational settings, these skills enhance collaboration, build trust, and resolve conflicts, all of which are particularly critical during periods of change.

Acceptance level refers to the degree to which individuals or groups are willing to embrace or tolerate new ideas, behaviors, or realities. Rafferty and Jimmieson (2017) link high acceptance levels to better employee engagement and more effective change outcomes, while Oreg, Vakola, and Armenakis (2018) identify transparent communication, inclusive decision-making, and trust in leadership as the primary drivers of acceptance within organizations [37, 42]. Critically, acceptance is not determined by communication alone.

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Leadership style shapes whether employees trust the message and the messenger. Organizational culture determines whether openness to change is embedded or whether change is inherently resisted. Employee trust, built over time through consistent and honest communication, mediates how new information is received. Resource availability affects whether the changes promised through communication are practically deliverable. This study addresses communication as one powerful lever within this wider system of factors.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on four established frameworks. Lewin's Change Management Model [10] outlines a three-stage process of Unfreeze, Change, and Refreeze, emphasizing that organizations must first dismantle existing behaviors before implementing new practices and embedding them as the new norm. Communication is critical at every stage to reduce anxiety and build commitment. Kotter's 8-Step Change Model [24] provides a sequential roadmap from creating a sense of urgency through to institutionalizing change, with communication underpinning each step. The ADKAR Model [20] focuses on the individual level, guiding each person through Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, and Reinforcement, underscoring that organizational change succeeds only when individuals change successfully. The Shannon-Weaver Communication Model [12] provides the theoretical lens for understanding how messages are encoded, transmitted, decoded, and disrupted by noise, directly applicable to understanding why communication breakdowns during change generate resistance and confusion.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Oyetunji (2023), in a case study of MTN Nigeria, found that effective communication significantly influences successful change implementation, that transparent employee participation reduces resistance, and that timely messaging boosts morale and trust in leadership [38]. Makinde (2020) studied MTN Nigeria's CRM implementation and found that communication breakdowns caused confusion and delays, while ongoing training and feedback loops improved engagement during the transition [27]. Nwosu (2018), in a case study of Coca-Cola Nigeria, found that strong internal communication practices increased productivity and goal achievement, that two-way and consistent communication improved employee performance, and that ineffective communication led directly to operational inefficiencies [33].

At the national policy level, the April 2025 appointment of Bayo Ojulari as NNPC CEO illustrates the critical role of communication during leadership transitions, with the NNPC's transformation of its Corporate Communications Division into a core business function reflecting a broader recognition that communication is central rather than peripheral to managing organizational change [41, 43]. These empirical examples collectively affirm that organizations treating communication as a strategic asset achieve better outcomes during change. However, it is important to note that generalizability from two case studies carries inherent limitations, as discussed in the methodology section. The patterns observed across MTN and Coca-Cola Nigeria are consistent with broader literature but should not be taken as universally applicable without further cross-industry investigation.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and exploratory research design, appropriate for investigating the nuanced and contextual relationship between communication skills and acceptance levels during organizational change. The focus on two case organizations, MTN Nigeria and Coca-Cola Nigeria, enables rich contextual analysis of how communication practices operated during specific change episodes, including MTN's CRM implementation and Coca-Cola Nigeria's sustainability transitions.

Data Collection

The research draws on both primary and secondary data sources. Secondary data was gathered through a comprehensive review of academic literature, organizational reports, annual publications from MTN Nigeria and Coca-Cola Nigeria, and relevant case studies on change management in Nigerian corporate settings, including the empirical works of Oyetunji (2023), Makinde (2020), and Nwosu (2018). Primary insights were informed

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by documented organizational experiences and publicly available stakeholder accounts of change processes within the two case organizations. The combination of these sources enabled triangulation of evidence across independent accounts of the same organizational events.

3.2 Limitations and Scope

The qualitative and exploratory nature of this study carries important limitations that are acknowledged transparently. First, focusing on two case organizations limits the generalizability of findings to other industries, organizational sizes, or national contexts. The communication practices and outcomes documented at MTN and Coca-Cola Nigeria reflect the specific organizational cultures, resource levels, and leadership approaches of those firms and may not transfer directly to smaller organizations or those in different sectors. Second, the methodology relies on documented organizational experiences and secondary sources rather than direct quantitative measurement of the relationship between communication practices and change acceptance, meaning that the study cannot establish causal relationships in a statistically precise sense. Third, other factors including organizational culture, leadership style, employee trust, and resource availability independently influence change acceptance outcomes and are discussed in this study alongside communication rather than treated as controlled variables.

These limitations are not unique to this study but reflect the inherent constraints of exploratory qualitative research on organizational phenomena. Future research addressing these limitations through surveys across multiple organizations from different industries would provide a more systematic and generalizable account of the communication-acceptance relationship. The current study contributes a theoretically grounded qualitative analysis of two significant Nigerian corporations that adds to the empirical record on change management in the Nigerian business context.

Analytical Approach

Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns across the empirical evidence base. Data collection was guided by the four theoretical frameworks described in Section 2.2, with analysis organized around the key stages of each model to assess how communication practices map onto established change management sequences. The qualitative approach enabled in-depth examination of how communication strategies operated in practice rather than purely statistical inference, consistent with the exploratory nature of the inquiry.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The findings of this study confirm that communication skills play a decisive and irreplaceable role in determining the acceptance level of change management strategies within organizations. Across both MTN Nigeria and Coca-Cola Nigeria, the evidence consistently demonstrates that organizations employing clear, transparent, timely, and empathetic communication during change processes achieve significantly higher rates of employee buy-in and smoother transitions. The following sections present the evidence from each case organization and then draw the patterns together.

MTN Nigeria: CRM Implementation

In the case of MTN Nigeria, the implementation of a CRM system initially encountered resistance and confusion. Makinde (2020) directly attributed this early resistance to communication breakdowns during the transition process, specifically the absence of clear messaging about the purpose and timeline of the system change and inadequate explanation of what the change would mean for individual employee roles [27]. The resulting information vacuum was filled by rumor and anxiety, producing resistance that slowed implementation progress. The subsequent introduction of feedback loops, regular staff briefings, and structured training communications improved engagement substantially and enabled the change to proceed successfully.

Oyetunji's (2023) broader analysis of MTN Nigeria confirms this pattern, finding that transparent employee participation reduces resistance and that timely messaging boosts morale and trust in leadership [38]. MTN's investment in internal communication platforms reflects an institutional recognition that acceptance of change cannot be assumed but must be actively cultivated. It is also worth noting that MTN's organizational culture and the credibility of its leadership team during this period provided an enabling environment within which communication improvements could take effect. Communication effectiveness is therefore best understood as operating within and shaped by these broader organizational conditions.

Coca-Cola Nigeria: Sustainability Transitions

Coca-Cola Nigeria's experience reinforces these findings. Nwosu (2018) documented that the company's sustainability transitions, including eco-friendly packaging and digital sales platform adoption, achieved high acceptance rates among employees and consumers alike, driven by extensive awareness campaigns, inclusive engagement programs, and consistent two-way communication [33]. The study found a direct positive relationship between the quality of internal communication and employee productivity, with ineffective communication identified as the primary cause of misunderstandings and operational inefficiencies where they occurred.

The Coca-Cola case also illustrates how communication operates alongside other factors. The company's strong brand culture and leadership commitment to the sustainability agenda created conditions in which communication efforts landed effectively. Where leadership failed to visibly champion the message, even well-crafted communications had limited impact on employee behavior. This observation is consistent with the broader literature on the interaction between communication and leadership style in driving change acceptance.

Synthesis Across Cases

Table 1 summarizes the key communication practices, contextual enabling factors, and documented outcomes across the two case organizations to facilitate comparison of findings.

Table 1: Summary of Communication Practices and Change Acceptance Outcomes

Dimension	**MTN Nigeria (CRM Implementation)**	**Coca-Cola Nigeria (Sustainability Transitions)**
Primary communication challenge	Absence of clear role-level messaging during CRM rollout	Ensuring employee and consumer awareness of sustainability shift
Communication breakdown effect	Resistance, confusion, implementation delays	Isolated misunderstandings and operational inefficiencies
Communication interventions	Feedback loops, regular briefings, structured training communications	Awareness campaigns, inclusive engagement programmes, two-way communication channels
Enabling contextual factors	Organizational culture; leadership credibility during transition	Strong brand culture; visible leadership commitment to sustainability agenda
Documented outcome	Improved engagement; successful CRM implementation	High acceptance rates; direct positive link between communication quality and productivity
Theoretical alignment	Kotter urgency and coalition building; ADKAR awareness and knowledge stages	Lewin unfreezing; ADKAR awareness and reinforcement stages

Note: Entries derived from Makinde (2020) [27], Oyetunji (2023) [38], and Nwosu (2018) [33] as cited throughout. Contextual enabling factors are identified from qualitative analysis of organizational accounts and should be understood as interpretive rather than independently verified.

The theoretical frameworks applied in this study provide additional explanatory structure for these findings. Lewin's model confirms that the unfreezing phase is heavily dependent on communication to create the perception that change is both necessary and manageable [10]. Kotter's model underscores that every step from urgency creation to cultural institutionalization requires active, targeted communication [24]. The ADKAR model demonstrates that individual change hinges on whether the right information reaches the right people at the right time [20]. Importantly, the Shannon-Weaver model reminds us that noise, including organizational culture, rumors, and distrust, can disrupt even well-crafted messages, reinforcing why contextual enabling factors matter alongside the quality of the message itself [12].

SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Summary of Findings

This study set out to examine the influence of communication skills on the acceptance level of change management strategies in organizations, using MTN and Coca-Cola Nigeria as case studies. The findings are consistent across both cases: communication is not merely a support function during organizational change but is the primary mechanism through which change is understood, accepted, and sustained. Clear, transparent, and timely communication reduces uncertainty and increases employee buy-in. At the same time, this study acknowledges that communication operates within a system of factors that jointly determine change acceptance outcomes, including leadership style, organizational culture, employee trust, and resource availability. Future research should examine the relative contribution and interaction of these factors through quantitative and mixed-methods designs across a wider range of organizations and industries.

Recommendations

1. Every organization must prioritize effective communication skills as a core organizational competency. Communication training should be embedded in leadership development programs at all levels, with particular emphasis on change communication protocols and interpersonal engagement skills.

2. Organizations should adopt structured change communication frameworks such as the ADKAR Model to ensure that awareness, desire, knowledge, ability, and reinforcement are deliberately addressed for every individual affected by a change initiative, rather than assuming that top-level announcements are sufficient.

3. MTN and Coca-Cola Nigeria should continue to invest in two-way internal communication platforms that allow employees to provide feedback, ask questions, and raise concerns during change processes. Perceived fairness and inclusion in communication significantly increase acceptance levels [42].

4. Future empirical studies should incorporate surveys or mixed-methods approaches across multiple organizations from different industries to measure the relationship between communication practices and change acceptance more systematically, and to examine the interaction between communication and other factors such as leadership style, organizational culture, and employee trust.

Conclusion

Organizational change is inevitable in a dynamic business environment, but its success is never guaranteed. The evidence from this study, drawing on the documented experiences of MTN and Coca-Cola Nigeria and supported by established theoretical models, confirms that effective communication is among the most powerful determinants of whether change is accepted or resisted.

Organizations that communicate early, clearly, consistently, and empathetically, and that create genuine channels for dialogue rather than one-way information delivery, transform change from a source of anxiety into a platform for growth. These findings carry direct implications for organizations across Nigeria and the broader African corporate landscape, while acknowledging that the generalizability of qualitative case study findings should be tested through future quantitative research across a wider range of organizational contexts.

Ethical Statement

This research was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles for social science research. All data collection was based on secondary published sources, organizational reports, and publicly available documentation. No personal identifying information was collected or stored. There are no conflicts of interest to declare. Data supporting this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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