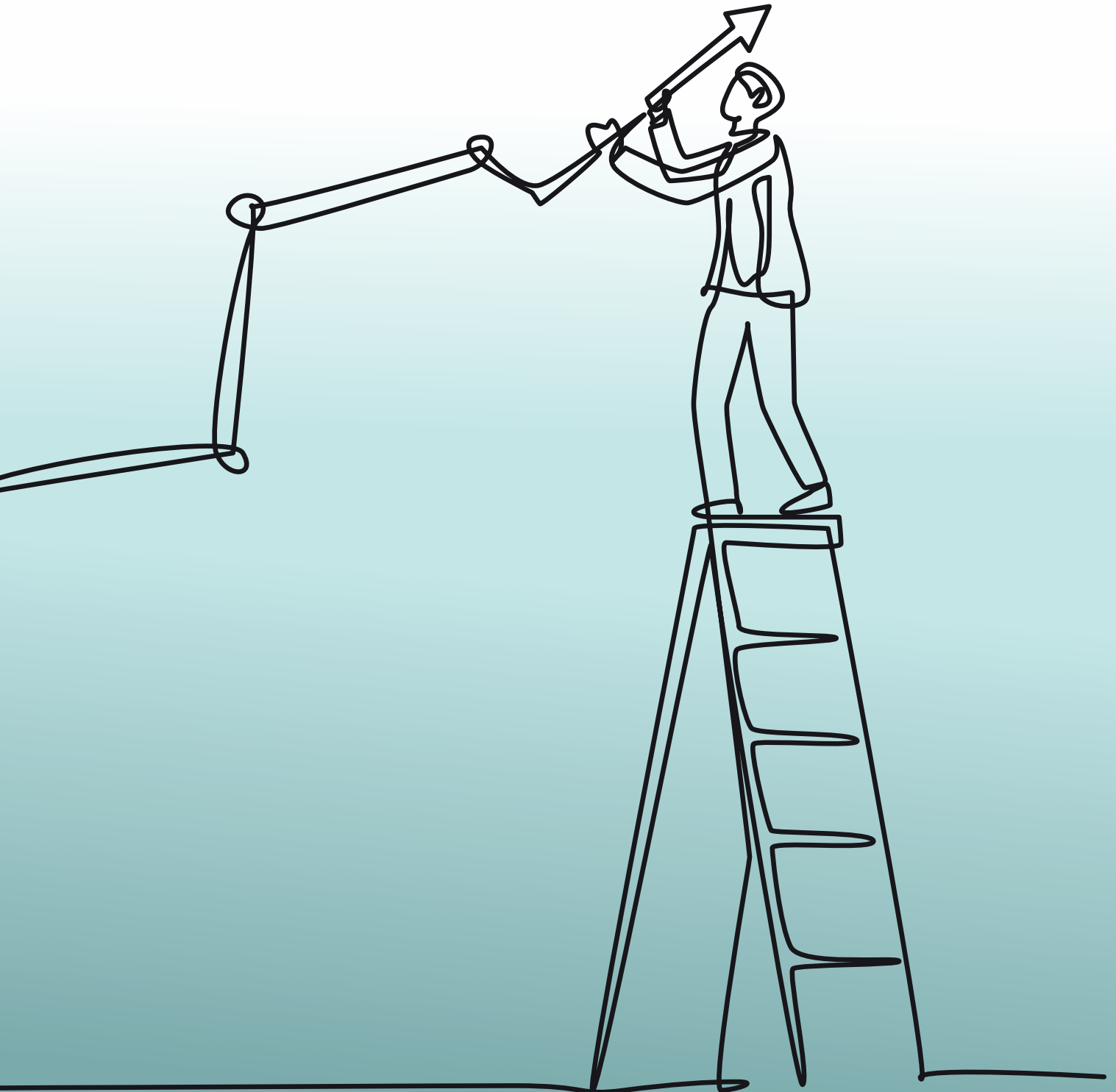


The wobbly model

A guide for communicators



The wobbly model

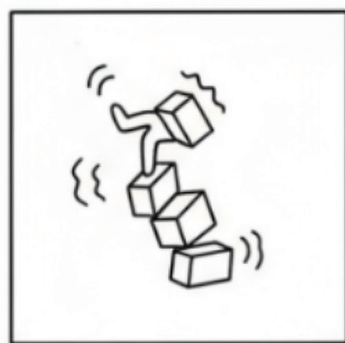
A straightforward guide for communicators

This guide helps you use the wobbly model as part of your communications planning so change happens through people and you build trust in leadership.

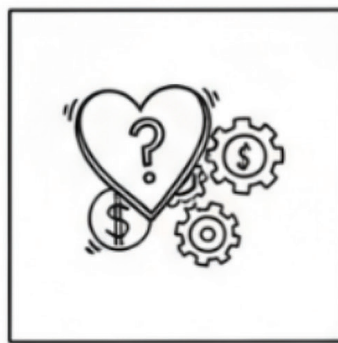
The wobbly model was developed by Karen Dempster, co-founder of Fit2Communicate to support communications colleagues to lean into human nature and influence big and small change in organisations.

How to use this guide

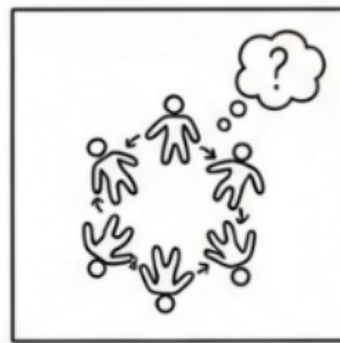
- **Sections 1-2:** Spot change and understand the change climate.
- **Section 3:** Use the six human moments to shape your approach.
- **Section 4:** Use the stakeholder conversation to influence from the start.
- **Section 5:** Build your plan, audiences, strategy and tactics using the wobbly model.
- **Section 6:** Help leaders show up in the right way.
- **Section 7:** Measure, adapt and lean into human nature.



Wobbly moment



Make it matter



Not alone moment



Say it straight



I'm trying



We did it

1. Spot the change

Use the Wobbly Model whenever you are asked to communicate something that involves people working, thinking or behaving differently. What can sound like a simple request to “get the message out” often hides something bigger - a shift that will change how people feel and respond. Your job is to spot it early and guide your stakeholders towards recognising it as change.

Ask yourself:

- Will this change how people behave, think or feel?
- Could it create uncertainty, frustration or fear?
- Will people worry about losing something - control, confidence or familiarity?
- Is there uncertainty about what happens next?
- Will people need reassurance, meaning or support to move forward?

If the answer to any of these is yes, it is not just communication - it is change. Use the wobbly model to guide your approach.

Example:

Stakeholder: “We need to tell people about the new system.”

Communicator: “What will people need to do differently?”

That one question helps you identify the real change behind the request.

2. Read the change climate before you plan

Before you apply the wobbly model, check the wider environment. Every organisation has its own ‘change weather’ - it affects how ready people are to listen, trust and engage. Understanding this helps you pitch the tone, pace and timing.







Change climate questions:

- How much change have people experienced recently?
- How well did those changes land?
- What’s the current level of trust in leadership and communication?
- Are there any existing networks, champions or managers who can help steady the wobble?
- How confident are leaders about listening, not just telling?

If your organisation has high change fatigue (due to lots of recent change), build your plan to support stability and empathy before racing ahead. If it’s change-hungry (people want change), focus on clarity and direction. Either way, the wobbly model helps you read the room.

3. Use the six human moments to guide your approach

Each moment describes how people experience change. Use them to shape your questions, messaging and timing.

	Moment	What people feel	Your role	Questions to ask	What to do
	The wobbly moment (People first hear about the change)	Unsettled, anxious, unsure	Acknowledge and steady	What is changing? What is staying the same?	Help leaders listen first. Anchor people in what is familiar.
	Make it matter (People try to understand why it's happening)	Disconnected, confused	Give purpose	Why does this matter? Why should people care?	Link the change to values, purpose or real impact.
	Not alone moment (People look for others to make sense of it)	Isolated, uncertain	Create connection	Who can people learn from? Who is already doing this?	Engage champions to support colleagues. Share peer examples. Build networks.
	Say it straight (People want honest answers before they move on)	Sceptical, wary	Build trust	What do people need to hear clearly?	Tell the truth. Drop jargon. Admit what you do not know.
	I am trying (People start doing the new thing)	Tired, unsure	Encourage	What support or recognition do people need?	Thank people for their effort. Share small wins.
	We did it (People feel the change is part of daily work)	Proud, relieved	Reinforce	What has worked? What do we keep?	Celebrate, recognise people and amplify what has changed.

4. Influence leaders in your first conversation

When a stakeholder requests a communication, this is your moment to step into the role of strategic advisor, not message writer. What you do in this first conversation determines whether the work that follows simply informs, or whether it truly enables change.

This conversation helps you:

1. Identify whether the request is really about change, not just communication.
2. Understand the human impact and emotional climate surrounding that change.
3. Influence leaders to see communication as a core enabler of change.

LISTEN - "WHAT'S HAPPENING AND WHY NOW?"

Draw out the business context, not just the message.

- What problem or opportunity is this addressing?
- What outcome is the organisation trying to achieve?
- Why now - and why this way?

You are listening for change intent: is this about informing, engaging or shifting behaviour? Your goal is to understand the real change behind the ask.

EXPLORE - "HOW DO YOU THINK PEOPLE WILL FEEL ABOUT THIS?"

Move the conversation from process to people.

- Who will be most affected?
- How might they feel - hopeful, anxious, sceptical, fatigued?
- What might they lose, or fear losing?
- Have they experienced a lot of change recently? How well did it land?
- What is trust in leadership and communication like right now?

If the environment is change saturated, focus on reassurance and rebuilding belief before new messages.

REFLECT - "THIS SOUNDS LIKE A CHANGE MOMENT - LET'S EXPLORE WHAT THAT MEANS."

Help your stakeholder see that this is not just communication. Reflect back what you've heard:

"It sounds like this will require people to change how they work, think and collaborate. That's a real shift - not just an update."

Using the wobbly model lets you anticipate reactions and plan for them. This reframes communication as leadership action, to build trust, alignment and energy.

DIAGNOSE - "WHERE ARE THE BIGGEST WOBBLES LIKELY TO BE?"

Consider the six human moments and ask:

- Where will people feel the wobble first? (fear, confusion, threat to stability)
- Do they understand why this is happening?
- Who might feel isolated or unsure?
- What questions will they need answered honestly?
- Where will effort need recognition to sustain momentum?

This starts to give you a behavioural map of the change, aligning communication to where people actually are emotionally - not where the project hopes they are.

SHAPE - "LET'S DEFINE SUCCESS FOR THE BUSINESS AND FOR PEOPLE."

Agree what success looks like on two levels:

- Business success: measurable outcomes (efficiency, adoption, customer impact).
- Human success: what people need to think, feel and do differently (understand, trust, act with confidence).

Then define how communication will make that happen, through trust, clarity, meaning and recognition. Position yourself as the guide through the human side of change, not the messenger.

This conversation builds your influence. It helps the business see that:

- Communication is a fundamental part of how change becomes real for people.
- The wobbly model supports the human side of change.
- Trust, clarity and empathy are strategic tools, not soft ones.

5. Build your plan around how people actually feel

The wobbly model is the backbone of your communications plan. It ensures every action aligns with how people experience change, from uncertainty to belief, to ownership.

DEFINE OUTCOMES

Define both business and human outcomes.

Business outcomes:

- What must the organisation achieve? (efficiency, cost savings, innovation)
- How will success be measured? (KPIs, adoption rates, performance indicators)

Human outcomes:

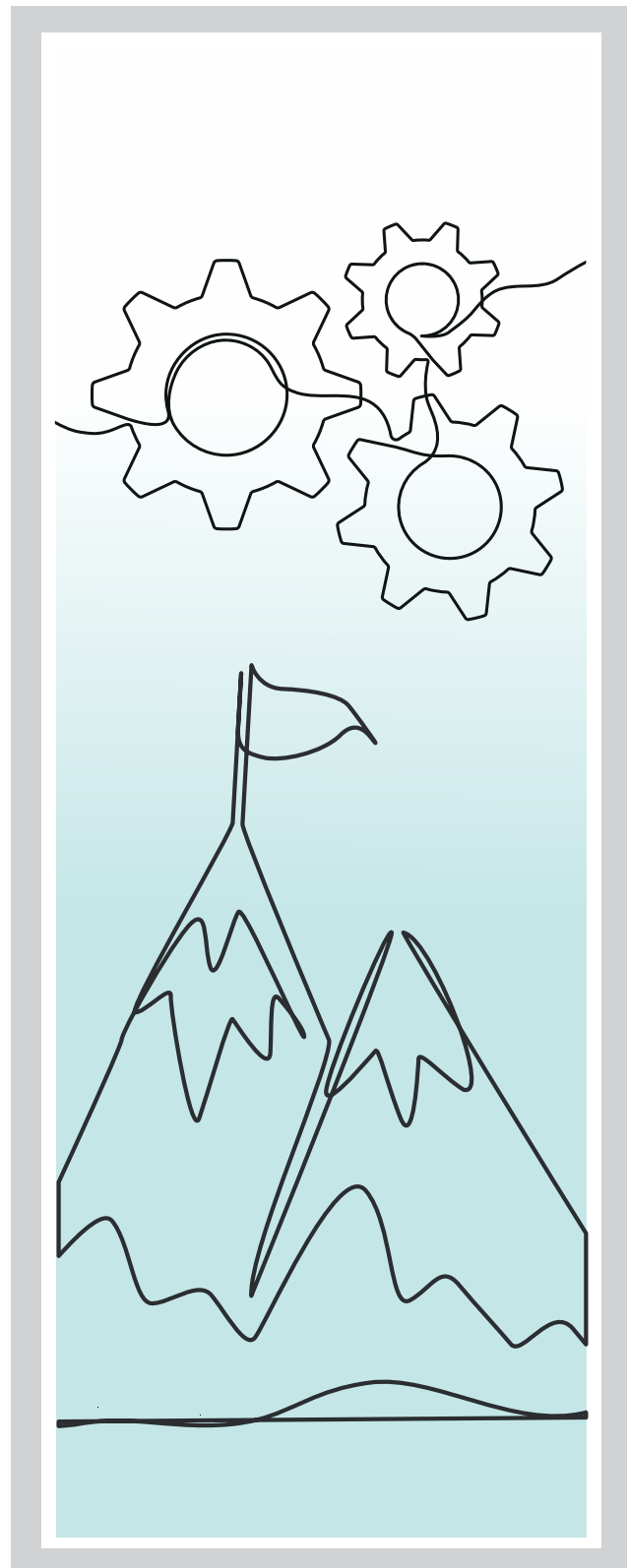
- What do people need to think, feel and do for success to happen?
- Which wobbly moments will they experience first?

Example:

Business outcome: Introduce a new CRM system to improve customer response time.







Then acknowledge human outcomes that we can expect and aim for:

1. Wobbly - People feel uncertain about losing control of their data.
2. Make it matter - People see how the system helps them spend more time with customers.
3. I'm trying - They feel supported as they learn.
4. We did it - They feel proud of smoother customer interactions.



SHAPE THE STRATEGY

Your strategy is how communication helps people move through each stage of change or human moments.

	Human moment	Strategic focus	Tone and intent	Strategic purpose
	The wobbly moment	Build trust and psychological steadiness	Calm, empathetic, consistent	Create a sense of safety by showing stability, openness and care. Communication should slow the pace, acknowledge uncertainty and help people find solid ground before action.
	Make it matter	Create meaning and shared purpose	Grounded, inspiring	Elevate the 'why' behind the change. Link it to values, purpose and human benefit so people see their place in it. Communication becomes a bridge between business logic and emotional relevance.
	Not alone moment	Strengthen connection and belonging	Inclusive, collective	Build a sense of shared journey. Use social proof and community energy to turn isolation into momentum. Communication reinforces 'we' over 'me'.
	Say it straight	Build credibility through openness	Clear, factual, transparent	Reinforce trust by being honest, specific and human. Use clear language that reduces noise and shows respect for people's intelligence. Consistency and candour sustain credibility.
	I am trying	Sustain motivation and belief	Encouraging, respectful	Recognise effort, progress and resilience. Make people feel seen and supported as they practise new behaviours. Communication should validate effort, not perfection.
	We did it	Reinforce success and embed pride	Proud, reflective, forward-looking	Mark achievement and capture learning. Communication closes the loop by celebrating progress and connecting it to the organisation's purpose, helping people see themselves as part of lasting change.

IDENTIFY AUDIENCES AND MESSAGES

Segment your audiences by emotional state, not hierarchy. People experience change differently depending on their level of control, visibility, and pressure. The wobbly model helps you tailor messages to meet people where they are emotionally, not just where they sit on the org chart.

When planning, map each audience to their most likely emotional state and design communications that:

1. Acknowledge how they feel (the human response).
2. Give them what they need (the practical clarity).
3. Use the right voice (the messenger they trust).

By getting the audience-emotion-messenger combination right, you can go beyond informing people and help them move through change.

Senior leaders - shaping belief and direction

Where they could experience a wobble:

Make it matter and Say it straight

What's happening for them:

Leaders often sit at the crossroads of strategy and pressure. They may intellectually understand the change but feel anxious about execution, legacy, or their teams' reactions. They're expected to be certain when others are unsure.

What they need:

Clarity on purpose, belief in the direction, and confidence in what success looks like so they can champion it with authenticity.

How to communicate with them:

- Anchor every discussion in outcomes and meaning - why this change matters to people and performance.
- Give them concise, credible talking points and visuals they can adapt for their own voice.
- Encourage plain-speaking and transparency over perfection.
- Provide safe spaces to test their messages before going public.

Who they need to hear from: The CEO, executive sponsor or trusted peers. Senior leaders listen best to other leaders who demonstrate both confidence and vulnerability.

Middle managers - turning direction into action

Where they could experience a wobble:

Wobbly, Say it straight, I'm trying

What's happening for them:

Managers carry the weight of change. They are the translators - expected to make sense of strategy while protecting their teams from disruption. They often feel squeezed between senior expectations and frontline emotion.

What they need:

Clarity about what's changing, practical guidance to lead conversations, and trust that their voices will be heard upward.

How to communicate with them:

- Treat them as partners in change, not channels. Involve them early so they can anticipate team reactions.
- Give them consistent core messages with flexibility to adapt locally.
- Provide briefing packs with FAQs, slide decks, and conversation starters.
- Equip them with 'listen first' techniques to support their teams.
- Recognise their emotional load - they wobble too. Acknowledge that leadership through uncertainty is hard work.

Who they need to hear from: Transformation leads, HR and Communication partners, and senior leaders who model open communication.

Frontline employees - making sense of what it means for them

Where they could experience a wobble:

Wobbly, Not alone, I'm trying

What's happening for them:

Frontline colleagues experience change most personally - it affects daily routines, skills, identity and confidence. They may feel least informed but most impacted.

What they need:

Reassurance that they're not alone, clarity on what's expected of them, and visible appreciation for effort and adaptation.

How to communicate with them:

- Use managers and peers as primary messengers - people trust people like them.
- Create informal, two-way spaces for dialogue: team huddles, drop-ins, quick videos, and chat forums.
- Focus on relevance ("What does this mean for me?") not just rationale.
- Show visible progress and real examples of colleagues adapting successfully.
- Celebrate effort early and often - recognition is a stabiliser.

Who they need to hear from: Direct managers and peers, backed by consistent leadership reinforcement.

TRANSLATING THE WOBBLY MODEL INTO TACTICS

Communication should move in rhythm with how people experience change. Each stage of the wobbly model signals a different emotional state and therefore needs a different communication approach. When you start planning:

1. Map your audiences against these stages - who's likely to feel which emotion first.
2. Sequence your communication accordingly - don't push meaning before safety, or celebration before trust.
3. Revisit earlier moments if energy dips - a wobble often means you've skipped an emotional need.

Before launch stage - the wobbly moment

Emotional state: People are uneasy, unsure and trying to understand what's changing.

Your goal: Acknowledge uncertainty and create stability before taking people forward.

Communication focus: Listening and reassurance.

Tactics that work:

- Share visible leader messages that acknowledge uncertainty and show calm confidence.
- Reinforce stability with 'what's staying the same' messages.
- Hold small group listening sessions and team discussions where people can voice questions and concerns.

- Create a single, reliable source of truth (an intranet hub or channel) to reduce speculation and stop multiple versions of the story.

This stage sets the emotional foundation for everything that follows. If people don't feel safe, they won't listen.

Early engagement stage - make it matter

Emotional state: Curiosity is rising but so are questions - "Why now?" "Why this?"

Your goal: Build understanding and emotional connection to purpose.

Communication focus: Storytelling and alignment.

Tactics that work:

- Run story-led town halls focused on "why this matters" rather than the mechanics.
- Create short video stories linking the change to customers, values or real impact.
- Encourage team-level discussions about "what this means for us" to localise the story.
- Share simple visual explainers that make the rationale and benefits easy to grasp.

This is the meaning-making stage. When people see their own purpose in the change, belief starts to build.

Early to mid-change stage - not alone

Emotional state: People are experimenting, comparing, and wondering if others are managing better.

Your goal: Create belonging and shared momentum.

Communication focus: Peer connection and advocacy.

Tactics that work:

- Share peer videos or blogs showing how others are adapting in authentic, relatable ways.
- Build a change champions network to offer practical support and spread progress stories.
- Post regular updates from real people on internal social channels - use natural, conversational tone, not corporate voice.
- Highlight cross-team collaboration with "we're in this together" stories.

Social proof matters here - people believe change is possible when they see people like them doing it.

Throughout - say it straight

Emotional state: People need reassurance that the story is still credible. They are scanning for honesty.

Your goal: Maintain credibility through honesty and transparency.

Communication focus: Information and dialogue.

Tactics that work:

- Produce clear, plain English FAQs and fact sheets - cut the jargon.
- Send monthly "what we know now" bulletins with real progress and open issues.
- Host open Q&A sessions with senior leaders to keep the conversation human.
- Create two-way feedback loops - short polls, quick "ask me anything" sessions or digital comment channels.

Saying it straight maintains trust. It shows respect for people's intelligence and their need for truth over spin.

Mid to late change - I'm trying

Emotional state: People are working hard to make change real, but energy dips and self-doubt creeps in.

Your goal: Reinforce persistence and recognise effort.

Communication focus: Motivation and recognition.

Tactics that work:

- Share recognition stories from leaders about individuals or teams making visible progress.
- Publish regular "what's working" stories that highlight learning and effort, not perfection.
- Encourage manager shout-outs in local channels and team updates.
- Create short thank-you videos or messages acknowledging resilience and persistence.

Recognition is fuel. When people see effort being noticed, they push through uncertainty with renewed confidence.

Post-change - we did it

Emotional state: Relief, pride, reflection. People want to see that their effort mattered.

Your goal: Celebrate success and embed new habits.

Communication focus: Celebration and reinforcement.

Tactics that work:

- Share "look how far we've come" stories linking outcomes back to the original purpose.
- Run team retrospectives to reflect on lessons and recognise progress together.
- Launch an internal celebration campaign showcasing achievements and collective pride.
- Encourage leaders to reinforce continuity - what's now "how we work" going forward.

Celebration isn't the end of communication - it's the beginning of ownership. Recognition helps the new normal stick.

The wobbly model doesn't replace your communication plan; it gives it rhythm. It ensures every tactic meets people where they are, emotionally and practically.



6. Coach leaders to be more human

Leaders shape how people experience change more than any campaign ever can. Their tone, honesty and presence set the emotional temperature others follow.

The wobbly model helps communicators coach leaders to show up in the right way at the right time - steadying uncertainty, creating meaning and building belief.

The goal is not to make leaders better presenters. It's to help them be more human in moments that matter.

The wobbly moment - model calm confidence

When uncertainty hits, people look to leaders for emotional cues more than answers. The way a leader behaves in this moment tells people whether it's safe to trust what's coming next.

What leaders need to do:

Acknowledge uncertainty without panic.
Be open about what's known and unknown.
Show empathy, not control.

How communicators can help:

- Prepare simple, empathetic key messages that acknowledge emotion as well as fact.
- Coach leaders to use steady body language and tone that signals calm, not spin.
- Provide short Q&A cards for quick conversations so leaders can respond authentically.
- Encourage honesty - "Here's what we know right now, and here's what we're working on."

People don't expect leaders to know everything. They expect them to stay steady while things shift.

Make it matter - connect to purpose

Once the initial uncertainty settles, people start asking "Why?" Leaders must help them see the human meaning behind the change, not just the logic.

Leaders need to create meaning by connecting the change to organisational purpose, customer value or shared mission.

How communicators can help:

- Work with leaders to craft stories that start with purpose, not process.
- Encourage leaders to share personal motivation: "Here's why this matters to me."
- Provide narrative frameworks that link strategy to human outcomes.
- Coach against over-reliance on slides or data - conversation is more powerful than presentation.

People believe change is worth it when they see their leaders believe it too.

Not alone - build community and visibility

As people start to act, they look for proof that they're not the only ones. Leaders can either fuel connection or deepen isolation depending on how visible they are.

Leaders need to be present, listen, and make others visible. Share stories of progress and teamwork.

How communicators can help:

- Encourage leaders to spend time with teams informally - walk the floor, listen first.
- Identify early champions and brief them for joint visibility with leaders.
- Amplify authentic examples of collaboration and progress through internal channels.
- Support leaders in thanking teams collectively - turning 'you' into 'we'.

Visibility builds belonging. When people see leaders alongside them, not above them, trust grows.

Say it straight - maintain credibility

Honesty is the currency of trust. When things get tough, leaders must resist the urge to over-polish or over-promise.

Leaders need to speak plainly. Admit what's uncertain. Commit to follow up on unanswered questions.

How communicators can help:

- Draft concise briefing notes and clear key lines that keep tone simple and factual.
- Coach leaders to sound confident without over-reassuring.
- Set up two-way formats - Q&A sessions, open forums - where listening is as visible as speaking.
- Remind leaders that "I don't know yet" builds far more trust than "Everything's fine."

Credibility doesn't come from having all the answers; it comes from being honest about what you know.

I'm trying - recognise effort and persistence

By this point, people are in the messy middle of change. They're adapting, learning and tiring. What they need most is recognition.

Leaders need to thank people for progress and perseverance. Show vulnerability about their own learning.

How communicators can help:

- Capture and share recognition stories that leaders can amplify authentically.
- Build short feedback loops so leaders can respond quickly and personally.
- Encourage leaders to acknowledge the effort, not just the outcome: "I see how hard this is, and I appreciate it."
- Help leaders show they're learning too - humility deepens connection.

Recognition fuels resilience. When people feel seen, they keep going.

We did it - celebrate and close well

When change succeeds, people need closure - to see what's been achieved, what's been learned, and what it means for the future.

Leaders need to celebrate success and share ownership. Reflect on lessons. Credit the team, not themselves.

How communicators can help:

- Design meaningful closure moments - reflection sessions, celebration events, storytelling campaigns.
- Create visual stories showing "how far we've come."
- Coach leaders to tie success back to purpose and next steps.
- Encourage them to speak in collective language: "We made this happen together."

Recognition marks the end of one change and the beginning of the next. It turns achievement into shared pride.

Further tips:







- Prepare leaders early. Brief them before change goes public so their first message sets the right tone.
- Coach through conversation. Don't just hand over talking points - rehearse tone, empathy and pacing.
- Model honesty and empathy. If you want leaders to sound real, show them what that looks like in your own communication.
- Close the loop. Help leaders gather feedback after each moment - what landed, what needs repeating, what's still uncertain.

Leaders don't build trust through perfect messages - they build it through consistent, human ones. The communicator's role is to help them find that voice and use it well.

7. Measure, adapt and lean into human nature

MEASURE EMOTION, NOT JUST ACTIVITY

Measure how people are moving through the human moments, not just how many messages you've sent.

	Moment	What to measure	Example metrics or methods
	The wobbly moment	Awareness, trust, confidence	Ask "What's one thing still unclear?" in meetings. Run anonymous 'confidence pulse' check-ins. Collect "what we've heard" summaries.
	Make it matter	Understanding of purpose	Invite people to share why this change matters. Track how often values, purpose or impact appear in team chats. Use a quick "why are we doing this?" quiz in meetings.
	Not alone moment	Peer connection, advocacy	Map informal champions (who do people go to?). Monitor who's sharing tips or helping peers. Ask: "Who helped you figure this out?" gather and share those names.
	Say it straight	Credibility, transparency	Capture 'most asked questions' and update messaging live. Use a 'say it back' method: ask people to share messages in their own words. Spot and replace jargon in comms.
	I am trying	Motivation, engagement	Ask managers to submit weekly shout-outs for effort, not just wins. Run a 'first tries' board (virtual or physical) for people to share what they're learning. Count 'have-a-go' moments, not just outcomes.
	We did it	Pride, ownership	Collect short 'what we're proud of' voice notes or quotes. Ask teams to submit a photo or screenshot showing what's improved. Use a 'keep / drop / celebrate' session to gather reflection and embed success.

If progress stalls, find the missed moment: revisit **Wobbly** if fear persists, **Make it matter** if action is low, **I'm trying** if energy drops.

Every message during change triggers a human response. Communication that works understands how people think, feel and decide - and uses that insight to help them move forward. People don't resist messages, they resist what change means for their sense of control, identity or security.

LEAN INTO YOUR HUMAN INSTINCTS

The most effective communicators don't fight those instincts, they lean into human nature to help people feel safe enough to move forward.

Keep these truths in mind:

- People fear loss more than they value gain - start with reassurance. Change triggers a sense of threat before opportunity. Calm it first by reinforcing what's staying the same.
- People believe people like them - use peer stories. We take cues from those we trust. Authentic, peer-led examples change minds faster than official messages.
- People trust honesty over polish - be straight. People spot spin instantly. Simple, truthful language builds credibility and psychological safety.
- People remember emotion - lead with empathy. Emotion decides whether people will listen, believe or act. Show you understand their experience before you ask for action.
- People crave recognition - say thank you often. Every change creates effort. Noticing that effort turns fatigue into motivation.

In practice, ask yourself: "Am I working with or against human nature in this message?"

The best communicators design for how people actually think, feel and behave - not how we wish they did.

APPLY THE WOBBLY MODEL TO READ ORGANISATIONAL ENERGY

The wobbly model isn't only for planning individual change communications - it shapes understanding of how the organisation is feeling.

By listening, observing and mapping where

different teams sit emotionally, you can identify where trust is strong, where fatigue is high and where communication needs to focus next.

Use it as an emotional radar

Every team has a different rhythm and emotional energy. When you start to view the organisation through the six human moments, you can spot which parts of the system are ready to move and which need support.

- Operations might be in say it straight - they're craving clarity about direction and next steps.
- HR could be in we did it - closing one phase and needing help sustaining momentum.
- Technology teams might sit in I'm trying - they're adapting fast but need recognition for progress.
- Leadership could be wobbling quietly - uncertain how their messages are landing.

These differences aren't problems; they're signals. They tell you where to apply energy, empathy and reinforcement.

Read the organisation, not just the plan

Use the wobbly model in your listening and insight activities. Combine it with data from pulse surveys, feedback sessions, and leader conversations to build a heatmap of emotional readiness:

- Where is fear showing up?
- Where are people asking "why" again?
- Where is pride fading or cynicism creeping in?
- Where are small wins being ignored instead of celebrated?

You can then align communication and leadership focus accordingly:

- Reinforce wobbly areas with clarity and reassurance.
- Revisit make it matter where belief is low.
- Boost I'm trying areas with visible recognition and encouragement.

This moves you from reactive messaging to proactive energy management.

Shape system-wide priorities

Once you know where each part of the organisation sits emotionally, you can:

- Sequence communication themes so they match readiness.
- Coach leaders to focus on what their teams need now, not what the plan says they should be doing.
- Target listening and storytelling to where it will make the biggest difference.

When communicators apply the wobbly model this way, they act as the organisation's emotional intelligence - helping leaders sense, not just measure, the state of their system.

Why it matters

Organisations don't change evenly. Some teams move ahead while others hold back or tire. Reading emotional energy through the wobbly model lets you design communication that keeps the system connected and resilient. It helps you know when to push, when to pause, and when to celebrate.

Used this way, the wobbly model becomes more than a framework - it becomes your compass for organisational empathy, showing where trust, belief and momentum need the most attention.

FINAL TAKEAWAYS

- Every change starts with a wobble - notice it.
- Communication is not a broadcast - it is how people make sense of change.
- Use the six moments to guide how you listen, plan and respond.
- Coach leaders and read the organisational climate.
- Build trust through empathy, honesty and recognition.

The wobbly model is simple: steady the wobble, tell the truth, make it matter and show people they are not alone. That is how communicators lead change, not just support it.





The wobbly model

A straightforward guide
for communicators

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