

Accepting change as part of organisational life: Does this resonate with high-change organisations in South Africa?

ABSTRACT

This article proposes a new concept, co-change-orientated communication (co-COC), which encapsulates the daily social and communication processes of organisational members in making sense of change from a critical strategic communication perspective. Guided by an evolutionary approach to concept development, this article aims to quantitatively measure the pragmatic relevance of identified attributes and antecedents of co-COC to the development of a fully-fledged concept at six high-change South African organisations. An exploratory factor analysis confirmed that co-COC is attributed by meaningful dialogue, employee engagement, collaboration and co-creation, and the encouragement of dissent. It is bottom-up in nature and enabled by the antecedents of organisational agility, leadership agility, a change-able culture and stakeholder engagement. Co-COC further extends theoretical development on the need for change in approaches to communication that support ongoing organisational change and hasve potential to assist communication professionals to recognise the need and pragmatic relevance of contemporary developments in strategic communication. The various antecedents and attributes of co-COC could also provide organisations with guidance on the implementation of change-orientated communication approaches in support of ongoing organisational change.

INTRODUCTION

The acronym VUCA is often applied in an organisational context to refer to the current volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous business environment which has been brought about by various interconnected mega-trends such as digitisation and globalisation (Horney, Pasmore & O'Shea, 2010; Van der Steege, 2017). These trends have increased organisational change and complexity and are placing more pressure on organisations to constantly adapt and innovate (Bawany, 2016; Todnem By, 2015; Lewis, 2011). Organisational change has become the norm for ensuring organisational survival and success, and necessitates advanced change management perspectives and capabilities, with change being regarded as a natural, ongoing process (Al-Haddad & Kotnour, 2015; Pearse, 2017).

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Interactive communication technologies have further brought about a “collaborative turn” that gives rise to innovative and engaging opportunities to obtain valuable information from stakeholders through two-way conversations and listening to stakeholders (Verwey, 2015). Changes such as the advances in communication technology and global and economic developments have stimulated a movement towards critical ideology (Overton-de Klerk & Verwey, 2013). In this context, the task of the strategic communication professional is no longer viewed as a tool to achieve the objectives of organisational management, but rather as an all-encompassing process focused on purposeful communication to ensure the inclusion of all voices (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015). A critical perspective in the context of organisational change is premised on the notion that change is best understood through the manner in which members of the organisation construct their social reality (Graetz et al., 2006). This arguably yields an emergent focus on change in the organisation, with the strategic communication professional facilitating all communication processes within the organisation in making sense of change (Järventie-Thesleff, Moisander & Villi, 2015).

If they are to survive, organisations must change according to the demands of the volatile business environment, and communication plays a fundamental role in ensuring the successful implementation and management of organisational change (Christensen, 2014; Lewis, 2011; Helpap, 2016). According to McClellan (2011:466), successful organisational change “requires efforts to create and maintain discursive openings in which organizational participants engage in dialogue to engender new ways of talking about organizational processes and practices”. Existing studies on change communication include Lewis’s (2011) proposal of a communication perspective of change implementation that focuses on organisation–stakeholder interaction; consideration of the role of communication or internal communication in organisational change (Elving, 2005; Saáry, 2014); an exploration of the contribution of the outcomes of an internal communication strategy in positively influencing individual behaviour change during transformation (Bjorkman, 2015); an analysis of various communication approaches in organisational change (Johansson & Heide, 2008); an investigation of the link between change communication and change receptivity (Frahm & Brown, 2007); and an analysis of internal communication as a power management tool in change processes (Lies, 2012). Although studies that focus on proposing a strategic and participatory communication approach to organisational change do exist (Helpap, 2016; Lines, 2004; Morsing & Schultz, 2006), deeper theoretical development is required to assist communication professionals in realising the pragmatic relevance of critical developments in strategic communication (Overton-de Klerk, 2013), specifically in organisational change. The work of Järventie-Thesleff et al. (2015) certainly contributes to closing this gap through the proposed use of the corporate brand as a tool for managing strategic communication in a multi-change environment. Their article, however, focuses on the broader role of strategic communication during change and is not concerned with the internal communication processes of organisational members (management and non-management employees) in making sense of change.

This article endeavours to explore the need for innovative change management and communication practices in support of ongoing organisational change (Pearse, 2017). This is achieved through the process of concept development, which plays a significant role in the development of a knowledge foundation and entails the formulation of a definition and the identification of key attributes

(Rodgers, 2000). The proposed concept, co-change-orientated communication (co-COC), aims to encapsulate the process of accepting change as part of organisational life and how organisational members continuously, collaboratively make sense of change by drawing on contemporary developments in strategic communication. Strategic communication from a contemporary critical perspective “actively contributes to and shapes the processes and practices through which change emerges in the day-to-day of organisational life” (Järventie-Thesleff et al., 2015:535). This article aims specifically to quantitatively measure the pragmatic relevance of preliminary attributes, bottom-up communication and antecedents for co-COC (identified from a literature review and document analysis of the annual and sustainability reports of a number of Fortune Change the World organisations) at selected high-change South African organisations to build towards co-COC as a fully-fledged concept.

Against this background, this article focuses on answering the following research question: Does co-COC resonate with high-change organisations? To find an answer, a quantitative, web-based survey was conducted at six selected South African high-change organisations (organisations at the forefront of change) by measuring the pragmatic relevance of the pre-determined attributes, bottom-up communication nature and antecedents of co-COC.

To serve as contextualisation, this article first provides a discussion of the changes in the strategic communication landscape and an elaboration of what is meant by change-orientated communication. This is followed by a discussion of the initial concept development process that was followed to identify the preliminary attributes, bottom-up nature of communication and antecedents of co-COC explored in this study. An elaboration on the research methodology is then provided, followed by the reporting and discussion of the research results. The article concludes with the limitations and contributions of the study, and considerations for future research.

1. CHANGES IN THE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION LANDSCAPE

As a result of the collaborative turn brought about by, among others, Web 2.0 communication technologies, strategic communication professionals find themselves increasingly frequently at points of conflict, which have stimulated a move towards critical ideology. A critical perspective relating to strategic communication questions the concept of “managerialism”, in terms of which authoritarian managers assign workers workplace activities predominantly to benefit themselves (Holtzhausen, 2002). This perspective departs significantly from mainstream approaches, as it raises questions about power, persuasion and activism which the “orthodoxy of public relations [and communication management] chooses to ignore” (Coombs & Holladay, 2012:882). In terms of this perspective, power, persuasion and activism in mainstream strategic communication is regarded as “unethical”, and as “socially irresponsible behaviour” that should be avoided in favour of a balanced, two-way symmetrical communication perspective entailing mutual understanding between the organisation and stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

Overton-de Klerk and Verwey (2013), echoed by Verwey (2015), have identified various paradigm shifts in strategic communication brought about by disintermediation, the blurring of

communication genres, media convergence and organisation as communication. These shifts characterise contemporary strategic communication as bottom-up in nature, where meaning is created by the communication process itself. The strategic communication professional no longer acts as a representative of organisational management in order to control the communication, but instead serves as a facilitator for discourse in a context where the organisation is treated as a “living organism” which evolves and changes continuously (Lehtimäki, 2017). The strategic communication professional acts as the facilitator of dialogue and conversation in order to achieve innovative problem-solving, even if this creates dissent among organisational members (Overton-de Klerk and Verwey, 2013). According to Verwey and Muir (2018:210), when referring to dialogue, “it is no longer about achieving transactional symmetry, but a relational-modal approach aimed at collaboration and collectivism.” Contemporary strategic communication also emphasises the notion of “self-organisation”, where change and consensus in the organisation cannot be achieved through controlling stakeholders. Instead, the process of identifying creative solutions for business problems should start with stakeholders and proceed by means of high stakeholder engagement (Verwey, 2015).

Strategic communication should today be viewed as an all-encompassing communication function characterised by purposeful communication (Overton-de Klerk & Verwey, 2013). Purposeful communication or conversation places emphasis on action as opposed to talk, and allows sharing of meaning and ideas, deepens mutual understanding, and creates meaningful action (Dervitsiotis, 2002; Hodges & Gill, 2015). Strategic communication extends beyond merely providing information or building and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships, and pays attention to the manner in which communication could contribute to an organisation’s purpose or reason for being (Hallahan et al., 2007). The strategic communication professional no longer acts as the mediator between the organisation and its stakeholders towards sustainable relationship building. Instead, he/she now has the broader role of acting as facilitator for conversation between the organisation and stakeholders. It is considered that the role of the strategic communication professional today is to assist others to acquire access to the “communicative sphere” through purposeful arguments that could both contribute towards advancing the interests of the organisation and contributing towards society (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015:6).

2. CHANGE-ORIENTATED COMMUNICATION

Before a discussion on change-orientated communication can be provided, it is essential to elaborate briefly on the process of organisational change. The process of organisational change is built on the notion that organisations are “emergent properties of change” (Järventie-Thesleff et al., 2015:533). In this regard, organisational change is accepted as part of organisational life and could sprout from external environmental factors (e.g. competitive action; technological advances; government regulations; or economic conditions) or internal organisational factors. This article supports a broad perspective on organisational change, both internally and externally.

“Change communication” is the consistent effort to educate and motivate employees; encourage higher performance and discretionary effort; limit misunderstandings; and ensure employee

alignment behind the strategic and overall performance improvement goals during organisational change (Barret, 2002). It is regarded as a “potent tool” to set direction and ensure alignment between various organisational functions during change (Sharma & Sahoo, 2014:175). Most definitions of “change communication”, however, highlight the fact that the communication process and the implementation of change are indissolubly linked (Lewis, 1999). Conversely, “change-orientated communication” is regarded as any communication relating to change (Zorn, Page & Cheney, 2000). This definition is in line with the notion of the proposed concept as it emphasises that change communication should be regarded as a continuous process, not only during the implementation of organisational change. This perspective corresponds with the work of Ströh (2007) who recognises that organisations are complex and adaptive, with the ability to adjust to the unstable, changing environment through self-organisation. In corroboration with the paradigmatic shifts in strategic communication, Ströh (2007:128) proposes a “complexity science approach to change communication”, which underlines four important factors, namely dissent, self-organising processes, relationships and participation. Dissent is considered a daily activity that can stimulate growth, creativity and innovation through debate and dialogue. Self-organisation implies that the organisation is able to adapt itself to changing conditions by means of learning from previous experiences. Laszlo and Laugel (2000) argue that successful change is dependent on self-organised interactions between organisational members as opposed to a top-down controlled approach. Ströh (2007:128) avers that these “interactions could lead to relationships which create knowledge and intelligence, which in turn give meaning to the organisation.” Self-organisation is thus the threefold integration of multifaceted interactions with the environment, existing organisational relationships and the history of the organisation. It is also essential that stakeholders are connected to the organisation and are afforded the opportunity to participate in the creation of organisational strategy (Ströh, 2007).

Types of organisational change could be categorised according to the rate of occurrence, how it originates and by scale (Todnem By, 2015). This article will focus specifically on change in the category of origin – more specifically, planned and emergent change, because it is directly related to the proposition of co-COC. Planned and emergent change are also considered as the “dominant approaches” when studying organisational change (Van der Voet, Groeneveld & Kuipers, 2014:174). Planned change aims to highlight the processes that have to be implemented by the organisation in order to move from an unstable, indefinite state to a more favourable one (Eldrod II & Tippett, 2002). The model for planned change, which is most prominent in the literature and has served as basis for various other planned models developed over the years, is Lewin’s (1951) three-step model of change, namely unfreezing the current situation; moving to the new level and; refreezing the new level to ensure that the change has been internalised (Todnem By, 2015). Other models of planned change include Kotter’s (1995) eight-step model and Senge’s (1999) systems thinking model. Approaches to planned change have been severely criticised for being based on the supposition that organisations function under stable conditions and are able to move from one pre-planned stage to the next (Bamford & Forrester, 2003). Communication associated with planned change is predominantly top-down in nature and applied during the actual change implementation. Consistent with mainstream strategic communication, the communication in planned change serves as an “instrument of management control” aimed at ensuring the

successful absorption of change projects (Järventie-Thesleff, et al., 2015:536). It is focused on ensuring that messages are clear, participation is encouraged and that uncertainty is reduced.

Conversely, emergent change considers the volatile organisational environment and emphasises the fact that change cannot be regarded as a series of linear events, but as a “continuous, open-ended process of adaption to changing circumstances and conditions” (Todnem By, 2015:33). In line with the notion of “the organisation as becoming” (Weick & Quinn, 1999; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002), emergent change is concerned with how organisational members construct their social reality (Graetz et al., 2006:18). In this context, organisations are considered as fluid and change is accepted as a normal part of organisational life (McClellan, 2011). Emergent approaches/models to change (e.g. Kanter, Stein & Jick’s (1992) ten commandments for executing change and Luecke’s (2003) seven steps) are criticised for their lack of coherence and multiplicity in techniques (Bamford & Forrester, 2003). A more practical approach to the implementation of emergent organisational change is the cycle of continuous change suggested by Lawrence et al. (2006), which highlights the fact that continuous change is a process consisting of four phases, each with a specific champion, namely evangelist, autocrat, architect and educator. Communication associated with an emergent change context is bottom-up and lateral in nature. Such communication implies a means by which the organisation is established, composed and sustained (Cooren et al., 2011). It is about creating “practices and policies through which change can be embedded in the deep structures of the organisation, and to make sure that all members of staff, on all organisational levels, are capable and motivated to make sense of the change process in the course of their daily activities, both individually and collectively” (Järventie-Thesleff et al., 2015:537). In this regard, the significance of organisational change is negotiated during communicative interactions (Thomas, Sargent & Hardy, 2011).

3. AN EVOLUTIONARY APPROACH TO CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

In order to theoretically explore the nature of the proposed concept, Rodgers’ (2000) evolutionary approach to concept development was used as it is an approach to concept development that recognises the context of the proposed concept (in this case, contemporary developments in strategic communication in an organisational context). This approach moves away from the assumption that a concept is universal and unchanging, thus allowing for a flexible process where the steps do not have to be followed chronologically (Rodgers, 2000). Various data sources can also be used in concept development, of which the existing literature is the most prominent (Rodgers, 2000) and was the selected data source used as the basis of this study to identify the preliminary attributes, the bottom-up nature and the antecedents of co-COC. In this regard, a two-pronged process was followed: First, a sample of literature dealing with strategic communication, change management and change-orientated communication, selected according to various contextual bases and parameters, was explored to identify the potential core elements of co-COC. Second, based on the premise that the elements of co-COC identified from the literature should be incorporated into the daily activities of high-change organisations, it was necessary to obtain documents that provided a summary of the business activities of high-change organisations. In this regard, a document analysis of annual and sustainability reports of selected 2016 Fortune

Change the World organisations was conducted. This list consists of 50 global organisations that have made a positive social impact through activities that are part of their core business strategy (Leaf, 2017). These organisations are ranked according to three factors, namely measurable social impact, business results and degree of innovation. The organisation's reach, nature and durability of one or more social problems, the economic benefit of the respective socially impactful initiative and the degree of innovation in comparison to rivals are measured (Leaf, 2017). An organisation's annual report is its most significant formal communication with its stakeholders, and is regarded as highly credible (Dawkins & Ngunjiri, 2008:289); a sustainability report provides an overview of the impact of the organisation's activities on the economic, environmental and social environment, and outlines the organisation's commitment to a sustainable global economy (Global Reporting, 2017). The annual and sustainability reports thus provided an overview of various change projects and projects in response to changes imposed by the macro-organisational environment.

4. PRELIMINARY co-COC ATTRIBUTES, BOTTOM-UP COMMUNICATION AND ANTECEDENTS

The literature review and document analysis, as outlined above, revealed the following preliminary attributes, bottom-up nature and antecedents of co-COC that were quantitatively explored in this study.

4.1 Attributes of co-COC

From the literature review and document analysis it was evident that co-COC appears to encapsulate the core attributes of employee engagement, collaboration and co-creation, meaningful dialogue and encouragement of dissent.

Employee engagement

Employee engagement, in the context of this study, is the process where management involves employees in organisational decision-making. The outcome of employee engagement is similar to the concept of "work engagement" (Holbeche, 2015), which could be defined as "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption" (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004:294). The recognition of employees' input in the decision-making processes of the organisation potentially creates a sense of belonging and promotes self-discovery and, in essence, employee empowerment.

Collaboration and co-creation

Pearse (2017) argues that the leaders of 21st century organisations should rely not only on individual human capital, but also on the value of collaborative strategies. Trust and collective orientation towards collective action should be promoted. Employees who work together contribute to collective sense-making of change and a better understanding of what is needed to resolve specific issues (Pearse, 2017).

Meaningful dialogue

Different voices should be acknowledged in the organisation to stimulate creativity and innovation as contributions to unique problem-solving (Overton-de Klerk & Verwey, 2013). Unilever and the Coca-Cola Company, both 2016 Fortune Change the World organisations, support “always on” conversations and long-term dialogue with all stakeholders to sustain the ever-changing business environment (The Coca-Cola Company, 2016; Unilever, 2016).

Encouragement of dissent

As emphasised earlier, the task of the strategic communication professional is no longer to achieve consensus among stakeholders in alignment with the goals of management, but instead to act as a facilitator of conversations between organisational members, even if these cause dissent. From this perspective it is argued that knowledge develops through continuous debate and discourse. Indra K Nooyi, the chairman and CEO of Pepsico (a 2016 Fortune Change the World organisation) states that “it is inevitable that we’ll disagree on certain issues, but those disagreements need not be roadblocks to implementing solutions ... we need to engage with one another across sectors, listen to diverse perspectives, resolve current tensions and coalesce around the latest research to find a collective path forward” (Pepsico, 2016).

4.2 Bottom-up communication

The literature review revealed that bottom-up communication could seemingly be a key element of co-COC. Bottom-up communication implies that interaction, as opposed to the mere transfer of information, is favoured. The leader of the organisation places a high value on obtaining inputs from organisational members through co-creation and engagement strategies (Overton-de Klerk & Verwey, 2013). The organisation in this context has the ability to evolve in line with changes imposed by the business environment (Lehtimäki, 2017). Bottom-up communication is associated with an emergent change context, as emphasised earlier, where change cannot be managed in a linear fashion, but as a “continuous, open-ended process of adaption to changing circumstances and conditions” (Todnem By, 2015:33).

4.3 Antecedents of co-COC

The following antecedents appear to be essential for the implementation of co-COC.

Organisational agility

Organisational agility refers to “the organisation’s ability to develop and quickly apply flexible, nimble and dynamic capabilities” (Holbeche, 2015:11). In essence, it encapsulates the organisation’s ability to swiftly adjust, respond to, and flourish in a continuously changing environment.

Leadership agility

It is ultimately the responsibility of the leader to establish a receptive infrastructure in the organisation. An agile leader “champions the change effort and displays active change

leadership aligning people around the vision” (Holbeche, 2015:219). An agile leader should listen, be open and connect with organisational members. The leader should implement “discursive templates” (Järventie-Thesleff et al., 2015:543) or “frameworks for grassroots initiatives” (Ströh, 2007:133) and engage organisational members on all levels to facilitate change from below.

Change-able culture

Balogun (2001) argues that at the heart of successful organisational change lies a shift in the culture of the organisation. In the context of accepting change as part of organisational life a “change-affirmative culture” (Järventie-Thesleff et al., 2015:538) or “change-able culture” (Holbeche, 2015:220) should be embedded in the organisation. This denotes a receptive context in which change is viewed as dynamic stability. Organisational members should accept change as the norm.

Stakeholder engagement

In alignment with the concept of “self-organisation” in strategic communication, emphasis should arguably be placed not just on employee engagement, but on stakeholder engagement as a whole. As a pragmatic example of this in a high-change organisation, the Crystal Group focuses on “becoming a boundaryless organisation – the support and engagement of various stakeholders are actively sought. Our collaborations with our stakeholders create social and environmental benefits, develop synergy and result in widespread positive impacts throughout society” (Crystal Group, 2016).

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Since the study was concerned with the development of a new concept, the research was exploratory and cross-sectional in nature. In order to measure the pragmatic relevance of co-COC, the attributes, bottom-up communication and antecedents, identified by the literature review and document analysis, were quantitatively measured at six high-change South African organisations in early 2018.

5.1 Sampling strategy and data collection

A two-fold sampling strategy was applied. First, six high-change South African organisations were purposively selected based on the fact that these organisations had either received a 2017 Silver Quill Merit Award from the International Association of Business Communication (IABC) for a change-orientated project, had been selected as Fortune Change the World organisations in 2015, or had successfully implemented structural changes or a merger during the preceding year. These organisations represented the transport, accounting, health, retail and recruitment industries. Second, snowball sampling was applied. At each organisation, a project champion (for instance, the leader of a change project, or a human resources, corporate affairs or communication manager) was identified to assist the researcher in distributing a questionnaire to selected employees of the organisation who had

implemented change projects or had experienced a merger and/or structural changes. These “project champions” also pre-tested the questionnaire prior to distributing it to the selected respondents. The web-based survey was shared with these project champions by means of a link that was sent to the identified respondents together with background information about the project. Data was collected over an eight-week period.

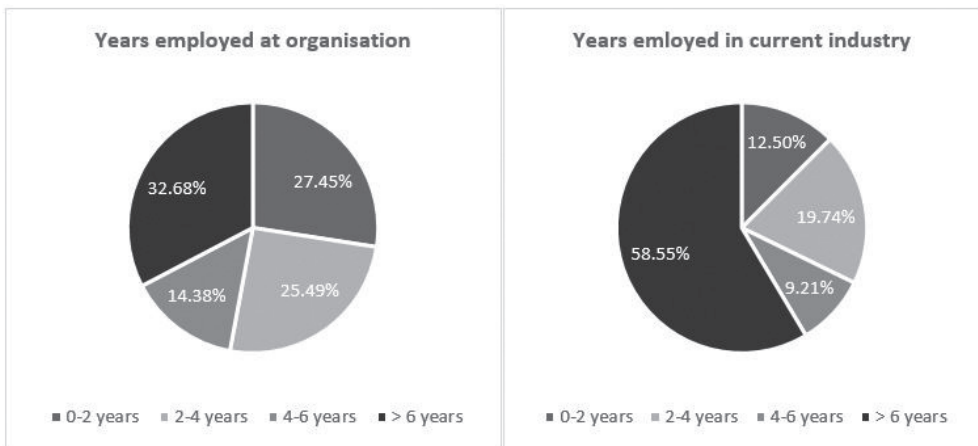
The web-based survey comprised 43 closed-ended questions and was divided into four sections, namely: biographical information; attributes of co-COC; bottom-up communication and antecedents of co-COC. A six-point Likert scale, which ranged from “agree very strongly” to “disagree very strongly”, was utilised.

5.2 Data analysis

The data analysis involved descriptive statistics, specifically, the calculation of frequencies, means, standard deviations and percentages. Exploratory factor analysis was conducted where principal factoring served as extraction method with varimax rotation to measure the 16-item co-COC attribute scale, a four-item bottom-up communication scale and a 16-item co-COC antecedent scale. Since four attributes and antecedents respectively were proposed, the number of factors was pre-specified and a four-factor analysis was conducted for these sections. A one-factor solution was retained for bottom-up communication. Pearson correlation coefficients were also calculated among the identified attributes, the attributes and bottom-up communication and antecedents.

5.3 Realised sample profile

Of the 240 questionnaires distributed (40 per organisation), 153 questionnaires were retrieved. Some respondents, however, did not complete the entire questionnaire and in those cases the questionnaires were excluded from the analysis. The following figure (Figure 1) contains various charts to show the profile of the realised sample.



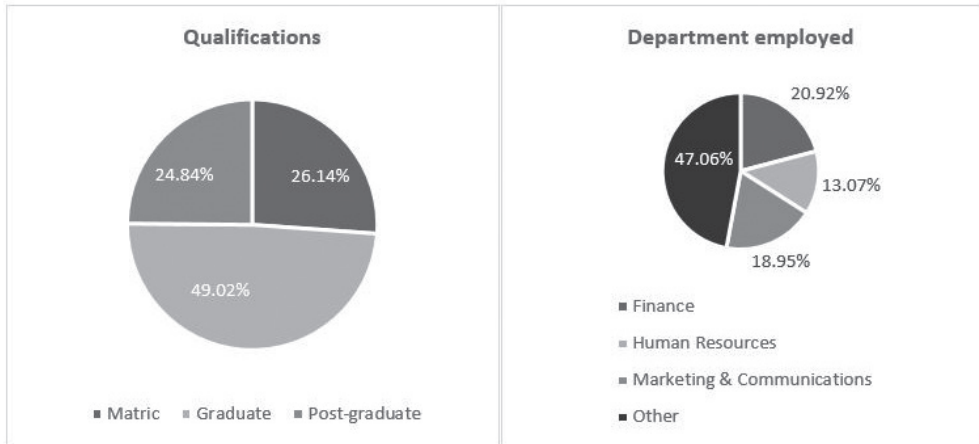


Figure 1: Profile of respondents

As illustrated in Figure 1, 47.06% ($n = 72$) of respondents were employed in departments other than finance, human resources and marketing and communication. These “other” departments included sales, logistics, customer relations, legal, production and supply chain management. 49.02% ($n = 75$) of respondents held a management position, while 50.98% ($n = 78$) of respondents fulfilled non-management positions. 63.40% ($n = 97$) of respondents were female and 36.60% ($n = 56$) were male.

5.4 Reporting of results

Responses to the list of 36 items pertaining to the attributes, bottom-up communication and antecedents of co-COC were subjected to exploratory factor analysis. The results relating to the attributes, bottom-up communication and antecedents are reported below.

Attributes of co-COC

As depicted in Table 1, four factors, shown in dark grey, emerged, containing either three or two items: encouragement of dissent (EOD); employee engagement (EE); meaningful dialogue (MD) and collaboration and co-creation (CACC). The overall MSA (measure of sampling adequacy) for the items that measured the attributes of co-COC was 0.93, with an average of 0.92 per item. 75.79% of the original variation is explained by the four-factor solution.

Table 1: Statements to measure the attributes of co-COC

Statement in questionnaire	F1: EOD	F2: EE	F3:MD	F4: CACC
Continuous debate among employees towards identifying resolutions to problems is apparent	0.74236	0.21182	0.18166	0.35423
New knowledge is a derivative of continuous debate in the organisation	0.67009	0.17326	0.27475	0.35905
Diverse employee opinions are used as a platform for the generation of new ideas.	0.65340	0.33762	0.25503	0.40643
My input in the organisation leads to a sense of self-fulfillment	0.57227	0.38539	0.55253	-0.06199
My input is valued by management	0.54191	0.45053	0.54152	0.15752
Management welcomes employees' input when organisational decisions have to be made	0.13094	0.81385	0.30345	0.16237
Employees are actively involved in organisational projects	0.30072	0.75045	0.19014	0.32716
Open discussions between management and employees are evident	0.18405	0.10160	0.74420	0.43219
Different opinions are valued in my organisation	0.15011	0.39269	0.71623	0.20192
Regular discussions are evident in the organisation	0.33950	0.19513	0.69464	0.38535
The organisation is characterised by an entrepreneurial spirit	0.51805	0.60789	0.08427	0.17137
We have the opportunity to collectively experiment with new ideas towards the resolution of issues	0.42716	0.51514	0.38311	0.33836
We work collectively to establish shared meaning in the organisation	0.25969	0.51266	0.40539	0.45148
We work collectively on projects in the organisation	0.19896	0.20162	0.26752	0.82734
Solutions to issues are co-created	0.39903	0.37534	0.22336	0.63991
Innovative solutions to problems are collectively identified	0.43400	0.23971	0.30791	0.63614
<i>Mean*</i>	2.90	2.90	2.58	2.67
<i>Std dv</i>	0.87	0.84	0.89	0.85
<i>Cronbach Alpha</i>	0.85	0.71**	0.85	0.89

* Mmax = 6 (1= Agree very strongly; 2=Agree strongly; 3=Agree; 4=Disagree; 5=Disagree strongly; 6=Disagree very strongly)

** Pearson Correlation Coefficient

The identified factors, shown in dark grey, are in line with the attributes from the literature review and document analysis. The items shown in light grey, originally intended to measure EE and CACC respectively, were considered as “double loaders” as these items loaded highly onto more than one factor and were excluded from the analysis. These items should, however, be reconsidered in future research. The Cronbach alpha for EE could not be calculated, as it appeared that there was an interrelationship between only two items in this factor. Instead, a Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated to determine whether these two items correlated to consider EE as an attribute of co-COC. A *p*-value of < 0.0001 was achieved, which indicated a positive correlation between these two variables of EE. All the communalities of the factor solution were above 0.5, which indicates that the original variation is still sufficiently explained within the four-factor solution.

Since the focus of this article is on building a fully-fledged concept, it was further important to determine whether the identified attributes were correlated.

Table 2: Pearson correlation coefficient of co-COC attributes

	Pearson Correlation Coefficients, N=134* Prob > r under H0: Rho=0			
	EOD	EE	MD	CACC
EOD	1.00000	0.66444 <.0001	0.71513 <.0001	0.73614 <.0001
EE	0.66444 <.0001	1.00000	0.63307 <.0001	0.61378 <.0001
MD	0.71513 <.0001	0.63307 <.0001	1.00000	0.71040 <.0001
CACC	0.73614 <.0001	0.61378 <.0001	0.71040 <.0001	1.00000

* Correlations only calculated for completed responses in respective sections

From Table 2 it was possible to infer that the co-COC attributes correlate positively with *p*-values less than 0.05.

Bottom-up communication

Bottom-up communication (BUC) was measured separately, as it does not function as an attribute per se. In this regard, a one-factor solution was retained by making use of the latent root criteria. The overall MSA for the items that measured BUC was 0.74, with an average of 0.73 per individual item.

Table 3: Statements to measure bottom-up communication

Statement in questionnaire	F1: BUC
Meaning in the organisation is created through interaction	0.85723
Management listens to organisational stakeholders through stakeholder engagement strategies	0.85385
Management listens to organisational stakeholders through co-creation strategies	0.85310
Interaction as opposed to information transfer is valued	0.81107
<i>Mean*</i>	2.84
<i>Std dv</i>	0.78
<i>Cronbach Alpha</i>	0.87

* Mmax = 6 (1= Agree very strongly; 2=Agree strongly; 3=Agree; 4=Disagree; 5=Disagree strongly; 6=Disagree very strongly)

As is evident from Table 3, BUC emerged as a factor consisting of four items, which affirms the findings from the literature review and document analysis. All the communalities of the factor solution were also above 0.5.

Since BUC and the identified attributes collectively encapsulate the nature of co-COC, it was further important to determine whether BUC correlated with the identified attributes.

Table 4: Correlation of BUC with co-COC attributes

Pearson Correlation Coefficients, N = 134* Prob > r under H0: Rho=0					
	EOD	EE	MD	CACC	BUC
EOD	1.00000	0.66444 <.0001	0.71513 <.0001	0.73614 <.0001	0.77172 <.0001
EE	0.66444 <.0001	1.00000	0.63307 <.0001	0.61378 <.0001	0.64091 <.0001
MD	0.71513 <.0001	0.63307 <.0001	1.00000	0.71040 <.0001	0.66727 <.0001
CACC	0.73614 <.0001	0.61378 <.0001	0.71040 <.0001	1.00000	0.63729 <.0001
BUC	0.77172 <.0001	0.64091 <.0001	0.66727 <.0001	0.63729 <.0001	1.00000

* Correlations only calculated for completed responses in respective sections

The above table indicates that the p -values are all < 0.05 , which implies that there is enough statistical evidence to reject the null hypothesis at a 5% level of significance. This ultimately indicates that BUC correlates with the four co-COC attributes which encapsulate the nature of co-COC.

Antecedents of co-COC

The cells shown in dark grey in Table 5 indicate that four factors emerged, each consisting of four or three items: leadership agility (LA); stakeholder engagement (SE); organisational agility (OA) and change-able culture (CAC). The overall MSA for the items that focused on measuring the antecedents was 0.92 with an average of 0.91 per item. 78.86% of the original variation is explained by the four factor solution.

Table 5: Statements to measure the antecedents of co-COC

Statement in questionnaire	F1:LA	F2:SE	F3: OA	F4:CAC
The leader of the organization (i.e. MD/CEO) listens to employees during change initiatives	0.83993	0.32135	0.15980	0.23552
The leader of the organisation (i.e. MD/CEO) engages employees on all levels of the organisation	0.83826	0.21894	0.13698	0.25954
The leader of the organization (i.e. MD/CEO) developed a receptive infrastructure within the organisation to absorb change	0.77224	0.37557	0.29392	0.24051
The leader of the organisation (i.e. MD/CEO) provides guidance during change initiatives	0.73333	0.37951	0.33184	0.23464
Input from external stakeholders are actively sourced to guide organisational decision making	0.26386	0.83399	0.23840	0.23403
External stakeholders are consulted to identify creative solutions to problems	0.37545	0.79982	0.23007	0.22714
Collaboration with external stakeholders creates synergy	0.30881	0.73384	0.23191	0.28507
The organisation continuously engages with external organisational stakeholders	0.30060	0.72647	0.31407	0.27559
The organisation is at the forefront of the latest innovations in the field/respective industry	0.04069	0.11635	0.82828	0.09625
The organisation has the capacity to absorb continuous change from the business environment	0.26497	0.26837	0.75236	0.21577
The organisation is receptive to new developments in the business environment	0.20378	0.27332	0.69476	0.19219
Employees are able to adapt in response to the opportunities in the business environment	0.32720	0.24866	0.64938	0.39512
The culture of the organisation enables employees to respond to the needs of the ever-changing business environment	0.37361	0.23346	0.54698	0.50566
The organisation places high regard on nurturing talent	0.18512	0.29816	0.22079	0.80032
The organisation offers opportunities for further career development	0.20412	0.17728	0.21715	0.77869
A healthy work-life balance is promoted in the organisation	0.29527	0.25257	0.17722	0.72134
<i>Mean*</i>	2.64	2.91	2.55	2.92
<i>Std dv</i>	1.11	0.81	0.79	1.08
<i>Cronbach Alpha</i>	0.95	0.92	0.85	0.86

* Mmax = 6 (1= Agree very strongly; 2=Agree strongly; 3=Agree; 4=Disagree; 5=Disagree strongly; 6=Disagree very strongly)

The statement shown in light grey represents a double-loader statement which was originally intended to measure CAC. This statement was excluded from the analysis and should be re-evaluated in future research. The results reported in Table 5 indicate that the antecedents for the implementation of co-COC identified from the literature can indeed be confirmed. All the communalities of the factor solution were above 0.5, which implies that the original variation is still sufficiently explained within the four-factor solution.

It was further also important to determine whether the various antecedents correlate, as they serve collectively as the grounding for the implementation of co-COC.

Table 6: Pearson correlation coefficient of co-COC antecedents

Pearson Correlation Coefficients, N = 134* Prob > r under H0: Rho=0				
	LA	SE	OA	CAC
LA	1.00000	0.76081 <.0001	0.55243 <.0001	0.67664 <.0001
SE	0.76081 <.0001	1.00000	0.60582 <.0001	0.67784 <.0001
OA	0.55243 <.0001	0.60582 <.0001	1.00000	0.56075 <.0001
CAC	0.67664 <.0001	0.67784 <.0001	0.56075 <.0001	1.00000

* Correlations only calculated for completed responses in respective sections

Table 6 indicates that LA, SE, OA and CAC serve collectively as the basis for the implementation of co-COC, as these antecedents correlate positively with *p*-values less than 0.05.

5.5. Discussion of results

As stipulated earlier, the process of concept development plays an important role in the development of a knowledge foundation and entails the formulation of a *definition* and the identification of key *attributes*. In alignment with the results of the factor analysis, co-COC could be defined as the “daily communication and social processes of organisational members to collaboratively negotiate and co-create innovations towards identifying creative solutions to evolve with changes posed by the volatile business environment”. The “co” prefix specifically encapsulates the collaborative nature of this process. It should also be noted that

although co-COC specifically refers to how organisational members collectively make sense of change, this process also promotes collaboration and co-creation with external strategic organisational stakeholders.

From the results it could be deduced that against the acceptance of change as part of organisational life, co-COC is bottom up in nature and elicits the attributes of meaningful dialogue, employee engagement, collaboration and co-creation and encouragement of dissent. These attributes are enabled by the antecedents of organisational agility, leadership agility, a change-able culture and stakeholder engagement. It is further suggests that an emergent approach to organisational change, which focuses on how organisational members construct their social reality where change becomes part of organisational life, necessitates organisational agility. This implies a flexible, open organisational structure to quickly respond and adjust, but ultimately evolve with the changes imposed by the volatile business environment. This necessitates leadership agility, where the leader and managers connect with employees and truly value their input and participation so as to promote a receptive context, or change-able culture. Such a context fosters the opportunity for organisational members to engage in meaningful dialogue so as to collaboratively make sense of change, co-create innovations and conduct experiments in response to the volatile business environment. Co-COC should not be focused on the mere transfer of information, but on employee engagement, where the leader and management involve employees in organisational decision-making, which could in turn elicit a sense of self-discovery and employee empowerment regarding the value of their inputs for organisational sustainability.

Change from below requires members of an organisation to learn how to talk to one another effectively and constructively on all levels of the organisation during the process of building a collective understanding of change. Such a perspective naturally allows for the encouragement of dissent, as knowledge develops through continuous debate and discourse. Furthermore, there should be meaningful dialogue across the entire organisation to allow for sharing of meaning and ideas. This also entails engaging with other external strategic stakeholders as a starting point for developing creative solutions.

When the implementation of co-COC is considered, it should be noted that some change projects will necessitate a planned approach within an overall emergent change process. These projects will require top-down, change-orientated communication. In such instances, Järventie-Thesleff et al. (2015) are of the view that organisational leaders should be encouraged to facilitate the change process rather than merely informing; to follow a charismatic as opposed to an authoritative leadership approach; and to encourage employee engagement in all units, departments and teams on multiple levels of the organisation, instead of simply enforcing collaboration among organisational members.

A further pragmatic consideration already noted is that the role of the strategic communication professional is no longer to control communication and to encourage participation so as to achieve resolution. Instead, strategic communication professionals should act as

facilitators to establish continuous discussion forums among organisational members at which opinions can be freely expressed and dissent encouraged (Ströh, 2007). In fulfilling the role of facilitator, the strategic communication professional should create “platforms for discourse and participation within and between the organisation and its stakeholders ... which necessitates both relational and dialectical strategies to ensure marginalised voices are also heard” (Overton & Verwey, 2013:373). Ströh (2007:133) emphasises that building and sustaining relationships lies at the heart of effective change initiatives, which could be achieved through “participation that builds trust and openness, not merely paying lip-service to involvement”. This will necessitate that the strategic communication professional no longer be too closely aligned with the organisation (Overton & Verwey, 2013).

6. LIMITATIONS, CONTRIBUTIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In accordance with the evolutionary approach to concept development, apart from providing a unique definition, a concept is composed of distinct attributes. This article has managed to confirm the attributes of co-COC that were identified by means of a literature review and document analysis through a quantitative factor analysis with selected high-change organisations in South Africa. In addition to these attributes, this article also emphasised the bottom-up nature of co-COC and identified various antecedents to realise the implementation of co-COC. A unique definition was also provided to encapsulate these attributes, nature and antecedents of co-COC.

Drawing from critical developments in strategic communication, this article presents a new concept, co-COC, which contributes to the body of knowledge on change-orientated communication and re-affirms the critical role of communication in the change process, and provides a much-needed starting point for managing change as an ongoing process that is part of organisational life. This concept moved beyond existing change-orientated communication concepts through the proposition of accepting change as a continuous process by encapsulating the collaborative nature of internal organisational members making sense of change. Furthermore, this concept proposed the co-creation of innovative solutions by drawing from contemporary developments in strategic communication. The various antecedents and attributes identified could specifically assist organisations in implementing a collaborative approach towards ongoing organisational change. Moreover, this concept goes further towards fulfilling the need for theory development beyond mainstream assumptions; this could assist strategic communication professionals in particular to acknowledge the need for the uptake of contemporary developments in practice.

The results of this article are not generalisable to all high-change organisations, as non-probability sampling was applied in the purposive selection of the participating organisations and respondents. Furthermore, specific items aimed at measuring some of the attributes and antecedents were calculated as double-loaders in the exploratory factor analysis and were excluded from the analysis. These items should be re-evaluated in future research. Future research could focus on further exploring this concept with a larger sample of high-change organisations and implementing co-COC longitudinally at a high-change organisation. It should also be noted that this article sketches the ideal conditions for co-creation and collaboration in realising co-COC towards the acceptance of change as part of organisational life. Since this article focuses on developing the

concept of co-COC, it does not explore the contrary where these co-creation strategies could be abused to the benefit of organisational management. This is definitely also an area to be explored in future research.

7. CONCLUSION

Organisations today are in a continuous state of flux, and have to be able to adapt to the demands of an interactive society in order to survive. In line with this perspective, this article responds to the need to develop theoretical approaches beyond traditional assumptions and, what was more important, to develop a change communication approach drawing on contemporary critical developments in the field of strategic communication. The identified attributes, bottom-up nature and antecedents of co-COC provide organisations with guidelines for instilling change as part of organisational life, and in that way move away from the dominant planned change and management outlook. The realisation of co-COC further necessitates changes in the practice of strategic communication, which relates to a broadened application of strategic communication as the all-encompassing, converging communication function to achieve the mission of the organisation. Moreover, the contemporary role of the strategic communication professional as facilitator to create platforms for discourse and encouraging dissent is essential.

The need for organisations to continuously change and adapt to the VUCA business environment is essential to their survival. The benefits of a communication approach that could facilitate organisational change as part of organisational life is more relevant than ever before.

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