

Change, re-branding, and communications: The fluctuating identity of a major UK organization

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Abstract

This paper reveals empirical evidence on a large-scale restructuring and corporate re-branding initiative in a major UK distribution company. The article examines the role of communication strategies in the change management process, which underpin the organization's attempt to alter its identity. An interlinked conception of communication theory and organizational identity theory is developed to reflect these findings. The aim of the study is twofold: to conceptualize the integrated role of communication strategies in change processes; and to explore the lacuna between the success and failure of the corporate communication strategies in redefining organizational identity. Semi-structured and on-line interviews with senior managers and internal consultants were conducted. The research findings highlight the key components of the change process and the wide gulf between the intention of the change and its realization.

Keywords: *Organizational Communication, Communication Strategy, Change Management, Organizational Identity and Image*

Introduction

Change management is “the continuous process of aligning an organization with its marketplace and doing it more responsively and effectively than competitors,” Berger (1994: 7). Organizations change in response to a variety of drivers that threaten the current practices and legitimacy of the organization. Managing change involves the need to consider the effects of the change on both the interpretive schemas of organizational members and of important external constituencies, such as shareholders and customers. As Gioia and Thomas argue: “under conditions of strategic change, it is not existing identity or image but, rather, envisioned identity or image - those to be achieved - that imply the standards for interpreting important issues” (1996: 370).

Changes to the organization on a transformational scale normally involve changes in organizational identity - those features of the firm which are central, distinctive and enduring (Albert and Whetten, 1985) - and such moves will affect organizational member's sense of identification with the organization and how they define it. Revisions in the interpretive schemes of top managers and employees are required for change, chiefly facilitated through a variety of communication systems. Our focus in this study is on the attempted change of identity in a major UK distribution organization and how this was conceived by senior managers and change agents, and how the change was received within the business. Change also has an external-facing aspect, influencing how key constituencies perceive the company. Senior managers are concerned with the impact change will have on the image of the firm with those outside the organization. The image of the firm, therefore, is linked to “the perceptions of how external constituencies view the organization” (Gioia and Thomas 1996: 371).

In this article, we focus on a case study of a large distribution company in the UK (henceforth known as ‘Avonia’ - a pseudonym) – and its attempts to rename itself as part of a major restructuring exercise aimed at fostering a new image and identity for the organization. The activity of corporate renaming, aligned with an attempt to change its identity is substantially on the rise where organizational restructuring, including mergers and acquisitions and spin-offs, claims to play a part in a rule of the business survival. Examples include Accenture (formerly Andersen Consulting), Diageo (merged Guinness and Grand Metropolitan), and Centrica (former

arm of British Gas). In brief, corporate identity refers to ‘how we perceive ourselves’ while image is concerned with ‘how others see us.’ A linked understanding between the two is focal to the harmony of any change efforts, and communications serve as an oil to smooth the operation. Two main exploratory research questions are asked: (i) *how do senior managers envisage the need for change and the renaming process to alter organizational identity and image?* and (ii) *how were communications strategies used to install a new portfolio of redefined corporate identity and image over time?* This paper begins with an exploration of the theories to identify the connectivity of the study. Then, we move to the case, and examine the intentions and reactions of organizational members in the change process. We conclude by drawing out the major themes from the research and examine their relevance for both communication and identity.

Theoretical Perspectives

Both change management and communication strategy have received considerable academic scrutiny, but though both subjects have been extensively researched, the issue of how communication strategies are formulated to enhance the change efforts, has received less attention. In particular, the links between change, communication and the notion of identity are under-explored. In this article, we explore a case study to draw out the interplay between communication, change management, and organizational identity.

Communication

Not only does communication prove to be of the most pivotal tools in social life and business management but it is also embedded in every aspect of becoming an effective organization and of continuing to be a learning organization (Barker and Camarata, 1998). As such, organizational communication is essentially viewed as the collective interactive process of generating and interpreting messages between people within the organization through either direction (one-way) or bi-directional (two-way) manner of communication (Stohl, 1995).

Communication theories have expanded to cover more psychological and cognitive aspects and yield a better understanding of pivotal emerging issues, such as trust, commitment, and

empowerment (Shelby, 1993). In the perceptual model, the cognitive interpretation of messages is focused by which the miscommunication becomes better understood.

Much of the empirical research appeals to the fact that firms tend to formulate and implement a series of communication strategy through a multidimensional lens so as to facilitate various organizational perspectives, such as diversity (Witherspoon and Wohler, 1996), corporate learning (Gilsdorf, 1998), job performance and job satisfaction (Pettit *et al.*, 1997). The elements of the effective communication strategy seem to be varied in association with the circumstances the firm faces. Mohr and Nevin (1990) define a communication strategy as the use of a combination of communication facets, which include frequency and formality of communication (Maltz and Kohli, 1996), content of communication (Jablin *et al.*, 1987), and channel of communication (Carlson and Davis, 1998).

An effective communication is the *sine qua non* of the successful change initiative (Lewis, 2000). It is legitimate for managers to employ such a mechanism to clarify the facts to various stakeholders of what is going to change, why, and what benefits they can expect to derive from the change. An ultimate goal of communication in change is to convey meaningful messages in a strategic manner across the organization to achieve employee's corporate acculturation and employees' commitment (Unzicker *et al.*, 2000). A central meaningful message concerns the identity and image of the organization. Managing change, and the strategy for communication, requires a consideration of the potential impacts on redefining the identity of self and organization (Molden and Symes, 1999).

Organizational Identity

Essential to organizational identity is a conception, specified by Albert and Whetten (1985), describing identity as that which is central, enduring, and distinctive about an organization's character. The interrelationship between identity and image is being increasingly explored, with Dutton and Dukerich (1991), cited in Gioia *et al.*, 2000, by arguing that image (i.e., perceptions of how others perceived the institution) is tied to identity (i.e., how members perceive their organization). Thus, it is unlikely that a change in image can be scrutinized with the absence of a change in identity. In this paper, organizational identity is defined as "consistent and targeted

representations of the corporation emphasized through the management of corporate symbols and logos; strategically planned and operationally applied internal and external self-representation” (Gioia *et al.*, 2000: 67). While Hatch and Schultz (2002: 995) refer organizational image to “the set of views on the organization held by those who act as the organization’s others.” In a dynamic environment, the scale of change introduced by top management may have a substantive effect on redefining both corporate identity and image.

Organizational Identity and Change

If there is no discrepancy between the way ‘we see ourselves’ and how ‘others see us,’ the identity is normally affirmed, and no significant need for change requires (Gioia *et al.*, 2000). In reality a tension between organizational identity and change management imperatives can become apparent. Senior management may call for a ‘strategic’ approach to resolve the problem by means of multifaceted media channels. A public declaration of the future image can signal to outsiders that the organization is changing; therefore, the projection of a compelling future image can directly affect both identity and construed external image, as well as external perceptions of the organization (Gioia *et al.*, 2000). Brown and Starkey (2000) highlight three factors which contribute to a change in organizational identity: critical self-reflexivity; the promotion of a dialogue about future identity; and perhaps most difficult, the attainment of an attitude of wisdom. In order to achieve this, organizational communication plays a pivotal role in conveying relevant messages across the business units and the interorganizational boundaries to ensure that a balance between ‘what they perceive ourselves’ and ‘how others see us’ is attained.

Organizational Naming

The name of an organization strongly contributes to its identity and manifests core aspects of meaning (Glynn and Azbug, 2002). Identity, the central, enduring and distinct attributes of an organization, is not entirely captured by organizational naming, but naming contributes significantly to the fixity and symbolic definition of the organization, both internally and externally to key constituencies.

Organizational names attempt to label identity. Because of their cogency as symbols of identity, the legitimacy of an organization can depend on an appropriate name and the name's ability to resonate with employees, consumers and other audiences. In certain circumstances, particularly under conditions of change, firms often instigate an identity change that involves a change of name, often due to a perceived lack of legitimacy in the current name of the firm.

Because the management of image and identity is crucial in an organization's attempt to achieve prominence (Gioia and Thomas, 1996) ensuring that the perceptions of the new name both as a construed external image and in the interpretive schemas of organizational members, is very important.

In summary, critical views on communication, change management and organizational identity need to be integrated in order to develop a rounded picture of change activity. Communication impediments proliferate when changes are ambiguously identified (Lewis, 1999). Not only do they cause a drain on profitability, but also the effectiveness of management declines (Gilsdorf, 1998). In the work of Dawson (1996: 192), many underlying reasons why communication falls short of the ideals, which are “accuracy, reliability, validity, adequacy, and effectiveness.” Moreover, the most frequently noted categories of problem encountered by the company in transition are lack of communication vision, employees' negative attitudes, and role conflicts. If an organization's management fails to consider which communication behaviors it wishes to foster for its success, the signals it sends to employees may be inconsistent or counterproductive.

In this study, we examine a large UK distribution organization undergoing a major restructuring, and leading with a change of organizational name. We examine the processes through which this change occurs and the intentions and reflective thoughts on outcomes of senior managers within the organization.

Research Methodology

Case Selection

We conducted the research at a large distribution company, Avonia, formerly known as British Distribution, which can trace its history over 100 years, and currently employs over 100,000 employees in the UK. The company was in the middle of implementing a major strategic change program, and although it has recently diversified its business into retail banking networks, its large-scale bureaucracy continued to stifle its search for competitiveness. The original brands of British Distribution, which comprise Monarchy, Pixel Force and British Distribution, constitute different business entities with independent financial management. They have become the core businesses of the firm and are called ‘the consumer brands.’ Each brand or product group division carries its own identity. Apart from the domestic business, the increasing number of joint ventures and acquisitions with companies abroad has emphasized British Distribution’s global ambition. Yet, because of government regulatory requirements, senior managers perceive seemingly insurmountable problems for the firm to grow strategically. The deregulation of markets allowed the onset of intense competition, bringing a shock to the organizational system, which prompted a massive change project in the company, involving refocusing, restructuring and rebranding to become Avonia.

The original business structure did not support British Distribution’s expansion into international activity nor the need for heightened strategic flexibility following deregulation of the market and the influx of new competition. Restructuring and refocusing were deemed inevitable. The major changes planned were preceded in August 2001 by a change of corporate name from British Distribution to Avonia. The new name change signaled that it was moving beyond its traditional base of communications to include logistics, supply chain management, warehousing, e-commerce and tailored solutions for large business customers, both in the UK and abroad. The new brand name is to be used internationally to underpin its mergers, acquisitions and joint ventures.

The internal reorganization was branded 'Shaping for peak performance,' which has the aim of creating new market-facing service delivery units and an opportunity to organize their business units for the new challenges.

We focused on a single case for two reasons. First, the case is relatively unique in context and provides the opportunity to build theory through the analysis of a number of unit cases within the firm. The research focus is geared to inducing a framework of how key persons in senior management and in the internal communication team perceive and formulate communication strategies in light of change management process as well as organizational identity. Second, because of the exploratory nature of the research, we opted for depth and rich data which of necessity required a thorough immersion in the organization. The case study method allows the authors to gain some insights for developing a thorough understanding of how strategic formulation and implementation within the company is operationalized (Yin, 1994; Pettigrew, 1990). This research aims to utilize the inductive approach (Cooper and Schindler, 1998; Hamel *et al.*, 1993) to generate a theoretical framework in reflection of the contemporary phenomenon.

Data Collection and Analysis

Multiple sources and modes of data or 'triangulation' are utilized to ensure internal validity as well as to minimize the potential biases, which may steal into the process of drawing conclusions (Yin, 1994). In the first place, we collected and studied pertinent archival data, such as company profiles, past and recent annual reports, international publications, press releases and employee feedback reports, so as to identify the transition of change and of how extant communication strategies go about. Also, a review of these materials facilitated the creation of relevant interview questions.

Two formats of interviews were employed. First, the semi-structured interviews were scheduled to provide the interviewees greater freedom in expressing the issues that they felt were most relevant from their own points of view, potentially unraveling issues not envisaged at the interview design stage. Interviews with 20 key individuals, ranging from top management to

middle managers as well as internal consultants, who were centrally involved with the change process, were interviewed for approximately an hour each. Secondly, given some of the interviewees' busy schedules, the interviews were conducted via telephone and electronic mail. The interviewers were made aware that the interviews would be a part of a larger effort to assess the success and failure of communication strategies facing involved in the change program. Each interviewee was also promised utmost confidentiality.

Once the data were collected, two types of analysis were performed. Firstly, the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed as case descriptions to which the findings were referred, and subsequently, examined where appropriate. Secondly, we subsumed a series of classified themes based upon a common ground in typology and cross-checked each other's to strengthen the validity of the defined constructs.

Case Findings

Forces for Re-branding

Avonia, because of its large workforce, has set up an internal communication function to 'ensure clear messages are conveyed to all employees.' In addition to internal communications, the organization has an external communications operation, linking to key stakeholders and the press. Both internal and external communication arms are operated under the Group Corporate Affairs department, their role is to formulate and implement communication plans across the entire range of businesses.

Each business unit has also set up its own internal communication team, which is responsible for disseminating information within a particular unit. The group center provides a general framework of internal communication plans and strategies in which other business units are likely to tailor them to their practical needs. The units attempt to measure the overall results of the communication plans by e-questionnaires, feedback forms and informal talks.

By looking through the lens of the various top executives and senior managers of Avonia, the findings of the study reveal two series of overarching themes in relation to the re-branding and the change in business regime. The first unveils the process of the communication strategy formulation along a change process. The second presents the implementation outcomes.

Forces for Change

In terms of external forces, international competition and globalization drove the company to make a strategic move beyond the domestic markets. This was to accelerate business growth and profitability through joint ventures as well as mergers and acquisitions:

We are getting into logistics, call center operations, and supply chain management services. Moreover, we broaden out present business to a global stage through mergers and acquisitions so as to build up the connection networks in Europe, North American and Asia.

This broadening of strategic horizons was one push toward changing name, with a further element stemming from doubts over whether the term 'British' would really help the business overseas. The second driver was name confusion:

Some of our customers cannot really differentiate between British Distribution and British Distribution Carriers, so if I say I work for them, they think I am a driver of a lorry. There is no clarity at all. And that is one of the big internal issues in association with external pressures behind rebranding.

Communication Strategies

The communication strategies in Avonia encompassed several dimensions. Primarily, upon the realization of the need for change, the internal communication team needed to define the destination of change efforts. As such, the team decided the tones of the messages to be delivered to the identified groups of audiences. The content of the message was accordingly

tailored and transmitted through rich communication channels, such as internal team briefings between managers and staff in each business unit.

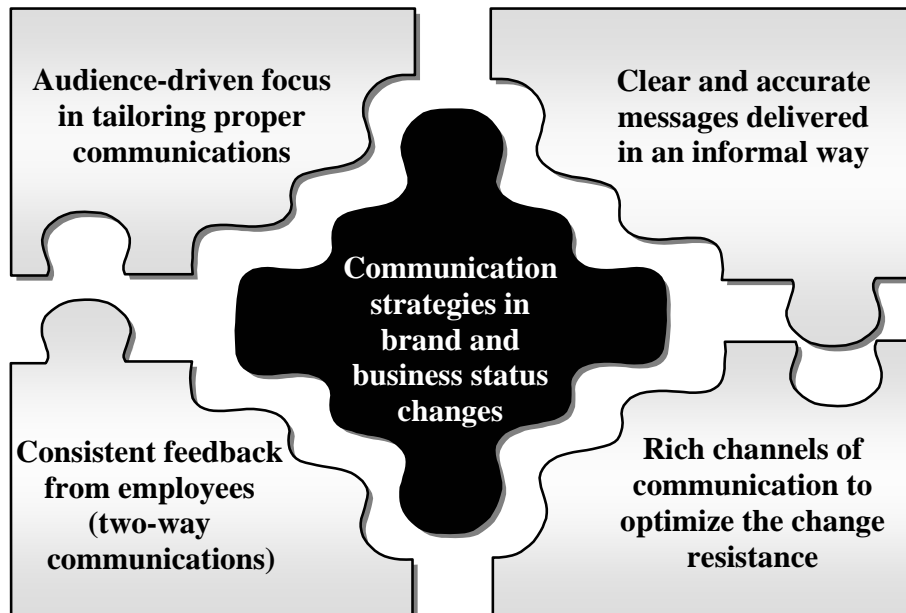
Due to the blockage of large organizations like ours, it is absolutely impossible for top management to engage in individual dialog with every single employee. Therefore a strategy of channel communications we use is to deliver the message from the top management to 4,000 senior managers and internal communication consultants through some interactive workshops. We urge them to pass the clear messages received onto their subordinates in a particular unit for which they work either through internal team briefings or else where appropriate.

In August 2002, a public announcement of the new name was made and employees received launch packs incorporating a set of bound cards addressing the concepts and illustrations of the brand and business status change. A communication manager claimed that it effectively conveyed a simplified message to a massive group of relevant staff and the press. On the last page of the launch pack, there was a short feedback form aimed to measure how well the employees understand the reasons for the brand change:

We tried to open as many feedback channels as possible to all employees, who may have further enquiries. They include e-questionnaires, e-mails, feedback forms and help lines.

The four major components of the communication strategy are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1



The general precept of the communications strategies was implemented was to deliver ‘a clear formal message in an informal way.’

Evaluation of Communication Strategies

The purpose of the communication strategy evaluation was to measure the effectiveness of communication schemes utilized to align the senior manager’s understanding with the change issue. Most employees in the study revealed that they had been aware of changes and superficially understood the written contents as being delivered. A level of cynicism was, however, substantial when they began to hear details. There was no session of interactive communications with managers seriously put in place. For this reason, employee’s confusion about change became an obstacle to the move toward employee commitment to change.

Most of the communications are in the form of written words and electronic transmission rather than face-to-face communication from the leaders. Such communications help people to understand the issue only, but the commitment to change, more importantly, is not intrinsic to the messages conveyed.

The scale of the changes, and the fundamental change of organizational identity brought resistance from the majority of employees, who were unused to change and who were skeptical of the new name:

The organizational culture in Avonia is very stressful. It is much like civil service, bureaucratic, over-engineering, which does not serve any challenges of competition. People generally fail to believe that we are in the situation for change since some of them have been in the company for years. And there is no platform of change and commitment to change put in place. That is why we need to acculturate them with new cultures.

The Impact of the Change Process

The re-branding exercise cost £2 million. Approximately two years after the scheme of corporate re-branding was adopted, the firm has been hard hit by increasing competition and radical corporate restructuring. Avonia restructured to cut costs by £1 billion at the end of the year. The company has already signaled its intention to lay off as many as 10,000 jobs by mid-2003, and also aims to close down hundreds of its offices in a year to come.

These developments threw the corporate re-branding into strong relief. The following themes emerged to reveal the key factors that contribute to such problems in action.

Cynicism from Public and Labor Union Reactions

The primary brand name of British Distribution has acculturated its heritage throughout the history of the firm. The new name 'Avonia' confused both existing and prospective customers, bringing uncertainty over its ownership status. Public media became a strong feedback channel to reflect employee understanding and perception for a message that was poorly disseminated by the firm. The UK Secretary of the State for Trade and Industry commented that a lack of consumer advertising of the brand lay behind the relegation of the name that became boycotted by unions and reviled by customers. Cynicism about the meaning of the new brand name and the necessity of the name change also stemmed from the cost, which, in a failing business, was viewed to be extravagant and ill-thought through.

The re-branding hence became symbolic of a wider malaise throughout the company, with deep distrust between senior management and unions. Staff at Avonia already faced huge uncertainty after the introduction of a cost-cutting program and a large-scale lay-off announcement. The credibility of senior managers suffered considerably. Employees in the operational level felt blamed for causing impediments to change, but also some of the top management executives were blamed for reluctance to change. Furthermore, some senior managers were perceived not to have committed to taking the business to a new competitive level.

A further complaint was that the re-branding was merely part of a 'window-dressing' campaign aimed at disguising the parlous state of the business and the perceived lack of quality in management performance.

Ineffective Internal Communication

Employees argued that the essence of communication in the firm has raised people's awareness, but not really promoted acceptance. Interpersonal and organizational tensions of the cost cutting program resulted in less support on the change efforts because the employees' fear of losing jobs and benefits. In addition, the network of grapevines within/across corporate units had dramatically reduced the power of the internal communication scheme. More interactive

communications were required to secure the realignment of the organizational reality and to close the lacuna between managers and employees.

Organizational Identity and Image: From Redefinition to Reinstatement

In connection with the finding in change initiative formulation – from ‘understanding where we are’ to ‘understanding where we head for’ – it implicitly parallels to the proceeding of organizational identity and image redefinition. Most participants perceive Avonia as a rigid bureaucratic giant confined by the frame of governmental regulations. Provision is given to the fact that Avonia has not been threatened by any competitors in the domestic market, people in the firm thus have become unlearnt and, subsequently, developed their mindset in the ‘non-competitive’ work environment, leading to ‘static’ enthusiasm to cope with challenges. They see themselves as mechanistic engines that collectively mobilize a gigantic vehicle on the move. Looking through a lens of the customers, they have perceived the firm as a large state-owned enterprise with exclusive heritage where the corporate names and brand logos are of most concern in representing the organizational status. Their trust and loyalty to all brands under the umbrella of the old name of British Distribution is well established.

Galvanized by the heat of globalization, a new era of corporate business status and brand image changes has shaken the *status quo* of the firm’s identity and image. The management attempts to redefine both issues, concomitantly, in aligning with the market position toward which the company is moving. The media and corporate communication are extensively deployed to convey simplified messages within/across the organization and to the public. Intimate details of the early formulation of the strategy are published prominently and simultaneously with internal communication in the press.

Nonetheless, such was the disastrous impact of the re-branding a decision was taken by senior managers in 2002 to reverse the name change back to the original. One of the employees claims that:

We suffer from both information overload and information insufficiency. That is, we are facing too much information on details about each business unit and too little information on the big corporate picture of Avonia. Therefore, what will the corporate identity be?

Subsequently, an agenda of the corporate identity and image redefinition has to be revitalized and reinterpreted.

Discussion

The case study of Avonia draws out three major issues for discussion. First, the unexpected pitfalls of the integrative communication strategies highlight a failure of the identity makeover. Consistency and continuity of the communication foci is the key to creating awareness and understanding to all parties concerned. Apparently, the firm fell short of the appropriate practices. It failed to transfer British Distribution's brand equity over to the new brand Avonia. The company also failed to convey the emotional and rational benefits employees and customers derive from the rebranding and identity change. The new brand name needed to capture its new identity, though it came with a huge investment for organizational and public campaigns.

Second, senior management seemed to lack commitment to the work of changing corporate identity and change. Generally, top executives are considered “knowledgeable captains” behind the steering wheel of change in the organizations. Corporate strategic directions mainly reflect upon their determination and courage to lead changes. However, evidence showed that senior managers were anxious about organizational change due to costs and time scales involved. The aforementioned statements seem to be paradoxical in a pragmatic sense. On one hand, they intend to navigate changes thoroughly, but on the other hand they live in fear of change failure. Oftentimes, change success is determined by the degree of risks on which the managers attempt to take. The Avonia case reveals that the management teams’ actions fall to such a paradox.

Third, the strategy primarily focused on two-way communication, but it turned out to be one dimensional or one-way communication in practice. A large number of written materials (mostly

plain texts), such as newsletters, memos, etc., were sent to staff and the press without the clear identity or concept of the brand conveyed in the message – inevitably subject to cynicism. It is suggested that an organization undergoing change transitions should develop informal discussion groups as powerful agents for change. Its underlying philosophy is to communicate change issues in an interactive atmosphere. Essentially, a mode of face-to-face communication aims to be reinforced and mobilized by the open discussion with regard to the change dimensions. The framework of the findings is given in Figure 2.

A fundamental issue is the extent to which the re-branding to Avonia signaled a devaluation of the core identity of the firm. Though employees were reasonably clear about the strategic aims and external threats to the organization, the history and strong brand name of British Distribution had enabled them to maintain positive perceptions of the organization. Because many employees had relatives and parents who had worked for the firm, this sense of social identity was a powerful force within the firm, membership of which was valued, even in the absence of high pay or highly develop career paths. The re-branding undermined the sense of affirmation to the organization, with a name that was perceived to smack of consultant-speak and served to deny the heritage of the organization. A major complaint was that nothing positive was given by the company to serve as an aspirational goal or sense of purpose to the organization. All employees could see was rationalization of jobs and a new name that had no resonance with either them or with the external world.

Managing change does destabilize members' identity, but in this case, the shift was too great - employees asking 'what kind of organization is this?' were bewildered. The case for strategic change was unanswerable, yet a combination of poor communication strategies and a name-change that further de-legitimized the company, seriously challenged members' commitment and morale.

In this case, the organization tried to project a desired future image with a 'go-ahead' name and hoped that the desired identity change would follow. It is clear from the findings that this pull was nothing like enough. The re-branding was not understandable to employees, consumers or

other stakeholders and did not secure legitimacy. The radicalness of the name played badly with a conservative organization unprepared to take a leap into the future, precisely because that future was never made plain to them, through a blurred strategic and vision process and an even more opaque communications approach.

This has been an exploratory study based on a single case study and so should some caution be exercised with regard to the findings. Examining these effects longitudinally would increase the strength of future studies as too would the use of contrasting observations from multiple cases seem to enhance the notion of replication.

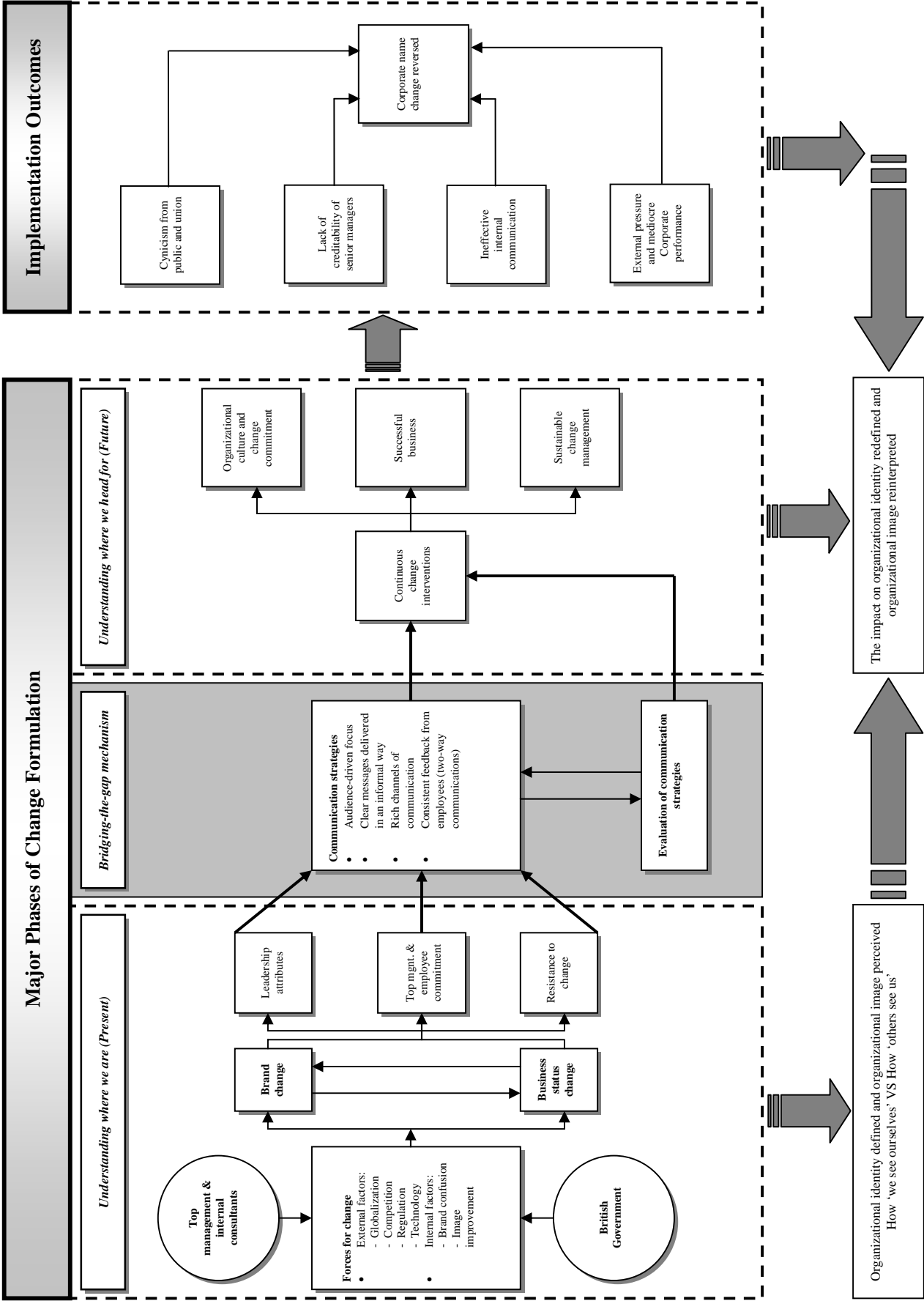
Concluding Remarks

Corporate re-branding and business status changes in a major UK communication firm provides a key instance of an attempt to ensure enhanced legitimacy both internally and externally to core constituencies, leading to the redefinition of organizational identity and image. In order to effectively facilitate transformational change, communication strategies will not succeed if done piecemeal. They should be done in the form of an integrated framework, thereby broadening horizons toward a holistic approach toward the entire organization.

This research study shows that communication strategies in change process stem from a clear understanding of 'where we are' and 'where we head for' and henceforth bridging the gap with communication mechanisms. Their essential elements include audience-driven focus, succinct messages delivered in an informal way, two-way communication, and rich channels of media employed. Paralleled with this change initiative, it implicitly involves the intention to embody a new portfolio of 'redefined and reinterpreted' corporate identity and image through a new name and business status. However, in practice, an influential avenue to a change identity, which is a changed image, becomes a fiasco within two years after the implementation put in place.

Figure 2

A Framework of Communication Strategies in Change Process and Implementation Outcomes on Organizational Identity: Avonia Company



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