

Managing Change in Digital Media Companies: Addressing Unrealistic KPIs and Employee Burnout

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Abstract: *This paper explores the role of communication and conflict resolution in managing change within digital media companies, with a focus on addressing unrealistic Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and the 996 work culture. By applying insights from Michael Elwood Roloff's research on conflict and communication, the paper discusses the dynamics between mid-level leaders, employees, and top management. It presents strategies to manage employee resistance, enhance collaboration, and realign organizational goals with realistic expectations, promoting a healthier and more productive work environment.*

Keywords: Digital Media Companies, Conflict resolution, Manage.

1. Statement of Problem Area

1.1 Background of Change Attempt

1.1.1 Nature of Change

In the contemporary digital media landscape, executive management faces the challenge of setting ambitious Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). This often leads to the establishment of unrealistic targets, as seen in companies like TikTok and RED, to push employees toward higher productivity and innovation. However, setting unachievable KPIs, especially within the framework of the 996 work culture—working from 9 AM to 9 PM, six days a week—places immense pressure on mid-level leaders and employees. As Roloff (1981) notes, communication breakdown and unresolved conflict can exacerbate stress in organizations, leading to reduced morale and productivity.

1.1.2 Issues

The primary issue with this approach is the unrealistic nature of the KPIs set by executives. These targets, while intended to motivate, often lead to overwhelming workloads for mid-level leaders and their teams. The pressure to meet these unattainable goals can result in extended working hours, encapsulated by the notorious "996" work culture—working from 9 AM to 9 PM, six days a week. This culture not only strains employees physically and mentally but also can diminish overall productivity and morale in the long run.

Furthermore, the misalignment between the goals set by executives and the operational realities faced by their teams can create a disconnect, leading to frustration and burnout among employees. This disconnect highlights a significant challenge in the change management process within these companies, where the ambitious visions of top management clash with the practical capabilities of the workforce.

1.1.3 Change Agents

The change agents in this scenario are several mid-level leaders and group leaders within the organization who are striving to improve the 996 working situation. Roloff (1987) highlights the importance of conflict resolution in leadership

roles, where leaders act as mediators between conflicting interests. These individuals possess significant influence within their teams and are in direct communication with both their team members and upper management.

A) Personality

Mid-level leaders and group leaders in digital media companies often exhibit a high degree of empathy and a strong concern for their team members' well-being. They are characterized by their caring nature, particularly regarding the stress levels and work-life balance of their employees. This makes them well-suited to advocate for more realistic and humane KPIs.

B) Power

These leaders hold substantial power in their ability to assign tasks and manage the workflow of their teams. Additionally, they have direct communication channels with upper management, enabling them to voice concerns and propose changes that can impact the broader organizational policies and goals.

C) Motives

The primary motives for these mid-level leaders include ensuring the well-being of their team members, reducing burnout, and fostering a more sustainable and productive work environment. By advocating for more realistic KPIs, they aim to balance the ambitious goals of top management with the operational realities and capacities of their teams.

1.1.4 Target(s)-the Person or People at Whom the Proposed Change are Directed

The targets of these proposed changes are the workers within the organization. These individuals are responsible for executing the tasks and meeting the KPIs set by the top management.

A) Personality

Workers in digital media companies often exhibit a mix of creativity, resilience, and technical skills. They are typically

passionate about their work, motivated by the dynamic nature of the industry, and driven to innovate within their roles. However, they can also experience stress and frustration when faced with unattainable goals.

B) Power

The workers hold limited power within the organizational hierarchy. Their role primarily involves executing tasks and meeting the objectives set by their managers and the top executives. They have minimal influence over strategic decisions and are expected to align their efforts with the directives provided by higher management.

C) Change Orientation

Workers are generally focused on achieving their immediate tasks and contributing to the broader goals of the organization. They are accustomed to balancing their workload with the need for creativity and innovation. However, when faced with the imposition of unrealistic KPIs, they may experience heightened stress, reduced morale, and a shift towards a survival mindset, where meeting deadlines and avoiding burnout become primary concerns.

The proposed change, driven by top executives, aims to push workers to exceed their limits and drive productivity through the establishment of high KPI targets. However, the unrealistic nature of these targets can lead to excessive workloads, employee burnout, and a disconnection between executive ambitions and the operational realities faced by workers. Addressing this issue requires a nuanced understanding of the motivations and limitations of both the mid-level leaders and the workers within the organization.

2. Statement of Theory

2.1 Key Concepts and Definitions

2.1.1 Resistance to Change

Key Concepts and Definitions:

- Resistance to Change: A phenomenon where individuals or groups push back against transformations within an organization, often due to fear of the unknown, loss of control, or bad past experiences with change.

Explanatory Statements:

- Resistance to Change is a natural reaction where individuals try to maintain the status quo. This resistance can stem from a variety of sources, such as lack of trust in management, poor communication, or perceived negative impacts of the change.
- Roloff's (1981) work on resistance and negotiation suggests that resistance often stems from fear of the unknown or perceived threats to autonomy. Understanding resistance helps in identifying the underlying concerns of employees and addressing them effectively to facilitate smoother transitions.

2.1.2 Social Influence Theory

Key Concepts and Definitions:

- Social Influence: The process by which individuals change their thoughts, feelings, or behaviors as a result of interacting with others.
- Normative Influence: Conforming to the expectations of others to gain social approval.
- Informational Influence: Conforming because of a desire to be correct and to understand the right way to act in a given situation.

Explanatory Statements:

- Roloff (1981) also explores the role of social influence in organizational settings, noting that individuals' behaviors can be shaped by peer pressure and group norms. Social Influence Theory explains how individuals' behaviors and attitudes can be shaped by social interactions. Normative influence often leads to compliance, where individuals conform to group norms to gain acceptance.
- Informational influence, on the other hand, can lead to internalization, where individuals accept information from others as evidence of reality. This theory is essential in understanding how social dynamics can drive organizational change and the importance of fostering positive group norms.

2.1.3 Organizational Assimilation Theory

Key Concepts and Definitions:

- Organizational Assimilation: The process through which new employees learn the attitudes, behaviors, and skills needed to function effectively within an organization.
- Stages of Assimilation: Anticipatory socialization, encounter, metamorphosis.

Explanatory Statements:

- Organizational Assimilation Theory outlines how employees integrate into an organization. Anticipatory socialization occurs before joining the organization, where individuals form expectations.
- The encounter stage happens when new employees first join the organization and begin to see the reality of their roles. Metamorphosis is the final stage where individuals become fully integrated members, adopting the values and practices of the organization.
- Roloff's (1987) insights on organizational assimilation stress the importance of clear communication and support systems in helping employees adjust to new roles and expectations. This theory helps in designing onboarding processes and support systems to ensure new employees can transition smoothly and align with

organizational goals.

3. Change Management Plan

3.1 Change Goals

3.1.1 Instrumental-Resource Goals

- **Increase Productivity**

To increase productivity, it is crucial to set realistic and achievable KPIs. Roloff's (1981) emphasis on communication highlights the need for transparent discussions between management and employees regarding workload expectations. The first step is to conduct a detailed analysis of current workloads and performance metrics. This can be achieved through surveys and interviews with employees, which will provide valuable insights into their tasks and challenges. Implementing time-tracking tools will offer objective measures of how time is spent on various tasks, while analyzing historical performance data will help identify trends and set achievable goals.

Data-driven KPIs should reflect actual capabilities while still challenging employees to grow. Benchmarking performance metrics against industry standards can help set competitive yet realistic KPIs. These targets should be adjustable, allowing for quarterly reviews and employee feedback to ensure they remain relevant and achievable. Continuous monitoring and regular check-ins, such as bi-weekly meetings, will help track progress and address any issues that arise.

- **Optimize Resource Allocation**

Optimizing resource allocation involves using time, skills, and tools wisely to achieve new, realistic KPIs. Automating tasks by using technology to handle routine activities frees up employees' time to focus on more strategic tasks. Training courses will ensure that employees are able to use these automated tools effectively. Project management tools can assign tasks based on employees' individual strengths and workload capacities, ensuring that tasks are assigned to the most appropriate employees. Developing detailed resource plans, aligning human resources with project timelines and organizational goals, using resource allocation software, and conducting regular capacity planning meetings will ensure that resources are allocated properly. This approach will enable employees to work more efficiently and avoid overwork and resource wastage, thereby helping to achieve new KPIs and improving overall productivity and employee satisfaction.

- **Cost Reduction**

By addressing the root causes of employee burnout and attrition, operational costs can be reduced. The notorious "996" work culture—working from 9 AM to 9 PM, six days a week—exacerbates employee burnout and leads to high turnover rates. Implementing employee benefit programs that focus on mental health, stress management, and work-life balance can help mitigate these issues. Offering flexible work arrangements, such as flex time or remote work options, can reduce stress and increase job satisfaction. By promoting a

healthier work-life balance, the reliance on excessive working hours can be diminished.

Increasing efficiency through lean management techniques will simplify operations and reduce time wastage. Establishing continuous improvement teams to identify and implement efficiency improvement measures will further enhance productivity. Health and wellness programs, including wellness incentives and regular health screenings, will reduce absenteeism rates and medical costs. These measures will help organizations achieve the new realistic KPIs while reducing operational costs and increasing employee productivity and satisfaction, all while combating the detrimental effects of the 996 work culture.

3.1.2 Relational Goals

- **Enhance Collaboration**

Enhancing collaboration is vital for building a positive work environment. Open communication channels, such as monthly meetings and suggestion boxes, will allow employees to share ideas and feedback. Team-building activities, like annual retreats and group workshops, will foster team spirit and strengthen interpersonal relationships. Collaboration platforms, such as project management software and internal chat platforms, will facilitate real-time communication and document sharing.

- **Build Trust**

Roloff (1987) underscores the importance of interpersonal communication in resolving conflicts and building strong relationships. Building trust requires transparency and consistency. Regularly updating employees on the progress of change initiatives through weekly updates and quarterly feedback sessions will demonstrate transparency. Leadership visibility, through an open-door policy and leadership walkabouts, will show commitment to the change and support for employees. Recognition programs, like Employee of the Month and public praise during team meetings, will acknowledge and reward employee contributions and efforts.

- **Promote Inclusivity**

Promoting inclusivity involves ensuring diverse input, creating structured feedback mechanisms, and providing equitable opportunities. Forming diversity committees and holding inclusive workshops will capture different perspectives and needs. Conducting annual surveys and organizing focus groups will gather comprehensive feedback from all levels of the organization. Offering training programs and developing individualized career development plans will ensure equal access to resources and opportunities for advancement.

3.3.3 Face-Image Related Goals

- **Present Change Agents Positively**

Presenting mid-level leaders positively is crucial for gaining employee buy-in. Roloff (1987) suggests that leaders who demonstrate empathy and understanding are more likely to

gain the trust of their teams. Demonstrating expertise through expert panels and training sessions will show thorough understanding of the new processes and tools. Exhibiting empathy by hosting open forums and conducting personal check-ins will address employee concerns and fears. Leading by example, with mid-level leaders being the first to adopt new practices, will set a positive example for others.

- **Address Employees' Image Goals**

Addressing employees' image goals involves reassuring them that the new KPIs are designed to showcase their strengths and help them grow professionally. Clear communication on how the new KPIs align with professional growth opportunities, along with career counseling sessions, will help employees see the benefits. Providing support through skills workshops and mentoring programs will help employees meet new expectations. Publicly recognizing and celebrating achievements through achievement boards and celebratory events will boost morale.

- **Maintain Organizational Reputation**

Maintaining the organizational reputation requires positive communication, stakeholder engagement, and consistent branding. Crafting and disseminating positive messages about the change through internal media campaigns and success stories will highlight the benefits. Engaging with external stakeholders through meetings and regular updates will explain how the changes improve service delivery and performance. Updating brand guidelines and conducting training sessions will ensure consistent branding across all communications.

3.2 Obstacles to Goal Achievement

3.2.1 Resistance to Change

- **Fear of the Unknown**

Fear of the unknown is a significant barrier to change. As Roloff (1981) points out, resistance to change is often rooted in communication breakdowns and unresolved conflicts. Employees may resist the change due to uncertainty about how it will impact their roles and responsibilities. This fear can lead to anxiety and reluctance to adopt new KPIs. Conducting regular informational sessions and providing detailed documentation explaining the changes and their impact will reduce uncertainty. By clearly outlining the benefits and addressing concerns upfront, employees will be more likely to embrace the change. Highlighting how realistic KPIs can alleviate the pressures of the 996 work culture by creating more manageable workloads can further reduce this fear.

- **Loss of Control**

The perception that new KPIs might reduce their autonomy and control over their work can create resistance among employees. Involving employees in the planning and implementation process through focus groups and seeking their input will give them a sense of control and ownership. By allowing employees to contribute to the decision-making

process, they will feel more invested in the outcome and less resistant to the change. Emphasizing that realistic KPIs are designed to improve work-life balance and reduce the need for excessive overtime will help address concerns about loss of control.

- **Bad Past Experiences**

Previous unsuccessful change initiatives might make employees skeptical about the current change, leading to a lack of trust in the process. Highlighting the differences between past and current initiatives, and demonstrating a clear plan for addressing potential issues, will help build trust. Providing examples of successful changes and outlining the lessons learned from past failures will reassure employees that the current initiative is well-thought-out and likely to succeed. Showing how the new KPIs can avoid the pitfalls of the 996 culture by promoting a more sustainable and productive work environment will further build confidence in the change.

3.2.2 Social Influence

- **Peer Pressure**

Peer pressure can significantly impact employees' willingness to adopt new, realistic KPIs. Roloff (1981) emphasizes that peer pressure and group dynamics play a significant role in shaping individuals' responses to change. If influential peers or groups within the organization resist the change, others may follow suit, undermining the implementation efforts. Engaging key influencers within the organization to champion the new KPIs will create a positive perception among their peers. These influencers can help shape attitudes and behaviors, making it easier to gain widespread acceptance. By leveraging the social influence of respected colleagues, mid-level leaders can foster an environment where adopting the new KPIs is seen as a positive and necessary step toward achieving organizational goals.

3.2.3 Organizational Assimilation

- **Learning Curve**

New employees and even existing staff may face a steep learning curve in adapting to new, realistic KPIs and the associated tools or processes. Comprehensive training programs, including ongoing support and resources, will ease this transition. These programs should cover not only how to use the new systems but also how the new KPIs will benefit both the employees and the organization. Pairing new users with experienced mentors who can provide guidance and support will help employees navigate the new system more effectively, ensuring that everyone understands and is capable of meeting the new performance expectations and promote a healthier work-life balance.

- **Integration Issues**

Difficulty in integrating the new KPIs with existing processes and practices can lead to frustration and resistance. Establishing continuous feedback loops will allow employees to report issues and suggest improvements. This promotes a sense of ownership and continuous improvement, making it

easier to address integration issues as they arise. Regular feedback sessions, led by mid-level leaders, can help identify common problems and develop practical solutions, ensuring that the new KPIs are seamlessly incorporated into daily operations and reduce the pressure and inefficiencies.

3.3 Strategies to Overcome Each Obstacle

3.3.1 Addressing Resistance to Change

- **Communication and Education**

Regular meetings, emails, and workshops should clearly explain the benefits and purpose of the new, realistic KPIs. Highlighting how these KPIs will make work easier and more efficient by setting achievable goals will address concerns. Detailed information sessions and educational workshops will alleviate fears and build confidence in the new KPIs. For instance, explaining how the new KPIs are designed to be more attainable and aligned with individual and team capacities can help employees understand the rationale behind the change and see its positive impacts on their work-life balance and productivity. Aiming to eliminate the need for excessive overtime and reduce the pressures of the 996 work culture will further alleviate concerns.

- **Involvement and Participation**

Involving employees in the planning and implementation process through focus groups and feedback sessions will ensure their concerns are heard and addressed. Allowing employees to contribute to the decision-making process will give them a sense of control and ownership, thereby reducing resistance. For example, mid-level leaders can organize workshops where employees can discuss their current challenges with the existing KPIs and provide input on what would make the new KPIs more effective and realistic. This participatory approach not only empowers employees but also fosters a collaborative environment where everyone is invested in the success of the new KPIs.

- **Incremental Implementation**

Rolling out the new KPIs gradually will allow employees to adjust and provide feedback at each stage. This approach minimizes disruption and provides opportunities to address issues as they arise. By implementing changes incrementally, employees will have time to adapt, reducing the perceived threat and making the transition smoother.

3.3.2 Leveraging Social Influence

- **Create Success Stories**

Sharing success stories and positive testimonials from early adopters of the new, realistic KPIs will demonstrate tangible benefits and encourage others to follow suit. Highlighting how the change has benefited their work and improved productivity will create a positive perception and motivate others to adopt the change. Roloff (1987) suggests that by leveraging the social dynamics within teams, leaders can create a bandwagon effect that encourages widespread acceptance of the new KPIs. For example, showcasing how a

specific team was able to meet their targets more consistently and with less stress under the new KPIs can illustrate the practical advantages and foster a supportive environment for the transition.

- **Social Proof Campaigns**

Using social proof campaigns where employees share their experiences with the new KPIs in internal newsletters, meetings, and social media will create a bandwagon effect, encouraging others to follow suit. Highlighting positive experiences, such as employees achieving their goals more efficiently and feeling more satisfied with their work, will motivate others to embrace the change. Mid-level leaders can spearhead these campaigns by gathering and disseminating success stories, thereby reinforcing the benefits of the new KPIs across the organization.

3.3.3 Facilitating Organizational Assimilation

- **Comprehensive Training Programs**

Developing and implementing comprehensive training programs is essential to help employees learn and adapt to the new, realistic KPIs. Mid-level leaders can play a crucial role in this process by organizing customized training sessions that cater to varying levels of familiarity with the new system. For example, mid-level leaders can arrange basic workshops for employees who are less familiar with the new metrics and more advanced sessions for those who are already comfortable with data analysis. Providing ongoing support and resources, such as access to a dedicated helpdesk and a library of tutorial videos, will ensure that all employees have the tools they need to succeed.

- **Mentorship and Support**

Pairing new users with experienced mentors can significantly help employees navigate the new KPI system more effectively. Mid-level leaders can identify experienced users within the team to act as mentors and provide guidance and support to their peers. Establishing continuous feedback loops, such as regular one-on-one meetings between mentors and mentees and team feedback sessions, will allow employees to report issues and suggest improvements. Roloff (1987) emphasizes the importance of mentorship and feedback loops in helping employees navigate organizational changes. This approach not only promotes a sense of ownership among employees but also encourages continuous improvement of the system.

- **Feedback Loops**

Creating continuous feedback loops where employees can report issues and suggest improvements will ensure the new KPI system is effectively integrated with existing processes and practices. Mid-level leaders can set up digital suggestion boxes where employees can anonymously submit their concerns or ideas. Regular feedback meetings, facilitated by mid-level leaders, will provide a platform for open discussions and collective problem-solving. This will help address integration issues as they arise and ensure that the system evolves to meet the users' needs.

3.4 Success Indicators

3.4.1 Minimum Success Definition

Improved Employee Morale: Employees should demonstrate increased satisfaction and morale as indicated by regular surveys and feedback sessions. They should feel more engaged, motivated, and positive about their work environment. This improvement will be reflected in higher engagement scores and positive feedback during these sessions.

Reduction in Overtime: A significant reduction in the number of employees working beyond their regular hours, addressing the issues of the 996 work culture. Time-tracking data should show a decrease in overtime, and employee feedback should indicate an improved work-life balance, suggesting that the new KPIs are realistic and achievable within standard working hours.

3.4.2 Highest Definition of Success

Consistent Achievement of KPIs: Employees consistently meet or exceed the newly set realistic KPIs. Performance data and reports should reflect this consistent achievement, validating that the new targets are effectively aligned with employee capabilities and resources.

Enhanced Productivity: Overall productivity should significantly improve without leading to burnout or excessive stress. Key performance metrics, such as output per hour worked, should increase, supported by positive employee feedback indicating that they can maintain these productivity levels sustainably.

Cultivation of a Positive Organizational Culture: The organization should develop a culture characterized by trust, collaboration, and open communication. This can be measured through employee surveys, feedback sessions, and observed workplace interactions. Signs of a positive culture will include greater trust in management, enhanced teamwork, and more open and transparent communication channels.

3.5 Costs and Risks of the Strategy

3.5.1 Possible Problems and Reasons

- **Change Resistance:**

Despite great efforts, some employees may resist new KPIs, leading to ongoing conflict and reduced productivity. This resistance may stem from a lack of understanding, fear of change, or a perceived threat to their autonomy. Employees may feel that the new KPIs reduce their control over their work, leading to anxiety and rebellion.

- **Misallocation of Resources:**

Misestimating the resources needed to support change can lead to inadequate support and increased employee frustration. If executives underestimate the resources needed or fail to prioritize effectively, employees may struggle to adapt, leading to lower performance and morale.

- **Communication Breakdown:**

Ineffective communication can lead to misunderstandings, misinformation, and inconsistencies with new goals. This can happen when information is not clearly communicated, is inconsistent, or is not effectively disseminated to all employees. Poor communication can cause employees to feel disconnected from the change process, leading to confusion and resistance.

3.5.2 Alternative Solutions for Costs and Risks

- **Ongoing Engagement:**

Maintain ongoing engagement with employees to resolve resistance issues. Periodically reevaluate and adjust methods based on feedback. This can include holding more meetings, providing further explanation, and providing more support if needed.

Rationale: Ongoing engagement helps build trust and ensures employees feel heard and valued. By regularly reassessing and adjusting the approach, leaders can address any issues before they escalate and ensure that the change process stays on track.

- **Resource Reallocation:**

Monitor resource usage and be prepared to reallocate or seek additional resources as needed to effectively support employees. This could include adjusting budgets, seeking outside funding, or reallocating resources to less critical areas.

Rationale: Effective resource management ensures that employees have the tools and support they need to achieve new KPIs. By monitoring and adjusting resource allocation, leaders can address any gaps and prevent resource constraints from affecting productivity.

- **Enhanced Communication Training:**

Training leaders in effective communication strategies to ensure clear and consistent messaging. This can include workshops, tutoring and visits from outside experts.

Rationale: Improved communication skills help ensure that leaders can effectively communicate new KPIs and address any concerns employees may have. By providing training, leaders can enhance their ability to communicate clearly and build trust with their team.

This comprehensive change management plan outlines detailed strategies to increase productivity, optimize resource allocation, reduce costs, enhance collaboration, build trust, promote inclusivity, actively present change agents, focus on employee image goals, and maintain organizational reputation. By applying Michael Elwood Roloff's insights on communication and conflict resolution, organizations can develop strategies to address employee resistance, enhance collaboration, and promote a healthier work environment. Setting new KPIs (key performance indicators) and addressing potential barriers to change resistance, social

impact, and organizational assimilation, as well as implementing specific strategies to overcome these challenges, organizations can achieve their goals of increasing productivity, improving collaboration, and enhancing employee well-being. Continuous monitoring, feedback loops and progressive implementation will ensure the success and sustainability of change, creating a positive and productive work environment.

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