Communicating during Organizational Change using Social Accounts: The Importance of Ideological Accounts

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ABSTRACT:

One way to improve trust in management during large scale organization changes is with effective communications.   This paper looks at three types of social accounts (causal, ideological and referential accounts) to see which are effective at improving trust during major organizational changes. A field study method explored two organizations and found that ideological accounts were best at improving trust in management. The relationship between ideological accounts and trust was mediated by the success of the social account, (i.e. the perceived understanding of the change decision). These findings indicate the benefits of highlighting long term motives for large scale organizational change.

Keywords: Social accounts, organizational change, trust, communications.

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Introduction

It is often claimed that many large scale organizational changes fail because of poor communication (Elving, 2005; Kavanagh & Ashkanasy, 2006). Bordia, Hunt, Paulson, Tourish and DiFonzo (2004) found that effective communication during organizational change was a key factor in succeeding in bringing about change. Effective communication will result in the desired action by recipients (Elving, 2005; Schweiger & De Nisi, 1991). Van Dam, Oreg and Schyns (2008) found that change information should be timely, and employees should be informed about the anticipated events, such as the specific changes that will occur, the consequences of the change, and employees' new work roles. Providing timely and useful information can help reduce uncertainty and anxiety, and increase employees' trust in those who manage the change. However, managers still fail to communicate effectively during change (Brashers, 2001; Van Dam et al, 2008).

Social accounts are particular forms of communication highlighted by researchers in the change literature (Brockner, DeWitt, Grover, & Reed, 1990; Cobb & Wooten, 1998; Shaw, Wild, & Colquitt, 2003). Social accounts are "the explanations one gives another for the decisions and actions he or she has made" (Cobb & Wooten, 1998:148). This method of communication helps the employee understand the decisions from the point of view of the decision maker, allowing the employee to view the changes in a new context. We argue that the success or failure of change initiatives is dependent on how skilfully organizations use social accounts. Specifically

we use Cobb and Wooten's (1998) classification of social accounts to demonstrate that to successfully communicate organizational change to employees, causal and ideological accounts are beneficial styles to adopt.

The aim of this research is to break down different types of social accounts to analyse the impact that each aspect has on trust in management. Trust in management has been found to be a key indicator of success in organizational change (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001). This paper presents data from two organizations which recently experienced changes. Within these two organizations we assessed the types of communications and levels of trust. The following section provides an overview of the key literature on social accounts which informs the explanatory framework used in this study. This is followed by the presentation of data from two organizations demonstrating the relationship between social accounts and trust in management, in a large scale, planned organizational change context.

Large Scale Change and Social Accounts

Organizational change is becoming more frequent and more important in the 21st century and appears to be an inevitable aspect of organizational life (Burnes, 2005). Large scale organizational change is difficult to achieve and implementation often fails to meet the objectives of the change (McNulty & Ferlie, 2004). Some estimates suggest that as much as 70-80% of changes implemented within organizations fail to reach their potential (Birken, Lee, & Weiner, 2012; Burnes, 2005; Hargie & Tourish, 2009). Specifically, organizational change is often perceived by individuals as threatening, and therefore requires careful implementation to

overcome mistrust associated with vulnerability, loss of security and well-being (Saunders &

Thornhill, 2003).

There are many perspectives of organizational change. Common to most definitions is the notion

that change is a process of organizational renewal that takes place over time (Birkin et al, 2012).

Change can be transformational, where a complete rethink of what an organization does or

stands for is implemented, or change can be small-scale and incremental (Burnes, 2005). There

are models of planned change where change is assumed to be both linear, and an activity that can

be managed, organized and led by senior managers (Birken et al, 2012; Dobers & Soderholm,

2009), and there are those that focus on how change emerges in an unplanned, non-linear way

due to changes in the external environment, or develops bottom-up as people change the way

they work over time (Kuntz & Gomes, 2012). Despite recent research trends focusing on this

later type of change, in reality top-down, management led change is still commonplace in

practice (McNulty & Ferlie, 2004), and the use of social accounts by managers to explain change

is a popular strategy to influence workforce behavior (Cobb & Wooten, 1998). In this paper, our

case studies are large scale, linear, planned changes and we argue that the top-down approach

taken by senior managers requires significant understanding of social accounts in order to lead

and manage change successfully. We argue that through a successful understanding of change

communication through a top-down approach, employees will be able to better understand

change and decision making from the management's perspective, and be less resistant to change

processes. In this paper, we focus specifically on social accounts as a management tool for

communicating about large scale, planned, organizational change.

We propose that, if the employer and the employees are effectively on the same page,

this gives direction and coherence to practical arrangements (Cobb, Stephens, & Watson, 2001).

Although the content of the social account message has been acknowledged to be of high importance (Frey & Cobb, 2010), more recent social accounts literature has tended to focus on the *adequacy* of the social account provided rather than the *type* of account (e.g. De Cremer, van Dijk, & Pilluda, 2010; Lester, Kickul, & Bergmann, 2007) and tended to superficially group social accounts as apology versus denial or excuses versus justifications (De Cremer et al, 2010; Tomlinson & Mayer, 2009). Tucker and Yeow (2011) make an important distinction between explanatory accounts (causal, ideological, referential) which are used to frame the origins of the decision and accounts which attempt to exonerate the account giver (apology, denial, reticence) used to attribute blame or influence perceptions of future actions). Given the often political nature of social accounts and managerial communications during large scale change, the type of explanatory account (beyond its exonerating qualities) is likely to have different impacts on its success and psychological variables such as trust in management. Without addressing the distinction between different explanations we risk oversimplifying the construct of social accounts.

In this research, we use the classification of social accounts stemming from Cobb and Wooten (1998). They view these types of account as components in a holistic intervention strategy for organizational change. Cobb and Wooten's classification is the only work which we are aware of which specifically uses social accounts as a tool for change intervention communications (although others have reiterated the use of social accounts during change e.g. Lines, Selart, Espedel & Johansen, 2005). The intervention they suggest is tailored to top down, leader to follower accounting and also offers a framework for integration into an organization's change management programme at both the organizational and unit level. Moreover, it gives consideration to the accounts within an accounting process rather than as a product of managerial

decision making. In other words, it acknowledges the active role that managers play in accounting where other authors consider social accounts as by-products that are not subject to manipulation by leaders (Skarlicki, Folger, & Gee, 2004). Cobb and Wooten's (1998) typology originally included four types of account, but penitential accounts - which state regret and apology, have subsequently been removed from the classification in later works (Cobb et al, 2001) which leaves explanatory social accounts which form three different components: causal, ideological and referential.

Despite this theoretical work, a scale to measure the different components of accounts has not yet been developed or tested empirically. We aim to fill this gap by developing and testing a measure for social accounts based on the three components outlined by Cobb and Wooten (1998). Below, we provide a more detailed description of each of the three types of social account:

Causal accounts: Identify the internal and external forces which affect the organization and why they imply a need for change. By identifying these forces, strategic decisions to overcome them have more purpose and the reasons for the decision become more visible. The decision making process becomes more transparent, allowing the perception of fairness to be more easily made (Bies, 1987; Daly, 1995). This type of causal account should not be presented alone (Tucker, Yeow, & Viki, 2010); rather, the action to be taken must be announced at the same time to reduce uncertainty. Causal accounts can be used in any situation to describe the current or previous standing of the organization. It can be used either to set the scene for further accounts or as an explanation in itself.

Ideological accounts: Address the values of change, in particular the underlying reason why managers want a change programme and what they expect to gain from it. Three types of values need to be addressed in an ideological account: a) Superordinate goals at the organizational level that outline what the organization is trying to achieve and provide direction; b) The broader core values that tackle the issues of what is important to the organization, helping to unify the workforce around particular values; and c) The procedural implications of the decision, including the distribution of budgets, staff cuts and authority in the new structure and the criterion on which this will be set (Cobb & Wooten, 1998). Ideological accounts are often preceded by causal accounts which may set the scene for the change goals outlined by this account.

Referential accounts: The aim of referential accounts is to adjust the frame of reference the employee uses to evaluate the fairness of decisions. For example, a decision to make 300 employees redundant during an organizational merger may seem very unfair to most employees. However, when reminded of a similar merger between two organizations within the same industry three years ago where 900 employees were made redundant during the process, suddenly the loss of 300 people does not seem as unfair as before. By using referential accounts, managers partially relieve themselves of responsibility for the decision by creating context (Bies, 1987). Referential accounts can also be used as a benchmark for success (Cobb et al, 2001; Cobb & Wooten, 1998). This gives the employee's confidence that whatever losses they may suffer during the change process, the overall outcome for the organization will be successful. Referential accounts also require research to seek out appropriate organizations that have undergone similar changes. Managers will see how others have overcome problems and this will make them better prepared for the challenges they face (Cobb et al, 2001).

This paper proposes that by considering the impact of different types of accounts on trust, managers will be able to identify the relevant social account that would be beneficial in reinforcing trust within the change situation in the organization. However, it is important firstly to define what makes a successful social account.

Social account success: Although there has been extensive research considering the outcomes of social accounts and their effective use in many organizational contexts, there is very little research which explains 'why' they impact these variables and what exactly we mean by a 'successful social account'. According to most authors the success of a social account is judged by the employees' knowledge of the change following the communication (Lines et al, 2005; Shaw et al, 2003). A social account has been successful if the employee understands the decision to change in its entirety and from the point of view of the decision maker (Cobb & Wooten, 1998). Therefore, social account success may be conceptualized through the extent to which an employee understands (or perceives to understand) the decision made from the point of view of the decision maker. A drawback in social accounts research is the inadequate ability to measure the success of an account, independent of the effects of the account on other variables. There is a tendency to make the assumption that if an account is given, it successfully creates understanding, however when considering variables such as fairness or trust it is possible that the provision of information without successful understanding occurring may impact on outcome variables (Schweiger & De Nisi, 1991). For this reason, we measure social account success as a variable in order to unpack this relationship further.

Traditionally, social accounts research has focused on the opinions and perceptions which the receiver has of the account giver and the repercussions of this for the workplace (Brockner, Konovsky, Cooper-Schneider, Folger, Martin, & Bies, 1994). For example the relationship

between social accounts and organizational justice has been the subject of much attention (Bies, 1987; Brockner et al, 1994). In keeping with this trend, this research will investigate how social accounts can be used to improve trust in management during an organizational change.

Social accounts and the role of trust: The importance of trust during organizational change has been studied by a number of authors (e.g. Lines et al, 2005; Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998; Saunders & Thornhill, 2003). A number of factors have been found to contribute to trust relationships within an organization including communication of decision making which will be the concern of this research. This research uses social accounts as a model to analyse these explanations and the link to trust in management during organizational change.

Trust is defined as the "willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party" (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995:712). Trust is based on positive or negative previous experiences of the relationship (Kim, Dirks, & Cooper, 2009). Trust relationships take a long time to build up, through the accumulation of previous experiences and applying this to current situations in the form of expectations. Major events such as organizational changes can bring about a complete reassessment of the trust relationship, either making or breaking the trust bond. Breaking trust can have long term consequences for an organization (Morgan & Zeffane, 2003).

There is some evidence of a positive relationship between social accounts and trust (Lines, et al, 2005). A study by Rousseau and Tijoriwala (1999) found a moderation effect between management's given reason for change and trust in management on the perceived legitimacy of those changes. It is reasonable to assume that given the close relationship between

procedural justice and trust that a link between social accounts and trust exists. However, the exact nature of this relationship is unknown. Given the forward looking style of ideological accounts, and their appeal to mutual goals, we might expect ideological accounts to have the strongest link to trust and therefore our research here tests this hypothesis. The aim of this study is to investigate how managerial accounts of organizational change affect employees' understanding and trust.

The issue of trust is of particular interest in this research due to its influence on psychological and performance outcomes of the change as mentioned above. If, as we predict, social accounts are related to trust then this will have implications on the outcomes of the change, such as an employee's commitment to the organization, their tendency towards organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB), their job satisfaction and their intention to stay with or to leave the organization. All of these variables have been previously linked with trust in numerous studies (e.g. Coyle-Shapiro, Morrow, Richardson, & Dunn, 2002; Hopkins & Weathington, 2006; Ozag, 2006). In short, it is pertinent for organizations to consider maintaining positive trust or increasing levels of trust during periods of uncertainty and change (Morgan & Zeffane, 2003).

As Klein Woolthuis, Nooteboom and De Jong (2010) write, interpersonal trust is a micro level phenomenon and has its basis in individuals; therefore a distinction has to be made between trusting behavior and trust as a psychological disposition. "Since there is no psychology on the organizational level, the common wisdom is to say that organizations as such cannot trust... to have trust in an organization one must also trust the individuals that enact the policies of the organization," (p.5). Here we use trust in management to consider one element of trust in an organization. Managers are usually the most used source of information for employees during

change and are the givers of social accounts (with which this paper is concerned) therefore it seems logical to use trust in management as an operationalization of trust within changing organizations when studying the impact of social accounts.

The Present Study:

Whilst much of the change and communications literature has recently focused on bottom-up and employee led change (Kuntz & Gomes, 2012) in practice management driven change is still commonplace and the effectiveness of management communications is still poor (Birken, et al, 2012). We acknowledge that in order to gain a full understanding of social accounts as a tool in management communications we must consider the processes of both account givers – how they are designed and the intentions of account givers in giving them - and account receivers – the relationship between the perception of these accounts in receivers and the behavior which results. The focus of this research is on the understanding of social accounts from the perspective of the account receivers. It is important to understand the ways that different social accounts are used to construct meaning and influence affective responses such as trust, within large scale change before we can understand employee reactions to change. In addition, the organizations which participated in this research were both introducing management led, top-down, organizational change. Therefore, it is these top-down, vertical communications which are of particular interest in this study. In this paper the account givers were always the managers and account receivers were the employees.   We focus on the impact of social accounts on trust.

When faced with uncertainty, individuals actively seek explanations in order to help them understand the change. In particular, Weick (1995) would argue that they retrospectively pay attention to the causal sequence of events which has led to the current action. Previous research has linked causal attributions with positive outcomes for employees (Tomlinson & Mayer, 2009) and we know that the attributions which individuals make influences their future behavior and therefore we might predict that the individual's behavior towards organizational change may be strongly linked to the causal accounts presented by managers. This leads us to the first hypothesis:

H1: Causal accounts will significantly predict the success of social accounts.

Although literature studying ideological accounts alone is sparse, it has been suggested that ideological accounts tend to be used when a change is actively sought by management, whereas a causal or referential account would be more likely to be used in a reactive situation, where change is needed in order to keep up or survive (Lines, et al, 2005). Where senior management are acting of their own accord we would assume that they have a realistic objective for doing so. The presence of ideological explanation may indicate the ability and competence of the drivers of change to see opportunities and to make realistic plans (c.f. ability); to act in the best interests of the organization (c.f. benevolence); and to do so in a legitimate, transparent and fair way (c.f. integrity). The content of such accounts relates highly to the criteria for trusting as proposed by Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995) which is widely accepted within the trust literature (e.g. Lines, et al, 2005; Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007). Therefore, we would expect ideological accounts to be the most significant in predicting levels of trust in management. This leads us to our second hypothesis:

H2: Ideological accounts will be related to higher scores of trust in management from employees who have recently experienced an organizational change.

We know that trust is likely to be stronger between two individuals who share beliefs and values (e.g. Dirks & Ferrin, 2001). This would therefore suggest that when social accounts are successful and the account receiver is able to understand the account givers frame of reference that the account receiver is more accurately able to judge the trustworthiness of the account giver and make accurate assumptions about the decision. In this study we therefore hypothesize that social account success will mediate the relationship between social accounts and trust in management because we need a holistic understanding of the events in order to make assumptions about trust.

H3: Social account success will mediate the relationship between the provisions of social accounts and trust in management.

Method

This paper considers data collected from two organizations which had recently undergone a significant organizational change. A questionnaire survey was administered to all front-line and lower-level management (i.e. team leaders) employees within the organization. More senior levels of management were not included in the survey as we wanted to focus on the change behavior of employee recipients' of change, ensuring consistency between our theoretical applications and data collection (Smyth & Edkins, 2007).

The first organization employs roughly 450 employees and is a family owned business in manufacturing seals for industries, such as car manufacturing and gas and water suppliers, based in the South East of Germany. A manufacturing change based at their existing plant to improve quality standards was studied here. The organization was optimising the production system at their current plant by implementing a Toyota-based manufacturing philosophy.

The second organization is a German organization working in logistics. They employ approximately 300 employees. The organization is one of the leading distributors and service providers for IT and consumer electronics in Germany. The organization is the German partner of a multinational wholesaler in logistics companies. The change occurred in order to bring this subsidiary in line with the systems of the parent organization. The German partner of this organization modernised and improved its productivity capacity through a major restructuring of its workforce, and organizational structure creating specialist working groups which provide service by product groups rather than the previous system of service provision based on geographical location.

These two organizations were selected because of the similarity of change objectives and duration of change management in the same geographical location. In both cases the change can be described as radical, with the intention to transform the organization for future development (McNulty & Ferlie, 2004). They each involved changes in work teams; process improvement; technological change and organizational restructuring, as well as featuring organizational culture and ideology change. Neither case involved significant downsizing, redundancy or merging, although in both cases some individuals may have been relocated or reassigned within the organization.

Measures

Social Accounts: As there were no previously designed scales to measure Cobb and Wooten (1998)'s classification of social accounts, a scale was designed and piloted. Two pilot case studies were used to develop and test the design of a social accounts scale. In the first pilot case study, interviews were conducted with 11 participants who had experienced a complex period of change in an academic institution. Interviews were analysed using thematic analysis with special attention placed on the description of the social accounts received during periods of change. Each explanation was classified according to descriptions in Bies (1987) and Cobb and Wooten (1998)'s descriptions of account types. From these classifications a pilot questionnaire was designed which consisted of 38 items. This was tested for wording and clarity on a sample of 20 students against a hypothetical scenario of change.

A further pilot study, was conducted using a revised scale to measure three different types of social accounts (causal, ideological and referential accounts) and a three item scale to measure the success of the social accounts. This pilot sample consisted of 20 employees from an agricultural organization recently experiencing changes in their management structure. These pilots resulted in a usable social accounts scale consisting of a total of 17 items. A more detailed description of the piloting studies, the construction of the final 17 measures, and further testing of the measures through two experimental studies (total N=281) can be found in (Tucker, 2010).

Participants were asked "to what extent was the following information included in the communications you received from your organization when announcing [title of the change project]?" The final measure consisted of 14 items scored on a seven point Likert scale (1=not at all, 7=very much included) with three items to measure causal accounts, for example "That the

organization could not continue to function in its current situation"; six items to measure

ideological accounts, for example "details of what would be achieved through the [name of

change project]"; and five items to measure referential social accounts, for example

"Implementations of this system which had recently occurred in other organizations were

compared".

An exploratory factor analysis showed one of the items of the new social account scale

failed to load as expected, possibly due to being presented out of sequence. This item was

removed from the composite measure resulting in causal accounts being measured by two items

instead of three. The final factor analysis with three factors explained 72.44% of the variance

with a varimax rotation and produced three types of social account: causal, ideological and

referential accounts, in line with Cobb and Wooten's (1998) classification: all of which had a

Cronbach's Alpha score above the recommended 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994) (see table 1

for Alpha scores). In order to ensure a stricter interpretation of unidimensionality (Mills, Dye, &

Mills, 2008; Samuels, 2004), the newly developed scale was tested using a confirmatory factor

analysis. Despite a significant Chi-Square (51) = 119.9, p<.001, (which is often regarded as a

problematic fit statistic due to its subjectivity to sample size (McClelland & Rumellhart, 1981)),

the three factor social accounts model produced Comparative Fit Index (CFI = .943), and Root

Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA = .089) fit indices which indicate a relatively

good fit (McClelland & Rumellhart, 1981) (factor loadings and items for all scales are available

in table 2).

[INSERT TABLES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE]

Social account success: This was also constructed as part of the social accounts

measures and pilots described above. Participants were asked to what extent they agreed with

three items representing social account success on a seven point likert scale (1=strongly disagree,

7=strongly agree). An example item is "I fully understood the implementation in its entirety".

All three items loaded as one factor in a confirmatory factor analysis (CFI = 1.00) to form one

scale consisting of three items with a Cronbach's Alpha of α=.90.

Trust in management: Although trust builds up over time, it is a snapshot perception

which influences individual's behavior during change. This measure was adapted from Cook and

Wall(1980). The internal validity of this measure has been tested numerous times in the literature

and has been deemed to be satisfactory by academics in the field (e.g. Yeow, 2000) however;

confirmatory factor analysis showed that the validity of this scale could be improved by

removing one item "Our management would be quite prepared to gain advantage by deceiving

the workers". This adjustment produced an adequate model fit (CFI=.910) and Alphas for this

measure (α=.91) which was found to be satisfactory.

It is common with data collected from a single self-report questionnaire for common

method bias to occur. One test for common methods variance is Harman's single-factor test

(Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). If either a single factor emerges or if one

general factor accounts for a majority of the variance between variables, common methods bias

is likely to be influencing the results of the study. In this study, 5 factors were generated with an

eigenvalue of over 1, accounting for a total of 70.95% of the variance. The first factor explained

only 39.04% of the variance which would suggest that the concerns over common methods

variance can be somewhat minimised. In addition, the procedures used to collect data here have

adhered to suggestions for reducing CMV such as ensuring respondent anonymity and the use of

multi-item scales (Podsakoff, et al, 2003), and confirmatory factor analysis as described above

(Samuels, 2004).

Results

The data for each organization was combined into one data set with an additional variable

of which organization participants belonged to added to the data. Comparisons based on this

condition were conducted throughout the analysis to ensure that individual organizational

affiliation did not confound the results of our analysis. No significant differences were found on

any variables used and findings remained consistent across both organizations.

Descriptive statistics:

Of the 185 returned questionnaires (137 from the first organization and 48 from the

second), 172 were deemed usable[1]. Of the usable sample, 97 were male, 59 were female and 16

failed to specify. The ages of employees ranged from 15 to 60 years (M=34.52, SD=11.95) and

length of employment ranged from <1 to 43 years (M=10.64, SD=9.87)[2]. As can be seen in

Table 1, neither gender nor age had any significant effects on the ratings of the social accounts

and on trust within the combined data set.

Hypothesis 1

Despite the medium and low perceptions of all types of accounts, employees did perceive

themselves to have been moderately well informed. This indicated some success of the account

information (see Table 1). All types of social account were found to be correlated with the

perceived success of the account, with ideological accounts being the highest correlated with

social account success: r(170)=.694, p<.001; followed by causal and referential accounts

respectively (see table 1 for correlations).

Multiple regression analyses were used to test whether the type of social account used

could predict the level of success of the account. With all three types of social account entered

in one model onto social account success, the analysis found that both ideological accounts

(β=.653, t(168)=9.002, p<.001) and causal accounts (β=.251, t(168)=3.910, p<.001) significantly

predicted the perceived success of the social account, in a significant model, R²=.732, F(3,

166)=63.873, p<.001. Interestingly, referential accounts were also a significant predictor of

social account success but with a negative relationship (β=-.166, t(168)=-2.510, p=.013)

suggesting that the presence of a referential account reduces the understanding of the event or

action. This, therefore, supports Hypothesis 1 which suggested that causal accounts would be

significant predictors of social account success. However, ideological accounts were also found

to be a significant and stronger predictor of social account success.

Hypothesis 2

All three classifications of social accounts correlated significantly with trust in

management, ideological being the highest followed by causal and referential (see table 1 for

correlations). A linear regression with all three social account types as predictors and trust as the

outcome variable produced a significant model, R²=.462, F(3, 166)=15.040, p<.001. Ideological

accounts were the only significant predictor of trust in this regression model (β=.527,

t(168)=5.522, p<.001). None of the other types of account significantly predicted trust, which

suggests that Hypothesis 2 is supported. Again, we notice the negative relationships between

causal accounts and trust and for referential accounts and trust (Causal, β=-.064, t(168)=-.759,

p=.449; Referential, β=-.057, t(168)=-.653, p=.514) suggesting that the presence of these types of account actually reduces trust in management, although these relationships are not significant.

Hypothesis 3:

In order to test the mediation analysis we consider each type of social account individually. Given the relationships reported above we first consider ideological accounts as the predictor, trust in management as the outcome and social account success as a potential mediator (see figure 1 below). In two bivariate regressions, (a) R^2=.482, F(1, 168)=156.088, p<.001, and (c) R^2=.208, F(1, 168)=44.178, p<.001, ideological accounts were a significant predictor of success (a) β=.694, t(168)=12.494, p<.001, and ideological accounts were a significant predictor of trust in management, (c) β=.456, t(168)=6.647, p<.001, suggesting that the first two criteria for mediation have been met. A multiple hierarchical regression, (b) R^2=.285, F(2, 166)=33.039, p<.001, found that social account success was a significant predictor of trust in management when controlling for ideological accounts, (b) β=.350, t(167)=3.837, p<.001 and the relationship between ideological accounts and trust in management is reduced (although not to insignificance), (d) β=.227, t(167)=2.487, p=.014, when controlling for social account success. This analysis can also be seen in Table 3. A Sobel Z test was performed to test whether the difference between the direct path and the mediated path which was found to be significant, z=3.68, p<.001, which means that the relationship between ideological accounts and trust in management is mediated by social account success (see Figure 1). This means that when providing an ideological social account, a higher rate of trust in management will also occur because of the relationship between ideological accounts and social account success and because social account success is a predictor of trust in management.

Neither causal nor referential accounts were significantly related to trust and therefore fail the first criteria for mediation analysis. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 is only partially supported for ideological accounts but not for causal or referential accounts.

[INSERT TABLE 3 AND FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Discussion

This paper looked at two organizations that underwent planned top-down organizational change with the aim to understand which types of social accounts were most important in improving trust in management. Causal accounts and ideological accounts were both significant predictors of the perceived success of a social account (supporting Hypothesis 1) which suggests that in order to achieve a successful account of your actions, a causal and ideological account should be the most central to the communication.

Hypothesis 2 suggested that ideological accounts would significantly predict trust in management. This was confirmed by the regression analyses reported above. Together with Hypothesis 3 demonstrating social account success as mediating the social accounts-trust relationship, it can be seen that using ideological accounts can improve trust in management during change. Ideological accounts explain the change in relation to the on-going goals and objectives of the organization, they suggest that the decision makers can be trusted to make the correct change decisions and move the organization forward (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). Ideological accounts (and causal accounts) help employees to see the change decision from the point of view of the account giver (Cobb & Wooten, 1998).

Interestingly, referential accounts presented no significant relationship with trust and even a negative relationship with social account success. This may suggest that comparisons with

other organizations confuse the employee about the real objectives for change in their own organization or that the decision makers lack their own direction or ability to take advantage of opportunities or lead the way in industry development.

This paper makes two key empirical contributions to research on social accounts as a communication tool during change management. Firstly, this research provides an empirical test of Bies (1987) and Cobb and Wooten's (1998) classification of social accounts. We designed a measure for social accounts which our factor analyses showed support for three types of accounts: causal, ideological and referential. As suggested by Cobb and Wooten (1998), causal and ideological accounts were significantly related to social account success and understanding.

Secondly, we empirically test the relationship between social accounts and trust. Lines et al (2005) predicted that the social accounts used by managers would influence the employees trust during organizational change. Here we demonstrate that this relationship is mediated by social account success. This is important because trust in management has been linked with employees' behavior during change which may impact the organizations change performance (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; Morgan & Zeffane, 2003). In the first organization, the objective of expansion and improvement without threat of opposition was clear and in the second organization, the continuing success of the organization was the driver for change. In taking this view, we would be in line with Lines et al's (2005) suggestion that ideological accounts would be more likely to be used when a situation is actively driven by the organization rather than a response to external events.

An area which has so far been neglected in social accounts literature is the impact on different types of change; (episodic or continuous (Weick & Quinn, 1999), planned or emergent

(Hargie & Tourish, 2009), first order or second order (Levy, 1986), for growth or downsizing).

In this study we have categorised the changes as planned change. This interpretation was based

on information collected from the organization during the sampling phase and based on the

perceptions which employees had of the change. In both organizations studied here, changes

imposed were perceived as relatively positive by the employers and employees and were

primarily for growth of the organization. However, the second organization used a more

continuous incremental approach to change than the first. We did not find any significant

differences between the two case studies in the relationship between ideological accounts and

trust which might tentatively suggest that there is little difference between types of change. It

would also be prudent to assume that not all elements of the change would necessarily be

categorised as 'planned'. As Fulop, Protopsaltis, King, Allen, Hutchings and Normand (2005)

suggest, complex, large scale change often has unintended as well as intended aspects. It is

beyond the scope of this study to test these differences in the nature of change specifically but

we would encourage further research to examine this issue further.

Study limitations and future research

It is important to note some limitations in this study. Firstly, the current study has used a

retrospective method of measuring social accounts. This was deemed to be a satisfactory method

for the purpose of this study as we were particularly interested in the perception of the social

accounts rather than the exact wording or construction of them. However, subjective evaluations

of a change project after a period of time could suffer from memory decay especially when

investigating perceptions (Weick, 1995). Given however, that the goal was to investigate the

impact different types of communications can have on the *perception* employees have of their

employers, and subsequently the trust levels, the issue of memory decay is not a concern.   For

future research however, when the accuracy of the content of the original social account or the

accurate recall at the time of their use is important to their study, an experimental method would

be advantageous to helping us to understand. In some cases it may be possible to collect

evidence of the official communications provided by account givers, however, caution should be

used in the analysis of these documents as the differences between intended social account

provision and social account perception have been highlighted by several authors (Bies, 1987;

Cobb & Wooten, 1998).

Secondly, whilst this study makes a significant contribution in being the first study (to

our knowledge) to empirically test the social accounts-trust relationship in this way, it should be

acknowledged that trust is a complex concept and the definitions of trust within this paper may

be viewed as simplistic. Here, we chose to focus on trust in management as we believe that this

represents an interesting starting point for further investigation the social accounts-trust

relationship. Trust in management is particularly relevant when we consider the use of top-down

communication like the announcement of organizational change because of the conflicting

viewpoints of employees and management which may occur. In future research, further data can

be collected by exploring the different types of trust that may be exploited during organizational

change.

Thirdly, it could be argued that social accounts are a construct linked to many levels of

the organization. By their nature, they are designed to transcend organizational levels – creating

alignment between senior level management and operational level employees. It may seem

surprising then that there is very little research which follows this multi-level trajectory of social

accounts. Researchers tend to either focus on the creation and design of social accounts (e.g. Frey & Cobb, 2010) or on their perception and outcomes. We acknowledge that this study is also guilty of this second flaw and therefore in respect of this we have ensured consistency between the level of theory, the level of measurement, and the level of analysis, all of which focus on the individual employee level (Smyth & Edkins, 2007). We make no attempt to elucidate the impact of alignment between the social account provided and the account received and therefore present these findings and our associated interpretation as a contribution to single-level theory. We would suggest the next logical step in social accounts research would be to attempt a multi-level study design to consider these dynamics further.

Fourthly, this study has made significant gains in developing a reliable and valid measure for different types of social accounts as classified according to Cobb and Wooten's (1998) typology which will be useful in furthering research in this area. However, due to the elimination of one item from the final 'causal account' measure this left only two items leaving a very small construct. Whilst the reliability measures which were performed for the construct suggested its viability as an independent factor we would encourage future developments of these items to aim to improve the causal account item measures to enhance confidence in the construct.

Finally, here we test social account success in terms of the recipients' understanding of the account. Whilst this is important for ensuring effective communications, it does not really tap into the acceptance of, or agreement with, the message within the social account. Even if employees understand a change, they may still actively resist it if they do not agree with the organizations decision. Cobb et al (2001) call for more research which explores why account receivers either accept or reject an account. Whilst some have focused on how the content of the explanation relates to the likelihood of social account acceptance (Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1999),

recent research indicates that the acceptance of a social account during change may depend on the legitimacy and evidence-base in recipients sensemaking (Shield, Thorpe, & Nelson, 2002). Here we (like Cobb and Wooten, 1998) propose that 'understanding' the account from the point of view of the account giver is the first step in creating acceptance of the account, however it would also be interesting to develop a more accurate measurement based on the extent to which the employees agreed with the accounts. Further research is needed to develop this further.

Practical implications

Our literature review and subsequent research findings offer suggestions about potentially effective ways for managers to communicate organizational change to employees. With regards to successful communication, there appears to be a role for causal accounts, but the strongest benefits seem to accrue from using ideological accounts. In contrast, referential accounts had a negative relationship with perceived social account success. These findings strongly suggest that management should not construct and deliver messages about organizational change without proper consideration of the content. The communications about change seem to be more successful in gaining employee understanding when they make reference to internal or external factors that are driving decision making, and more importantly, to ideological matters such as shared values and superordinate goals. Our findings suggest that management should avoid making reference to changes being implemented in other organizations (i.e. referential accounts). This is likely to have a negative effect of people's understanding of the need for change. Our findings also strongly indicate the role of ideological accounts in terms of trust. Therefore if

managers seek to improve trust in management during the change they should focus on

demonstrating their commitment to long term objectives and shared values (ideological).

In practical terms our research shows that employers and organizations need to be very

aware of how they communicate their choice of change and their reasons for change so that they

can have the best chance at getting their employees to agree to the change. This would also

provide the employers with an opportunity to think and plan a strategy that is win-win for both

their employees and for the company. Any form of organizational change needs to be carefully

planned; communicating that change is no less important

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Notes:

[1] 13 questionnaires were eliminated from the analysis where no social account had been recalled by participants. It appears that the length of employment was linked to these missing cases which suggest that these were employees who had recently joined the organization and therefore had not been present when the initial communications had taken place.

[2] This data was only collected in the first organization.

Table 1 – Means, standard deviation, correlations and Cronbach's alpha reliability

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Gender#	Age^	1	2	3	4	5	
1. **Causal** (2)	172	2.90	1.61	-1.612	.073	1	(α=.82)				
2. **Ideological**(6)	172	3.89	1.42	.510	-.038	.559**	1	(α=.90)			
3. **Referential**(5)	169	2.90	1.33	.408	-.049	.432**	.600**	1	(α=.88)		
4. **SA_Success**(3)	170	4.14	1.65	-.847	.086	.545**	.694**	.327**	1	(α=.90)	
5. **Trust in Mgmt**(9)	170	4.97	1.28	1.749	-.130	.209**	.456**	.235*	.508**	1	(α=.88)

T-test scores reporting no significant difference of gender on variables

^Correlations scores reporting no significant effects of age on variables

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Table 2 – Confirmatory Factor Analysis of Scale Measures
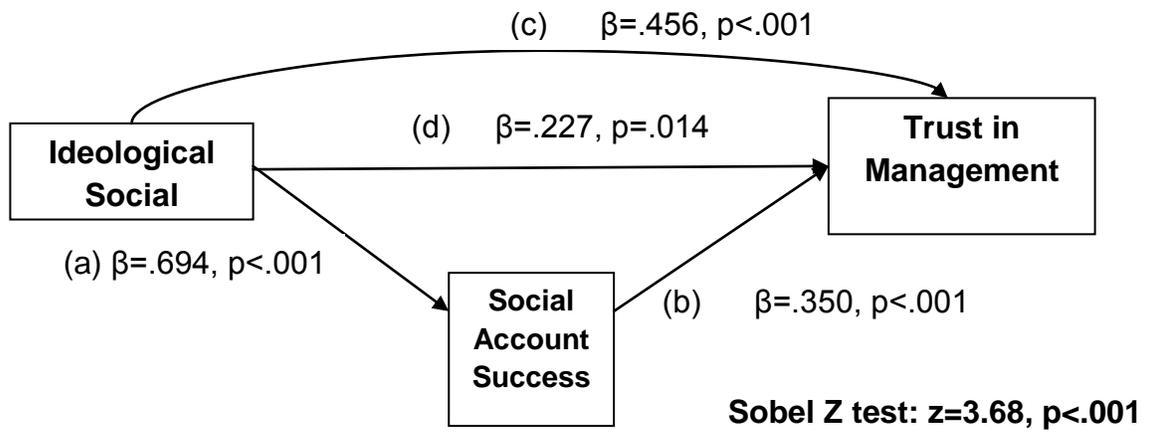
Item		Factor loading
Social Account Classification Measure: produced 3 factors - Chi-Square (51) = 119.9, p<.001, CFI = .943, RMSEA = .089		
Causal Accounts: 2 items α=.82		
Causal 1	That the organization could not continue to function in its current situation.	1.00
Causal 2	That the organization would cease to survive unless something changed.	.66
Ideological Accounts: 6 items α=.90		
Ideological 1	Details of what the benefits of the change will be were outlined.	.80
Ideological 2	Details of what would be achieved through the implementation of the Toyota system.	.82
Ideological 3	The motives that managers had for the implementation of the Toyota system	.83
Ideological 4	Solutions were offered to problems which exist.	.82
Ideological 5	Who you should talk to if you want questions about the change answered.	.70
Ideological 6	How employees could participate in the decision making.	.71
Referential Accounts: items α=.88		
Referential 1	Implementations of this system which had recently occurred in other organizations were compared.	.86
Referential 2	Previous changes within the company were compared.	.90
Referential 3	A positive example of a similar change was provided as a benchmark for success.	.80
Referential 4	A negative example of a similar change was provided.	.61
Social Account Success: 3 items, α=.90, CFI = 1.00, Chi-Squared and RMSEA not computed where df=<1 (Pratt, 2008).		
Success 1	I fully understood the implementation in its entirety.	.77
Success 2	I was able to make sense of the decisions which had been made about the implementation of this system.	.95
Success 3	I was able to see the decision from the decision makers' point of view.	.90
Trust in Management adapted from Cook and Wall (1980): 8 items, α=.91, Chi Squared (20) = 102.6, p<.001, CFI = .910, RMSEA = .155		
Trust 1	Management at my firm are sincere in their attempts to meet the workers' point of view.	.82
Trust 2	Our firm has a poor future unless it can attract better managers.	.36
Trust 3	If I got into difficulties at work I know my managers would try and help me out.	.75

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Trust 4	Management can be trusted to make sensible decisions for the firm's future.	.78
Trust 5	Management seem to do an efficient job.	.86
Trust 6	I feel quite confident that the firm will always try to treat me fairly.	.85
Trust 7	Most of the managers can be relied upon to do as they say they will do.	.83
Trust 8	I have full confidence in the skills of management.	.85

Table 3 – Hierarchical Regression – Ideological Accounts and Social Account Success on Trust in Management

	B	SE B	ß	t	P
STEP 1 $R^2=.221$, $F(1, 167)=47.453$, $p<.001$					
Constant	29.530	2.335		12.645	.000
Ideological	.646	.094	.470	6.889	.000
STEP 2 $R^2=.285$, $F(2, 166)=33.039$, $p<.001$					
Constant	27.240	2.323		11.727	.000
Ideological	.476	.125	.227	2.487	.014
Social Account Success	.312	.212	.350	3.837	.000

Figure 1 – Mediation analysis of ideological accounts, trust and organizational citizenship behaviors

(c) β=.456, p<.001

Ideological Social

(d) β=.227, p=.014

Trust in Management

(a) β=.694, p<.001

Social Account Success

(b) β=.350, p<.001

Sobel Z test: z=3.68, p<.001

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