

Change happens: Help your employees accept it—and adapt

By John L. Bennett

Today's managers are required to create rapid responses to shifts in customer expectations, competition, technology and global markets, as well as in employee expectations. Consequently, change occurs more rapidly and in greater volume—and it's more complex than ever. But left unattended, the impacts of change reduce employee and organizational productivity, contribute to burnout, negatively affect the quality of products and services, damage customer relations and reduce employee morale.

Managers who fail to lead employees through change in their organization may end up with a staff lacking trust in its leaders and/or unwilling to embrace future change. Those who resist change also may sabotage projects or may “check out” of the organization before they actually leave. In the end, managers wind up spending more time fighting resistance than implementing planned change.

So, as managers, what can be done to respond to these reactions and to proactively assist employees in embracing change? What can be done to make the transition from the way things are or have been to the way they need to be? The following steps can help you lead your employees:

Accept the change. It is difficult—if not impossible—to effectively lead others through any transformational change without first accepting that change yourself. As leaders and managers of change, you have the information earlier than other employees and have probably had more experience embracing change. As you assess the responses of employees to change, reflect on your own personal experience with embracing the same change. Did you readily accept it? What did you resist? How did you express your resistance? How long did it take for you to reach a point of acceptance? Use the answers to those questions to help your employees accept change, while at the same time, realize that each person deals with change differently.

Explain “why.” When confronted with doing the unfamiliar, people usually believe they have a right to know the reason for such changes. Today's employees want to be partners, not just subservient doers, and they seek to understand. By explaining the reasons for the change, you gain more support.

Involve employees in developing implementation plans. As the Chinese proverb states, “The mark of a good leader is when, after the job is finished, the people say, ‘We did it ourselves.’”

Be willing to alter plans. More often than not, plans for effecting change require adjustment. Always approach the project with this in mind, which allows you to open the project to new possibilities and will allow others to influence the process, as well as the results.

Track and report progress. Track progress and then share the news (good and not so good) with all those involved. Seeing the status and benchmarks of change will help focus on the mission and achieve desired results.

Communicate—internally and externally. Ask often, listen well and communicate thoroughly. Resistance is a source of evaluation. Never dismiss it outright; look for value in other perspectives. When employees believe there are gaps in their understanding of where they and the organization are going, they spend a lot of energy trying to build the bridges over those gaps.

Seek to understand where resistance may occur and develop coping strategies. Change nearly always meets with some form of resistance. Identify the reason for the resistance and address it. For example, if you wanted to sleep rather than go to the health club, you could change your workout time to the evening. If you tried to diet but couldn't, you might eliminate certain "bad foods" that are enjoyable. The same is true in the work environment. Identify the causes for resistance, and address the underlying beliefs or values. Modify the initial expectations.

Reward acceptance. Always acknowledge those who accept change and their achievements. Don't take them for granted.

Continually remind those affected of the benefits of the change. Create a "win-win" situation. Knowing the benefits of the "new way" will help them see the value in altering relationships, behaviors and processes from the "old way."

Provide opportunities to learn and grow. With change comes the need to learn new skills and to gain confidence. It takes time, patience, direction, support and coaching to learn the new way of functioning and to adjust to the new relationship.

Allow resisters to "exit" gracefully. People who are unable to overcome resistance to a change may decide to check out and leave. Or you may need to remove them from the team or organization. In either case, ensure a graceful departure.

Sponsorship. There is no substitute for initial and sustaining sponsorship for any change effort. Sponsorship bestows legitimacy on the change and ensures obstacles are removed while ongoing, sustained resources that are essential to successful implementation are present.

Help employees take personal responsibility to learn to embrace change. Embracing change can be learned, and it is important for managers to support employees in this growth. This can take the form of genuinely listening to their concerns and successes and being empathetic to them. By providing coaching and support, you can help your employees expand and grow.

Accept the fact that employees accept change in different ways. Allow them the space to be unique.

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