

Vitality

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In this issue

- Reactions to change
- Understanding the process
- Managing change
- The ten commandments of managing change
- The last word



Supporting employees through organizational change

Some employees thrive on change, others are fearful—and their fears trigger anxiety, resistance and a range of unproductive behaviours. Managers need to understand the change process so they can lead their teams through uncertain and often confusing times.

When a company announces a major organizational change such as a merger, restructuring, new direction or radical system overhaul, the anxiety felt by employees can have a detrimental effect on productivity and on the change process. In such situations, managers need to use all their skills to create a workplace where change is embraced, exploited and successfully implemented.

Obstacles To Change

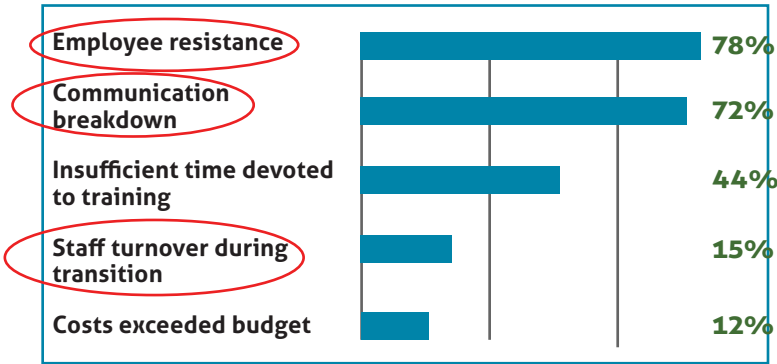
A 2006 study by Harvard Business Review found that 66 percent of change initiatives fail to achieve their desired business outcomes. Why is change so difficult? The five most common obstacles to change are depicted in the graph¹ below. However, the three circled obstacles are those that you, as an organizational leader, have some significant control over.

To keep their competitive edge, organizations must continually adapt and evolve. Those that don't seldom survive. Therefore, it's important for managers to help their teams embrace, not resist, change.



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Obstacles Experienced During Major Organizational Change



Reactions To Change

How people perceive a change will dictate their reactions to that change. For example, if employees see the change bringing more opportunities for professional and personal growth, then they will support the process. If they believe the outcome will result in job losses or fewer opportunities, then they will resist. The greater the perceived threat, the greater the resistance.

Most of us are, to some degree, threatened by change because we fear the unknown. That fear triggers many reactions, including anxiety, panic, depression and anger. These are normal responses—and so are the negative behaviours that often accompany those responses, such as:

- acting like a victim;
- giving in to negativity;
- detaching from the job;
- anger; and
- focusing only on one's area of concern.

For managers, the first component in any change initiative is to know how each member of their team is likely to react. Every individual is different, so every reaction will be different. Knowing what to expect makes it easier to manage the many emotional reactions that may arise.

Managing Your Own Response

It's easier to manage the reactions of your team if you manage your own reactions to the situation first. If you do not personally agree with the change or changes, you must deal with your concerns quickly before your staff picks up on any negativity or reluctance on your part. If they do, resistance will spread quickly. Effective leaders are seen to embrace change and work diligently to lessen any negative effects on their team. Be sure to lead by example by being optimistic and focusing on the opportunities the change will offer to your people and/or department.

Understanding the process

The transition to a new, unfamiliar workplace or way of working can be an exciting, scary, and bumpy experience for which people are often unprepared. Preparing yourself—and your staff—will make the journey less stressful.

Organizational change does not consist of a series of isolated events and does not happen overnight. It's a process that takes time. That process has three distinct phases.

Ending—Transition—Beginning

Simply put, a new beginning cannot start until something has ended. Everyone involved must recognize that the old way of doing things is gone or going, and be allowed to grieve that loss. Since each and every one of us deals with grief differently, you should expect a range of reactions. The more resilient and adventurous on your team are likely to cope well with shifting priorities and landscapes. Others will deny the loss then, when they realize that change is inevitable, bargain for more time or seek special accommodations to slow its progress. Eventually, they will reluctantly move towards acceptance.

However, the transition process is the most difficult phase to manage because it's unpredictable and often turbulent. This is when you may feel caught between senior management's need to proceed smoothly and on schedule, your team's uncertainty and resistance and your responsibility to effectively implement changes in your area.

While you can't control how senior management handles the transition, you can make the journey less frustrating and fearful for your team. Support and reassurance, openness and honesty, clarity and discussion will help ensure commitment to the initiative from your staff.

Managing Change

In today's business climate, if you aren't constantly managing change and transition, you aren't managing. Small, frequent changes keep your department moving forward and help your team members become more effective and ready to adapt when major changes occur. However, while people will easily embrace small, incremental modifications, they need more time to adjust when big changes loom. The bigger the change, the more notice people require.

Look and listen

Ask your staff for their opinions and feedback regarding the change initiative. Don't disregard objections, resistance or feelings—you'll only drive them underground which will lead to unproductive behaviour ranging from indirect grumbling and complaining to outright sabotage. Those openly resisting the change are calling for your help. Be there to listen and lend your support.

Walk around the office, engage people in conversation and share as much information as you can. Be patient with people. Give them time to come around to the new structure or process.

Communication

Seamless transitions require detailed preparation, planning, and evaluation. But *perhaps the single most important element in any change process is a well-planned, well-executed communication plan*. Incomplete or poor communication raises suspicions that management is hiding something or worse, doesn't know what it's doing. Poor or delayed communication also causes the rumour mill to go into overdrive and it becomes harder for managers to undo the misconceptions and regain control of the process.

Not communicating properly is perhaps the worst mistake an organization, or a manager, can make. Unfortunately, evidence suggests that less than 50

percent of managers successfully communicate information to their teams regarding change, or adequately discuss the impact of a change on their team². Effective communication should:

- not be delayed;
- be brief and focus only on the facts;
- be tailored and targeted; and
- be truthful.

People don't need to know every element in the initiative—just the goals, rationale and the changes that will affect them directly. Too much information promotes speculation and gossip.

As soon as you become aware of a planned organizational change, ask yourself:

- who needs to know what?
- when will they need to know?
- how will they find out?

Once you've answered those questions, you're ready to establish a communication plan.

The communication plan

A communication plan should include:

- the goals of the change initiative;
- rationale and importance of the change;
- role of that group in the change process;
- the impact on team members; and
- what resources will be allocated to the change.

Ideally, announcements and briefings should be conducted face-to-face, such as at town halls and departmental meetings, and then followed up in written form to confirm the information and reduce the potential for distortion. Communication should be ongoing throughout the transition with accurate information constantly flowing to those directly affected by changes.

The 10 commandments of managing change

- 1. Provide direction.** Define your department's role and needs in the change process. What has to happen to your area if this transition is to be a success?
- 2. Expect performance changes.** Expect a drop in productivity and an increase in stress levels during the process.
- 3. Be positive.** Rise above the confusion. Be upbeat and enthusiastic.
- 4. Clarify and manage the issues.** Separate the urgent from the important. A major organizational change will add to everyone's workload, but especially yours. Avoid being sidetracked by less important issues. Make sure your priorities are clear.
- 5. Be informed.** Take time to understand the psychological issues involved. Show empathy and understanding to your staff.
- 6. Inform your staff.** Give staff the bad news as well as the good. Don't assume people only want to hear the good news. Level with people by telling them the truth.
- 7. Support your staff.** Be honest. Don't make promises you can't keep. Change can make staff distrustful of management so now is the time to build your credibility.
- 8. Build your team.** Meet with your staff. Make sure everybody knows the report relationships and performance expectations. Clarify roles and responsibilities often and, if relevant, explain why roles are changing.
- 9. Let the staff work their way through the transition.** Encourage initiative, discussion and suggestions. Expect mistakes but don't judge. Be a great coach, not just the boss.
- 10. Just get on with it.** Focus on the transition process and your department's mission, goals and objectives.

The last word

Selling any major organizational change is crucial. Outline the benefits, the opportunities to learn new skills and the potential for personal growth. Focus on the positive, but don't oversell. Stress that, while the transition between the old and the new may be stressful, the final result will be beneficial to all involved.

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