

Maximize success when effecting change

Published in Career Times on August 19, 2005 - Gear Up section

**Strategy is needed to motivate a group
to adopt new practices**

By Charlie Lang, Executive Coach & Trainer @ Progress-U Limited



Maximize success when effecting change

© Progress-U Limited ♦ Charlie.Lang@progressu.com.hk ♦ www.progressu.com.hk

Imagine you are in charge of the restructuring process for a division of around 150 people. The purpose of the project is to streamline operations and administration to make everything more customer-orientated. The underlying objective is to achieve higher productivity and improved customer satisfaction, which should lead to business growth.

The first thing is to decide where to start. That might be in selecting a project team made up of all department heads and possibly some cross-functional managers from HR and finance. But decisions about who to include in the team will be crucial and will have an impact on the initial level of support you can expect to get for the project from other members of staff. Unfortunately, in many cases, little thought is given to the effect the selection of a project team will have on the people who will be involved further down the line.

In order to choose the best possible team, it is necessary to understand how groups function. In a corporate environment, groups typically have a formal leader, for example the department head. Depending on the size and culture of the group, there will also be one or more informal internal leaders or "key opinion makers". These individuals are usually respected by most other team members and have a strong influence on their beliefs and attitudes.

Maximize success when effecting change

Obviously, if major changes are being implemented, it is important to get the buy-in of these key opinion makers, since they will have a strong influence on the outlook and motivations of their colleagues. Countless times I've seen managers in charge of restructuring projects give insufficient consideration to this factor and face an uphill struggle and avoidable problems as a result. How, though, can we ensure the buy-in of all key people, and what should we do if there is resistance?

Selection criteria

In the division of 150 employees, there might be 15 to 25 key people, who are either formal managers or recognised opinion makers who need to be committed to the project. Since any team becomes inefficient when it is too large, the maximum number you can realistically work with is 15. In this case, you need to make a selection based not on rank but on two other factors: influence with team members and colleagues; and specific knowledge needed to re-engineer the company's processes and structures.

After doing this, it is vital to explain your choices and the rationale to those who have obviously been left out, ideally in one-to-one conversations. It might take time, but it is time well spent, as it will make the implementation process easier. You could also consider creating two teams: a smaller core team of around 10 people and an extended team with all key players. The former group would develop the new processes and structures and then get the latter to comment and provide further suggestions. This way they would still feel part of the project.

Maximize success when effecting change

It can sometimes happen that key individuals resist the idea of change by completely disagreeing with suggested concepts or the views of the majority. In my experience there is a good chance of getting them to support the new direction if their concerns are acknowledged and a clear explanation is given for the chosen way forward. Also, I recommend emphasizing that their support is important for the success of the project. Occasionally, there will be key opinion makers who, despite our best efforts, show absolutely no intention of cooperating. By doing this, they threaten to undermine the morale of their peers. In such cases, it is simply better to move such people from their current area of influence.

Expected gains

Whenever a change is being planned, people will generally gauge the likely disruption involved and set it against the expected gains. These could be seen in terms of the avoidance of difficulties (e.g. not being laid off) or in a more positive light. Therefore, it is very important for the project leader to spell out the benefits of restructuring, not only for the company, but also for each group or individual. All members of the project team must fully understand these benefits and explain them to other employees to achieve maximum buy-in across the whole organisation.

Any restructuring will create some winners and, unfortunately, some losers. It is therefore crucial to deal directly with those who have missed out and to point out they still remain valued employees even if they have not got the promotion or improved status they were hoping for. This recognition will help them to stay engaged in spite of any perceived slight.

Maximize success when effecting change

Projects managing change frequently fail because they don't take sufficient account of complex group dynamics. These forces are greatly influenced by the composition of the main project team and its leadership, as well as by the way communication is handled. Getting the buy-in of all key players is a major factor in making sure change projects successfully meet their objectives.



Charlie Lang is an Executive Coach and Trainer who founded Progress-U Limited in 2002. His mission is to develop his clients to become First-Class Leaders. He is a passionate and professional Executive Coach, Mentor Coach, Trainer, Public Speaker and Author of articles related to leadership, change management and innovative sales.

In 2004, he initiated the Master Coach Alliance (see <http://www.master-coach-alliance.com>) in Hong Kong, a network of professional Life, Business and Corporate Coaches. End of 2004, he started authoring the book "The Groupness Factor" (see <http://www.progressu.com.hk/Groupness-book.htm>) which got published in August 2005.

Maximize success when effecting change