

No one Really Likes Change – SO HOW CAN WE DO IT?

*Aspects of the Psychology of
Organizational Change*

During the course of a change process, executives often find that they take two steps back for every step they take toward their change goal. The reality is that most organizational change efforts fail. This article highlights some aspects of the psychology of change which are often overlooked and provides suggestions on how to deal with them effectively.

How does management typically plan a change process? After determining the desired outcomes, they create a task force to work out a strategy for implementing the necessary changes. The task force then works out a plan with milestones and descriptions of responsibilities in a given time frame. New organizational and process charts are outlined and a number of people are repositioned. Further, everybody involved is expected to follow the new procedures and regulations. Overall, the change process is projected to be linear.

In reality, however, the implementation of change is a nonlinear process, a big part of which is unpredictable. This is equally true for evolutionary and revolutionary change. Not only may the environment change in unexpected ways, but the dynamics in a given system might also yield unexpected dynamics which are hard, if not impossible, to predict.

That is why good leadership in times of considerable change is vital. Good leadership does not only help develop the strategic planning aspects of organizational change; it also organizes coaching in dealing with unanticipated consequences and the personal concerns of everyone involved.

Change success can be achieved with a professional coach-the-coach program for all leaders involved in the change process. During such a program, the following issues can be addressed:

- Appropriate and honest communication of the intended changes, highlighting the need for change including its desirability and practicality (the material and immaterial cost of change must also be considered);
- Immediate and honest handling of the concerns of people involved, such as change of status, worries about capability to perform successfully in the new position, and the long-term effects of the anticipated change;
- Adjustment of the change process whenever necessary, while keeping the change goal in focus.

About the psychology of organizational change

Psychologist Albert Bandura calls the judgment an individual makes about his or her ability to execute a particular behavior "self-efficacy". He enumerates four ways through which individuals acquire self-efficacy from a particular task: (1) performance accomplishments, (2) vicarious experiences (experiences made through another person), (3) social persuasion, and (4) positive emotional states.

Change leaders can take advantage of this knowledge to create the necessary experiences and thus reduce employee



anxiety and boost confidence. This can be achieved by:

- Explaining to employees how their previous experience will help them deal with upcoming changes;
- Assessing employees' competencies and comparing them with the required competencies in the new position to discover potential gaps;
- Providing training and coaching to bridge these gaps;
- Giving continuous feedback during the transition period to keep everybody on the same page.

Savvy change leaders realize that the reaction to change will be significantly affected by employee emotions, which



are, in turn, greatly affected by past and current practices and policies within the organization, i.e., the culture of the organization. It is possible to reduce excessive tension arising from change initiatives by providing sufficient, consistent and accurate information endorsed by a trusted and credible member of senior management.

Ideally, an organization first “prepares” its corporate culture to make it ready to embrace necessary changes. To achieve this, the leaders must be competent in enhancing adequate values through communication and the display of role model behavior. Furthermore, leaders should assess the current

formal and informal rules, regulations and systems to see whether these still support the desired culture. They can then make adjustments where necessary.

Achieving Buy-in

Another important aspect in any change process and one critical to its success is the ability of the change leaders to achieve buy-in from those affected by the changes to be implemented. With buy-in I mean a true acceptance of the need to change.

While good leadership communication is a prerequisite to get buy-in, it’s usually not sufficient. In larger organizations particularly, it is almost impossible to deal with each person individually in order to get buy-in from a sufficiently large majority. The good news is that it is not necessary to do so. In fact, it is enough to get the key opinion leaders on board as they will largely affect the opinions, beliefs and attitudes of their peers.

Who are the key opinion leaders? Very often they are not the managers. Rather, they are the staff members who are highly respected by their colleagues. It is therefore crucial to the success of a change project to involve these informal leaders. Ideally, they are made members of the change project team and thus become co-owners of the change process, which will motivate them to create buy-in among their peers as well. If that is not possible, the change management team should ensure that these opinion leaders are going to have a positive view on the anticipated changes.

From my experience working with executives involved in change processes, I have noticed that in cases where the change leaders were well prepared to communicate effectively and able to coach the affected employees, change processes were considerably more successful. If they additionally achieved clear buy-in from the key opinion makers, the process could be even called smooth.

Conclusion

The Mexican poet Octavio Paz said, “Wisdom lies neither in fixity nor in change, but in the dialectic between the two.”

Wise leadership is important at any given moment in any organization. In times of change, it is particularly crucial.

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