

## Leading Through Times of Organizational Change

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Change. The word alone triggers an emotional response. Some people thrive on change or take it in stride while others resist it. Our brains are wired to dislike change. That's because change can be overwhelming and uncomfortable. The unknowns may take people out of their comfort zone, activate innate reflexes, and lead to possible resistance. Beyond the psychological and physiological responses, there are organizational challenges to contend with such as role changes, added responsibilities, financial burden, or how work/life balance and culture may be impacted. The implications span across an organization making execution and implementation challenging. It is no wonder that the vast majority of change efforts fail.

Organizational change involves going from the current way of doing things to a desired future state. Throughout the change process it is the organization's leaders—the sponsors of change—who play the most critical role in determining the success of the effort. It's easy to lead when all goes according to plan. However, organizations typically experience challenges with implementation. While these challenges can be temporarily uncomfortable, organizational leaders should not let that deter them. Instead they need to embrace change and view it as part of their role. Organizational leaders need to be adaptable by being able to detect and respond to change. That begins by embedding change and innovative thinking into the organization's culture.

At the center of each phase of any change effort are the people affected by the change. These are the people who will either come along for the ride or resist, depending on how the effort is led and perceived. Many change efforts fail due to mismanagement of people issues. To ensure success, it is essential that all stakeholders are involved from the onset so that the initiative takes on meaning to them. When you have buy-in from different departments within the organization, conflicts can be resolved quicker, reducing any implementation roadblocks.

One potential roadblock occurs when organizations try to do too much at once—especially with limited resources. Stretching people too thin has a negative effect on how the change will be perceived and executed. All current and 'in progress' initiatives should be evaluated and triaged alongside the proposed initiatives to identify what the organization will begin, continue, and stop doing. This helps prevent change overload. Prioritizing initiatives that align strategy with the organization's value proposition while supporting opportunities for growth and advancement will yield the greatest success. Therefore, communication is essential to a successful implementation.

In order for communication to be effective, the change leaders need to commit to the initiative on a personal level. Forming an emotional attachment allows them to stand behind the effort, 100%. Leaders must show confidence that the organization can make the proposed changes a reality. If leaders don't believe in the initiative and the need for change, then no one else in the organization will either.

Leaders must create a clear message to explain why the change is occurring and the reasoning for the timing of the change. A clear message helps unite people around the vision. Messaging should be focused on the desired future state. Leaders must paint a clear picture and specify the outcomes so everyone knows what they are working toward. This helps everyone make sense of why changes are happening, reduces uncertainty and resistance among staff, and accelerates the pace of change. It's also important to let staff know what is at stake if the change doesn't happen. When people see the bigger picture sometimes they are able to accept change quicker. Provide reasons for why the old ways of working are no longer effective to frame why the change is necessary. Outline what the change will mean to the team, what they stand to gain, and any known sacrifices they may need to make along the way.

In addition to what is communicated, how and when a message is conveyed is equally important. Early and ongoing communication is essential to gain employee buy-in and the approach to communicating change should be consistent across all departments. The way changes are communicated has an effect on employee morale. Communication needs to appeal to both the emotional and rational minds of staff. It is the leader's job to frame the change as positive. Clear, consistent, and honest communication reduces anxieties. Leaders should realize that mindsets may need to shift before everyone adapts to the change. Leaders need to be honest about any unknowns while also showing confidence that together the organization can face any challenges, adapt, and remain successful.

To clearly convey the message across the organization, leaders should host an all-staff meeting followed by individual department meetings. This allows the opportunity for staff to process the initial message before regrouping in a smaller setting. While time for a Q&A session should be allocated during the all-staff meeting, the departmental meetings are where more individualized dialog can occur. It's crucial for leaders to attend, give sufficient time to listen to concerns, respond honestly, and continue to be available following the meeting. To demonstrate leadership's commitment, the change initiative should be the number one item on every team meeting agenda. By communicating effectively and often, leaders can begin to engrain the initiative into the culture of the organization and build trust and credibility.

Once the organization's proverbial sleeves are rolled up, things may start to get a little messy. Deadlines may be off track and outcomes may need to shift. This is the most challenging part of the change process, but also the most critical to leaders' communication efforts. Key components of successful change efforts are sustaining the

initiative and seeing it through fruition. Anticipating that there will be ups and downs makes these difficulties easier to handle. When leaders prepare for the unexpected, they can be proactive and responsive. They can take necessary action for what is needed in a responsible way. Leaders should find ways to motivate, inspire, and coach staff while focusing on results and rewarding those who achieve the goal. It's important to emphasize the early wins. Helping people thrive with change and not just cope is what separates successful leaders. While the outcome may not always be what was envisioned, it is important to take the opportunity to identify small successes and reframe any failures to improve future performance. Leaders should remember that improvements never occur without change and sustainable change takes time.

Regardless of their niche, all associations are impacted in some way by the regulatory, political, legal, environmental, technological, or competitive landscape. These external factors feed into the changes that take place internally. If organizations don't respond with their own improvement efforts they will eventually become obsolete. You can't improve unless you're willing to change. Responding to change positively, effectively, and responsibly allows organizations to remain viable. Leaders need to stay ahead of what is to come to remain relevant.

We have helped many organizations lead change efforts in strategic planning, organization design, governance, and mergers. A clear vision and prioritization of change initiatives coupled with effective and consistent communication have been the formula for successful outcomes.