

Reconciling Change at Break-Neck Speed

Keys For A Successful Transition

by Sherri Petro

Change in the workplace hits a distinct chord with everyone in the organization. Employees don't often jump for joy! Change can create trepidation and uncertainty. It can evoke wistfulness for "the old days" in some and tempered excitement in those who choose to embrace it. For those who have seen their share, it means the start of yet *another* cycle. Amazing isn't it, that life is about changing and yet organizationally we tend not to deal well with it?

In this fast-paced global economy—whether a company is physical or virtual—change at break-neck speed is the norm, not the exception. Typically the employees' first reaction to change is negative ("Oh, no – not again!). They have been conditioned to believe their livelihood is threatened, their skill sets are no longer valued and their meaningful work jeopardized. How then, do you reconcile the need for change with what appears to be a learned negative human reaction? Once reconciled, how do you insure the actual change effort will be successful?

Thinking Abundantly

We need to think, model and experience a different -- abundant -- perspective. Instead of closing in on ourselves when change comes calling, we can open up, use our whole and creative resources and create a more supportive system to deal with change. Commitment to communication, simplicity and clarity combined with execution using real change leaders, flexibility and a realistic view can provide a solid foundation for the successful implementation of a change initiative.

Whether developing the change initiative or implementing it within an organization, these eight tips will help navigate this charged subject.

1. **Recognize that even though change is handled differently by individuals, the initial reaction is more apt to be negative than positive.** M. Scott Peck's opening line in his wonderfully successful book, *The Road Less Traveled*, indicates, "Life is difficult." He goes on to explain that it is only when there is recognition of that truth that we can move beyond it. Change can be difficult to assimilate and that also must be recognized before it can be dealt with. Organizational change can rip at the very fabric of individuals' security. Once individual reaction to change is recognized as potentially negative, you can take the bull by the horns and deal with it. An optimistic belief that everyone will see change as an opportunity right off the bat is nice but not very realistic.
2. **Communicate, communicate, communicate.** A major critique of any change effort is lack of communication. Commitment to communicating is essential in garnering support. Employees want and need to know why the change is necessary. Open up and tell them with substance -- not platitudes. If presented logically and with credibility, employees will get it. Set up a schedule for communications and stick to it. In the absence of true information, any information will do. Recognize that a ground swell of rumors may be taking place

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at the same time on a parallel track. Keep tabs on the grapevine to understand the underlying employee concerns.

3. **Combine tips 1 and 2** — Communicate that management understands change can be difficult and adversity is best weathered together. Employees need leadership on how to deal with change. Knowing that leaders also wrestle with change reinforces the notion that all levels of the organization are in this together. A change leader admit they know change can be difficult -- even for the leader. Encourage meaningful discussion about decision making. Insure the leadership team is available to employees.
4. **Cultivate a healthy respect for the past.** It served its purpose. Trashing the past can have an unintended consequence of insulting the employees who worked hard during that time. They did the best they could with what they had. It didn't work out for whatever reason. The past cannot be changed. Recognize its place in getting you to where you are, commit to learn from it and move forward.
5. Identify a working vision for change with clarity and simplicity. Engage in simple and concise statements easy for employees to understand. In a change era, reading between the lines becomes an art and a distraction from the task at hand. Productivity suffers during change initiatives as employees deal with confusion. Make it easier for employees to stay on task as the change unfolds.
6. **Identify the company's real change leaders and give them wide berth to execute.** In Jon Katzenbach and the RCL Team's book, *Real Change Leaders*, these leaders are "linchpins" that connect top leadership aspirations, workforce energy and productivity with the reality of the marketplace. This may be the archetype of a group tapped into for a change initiative if a leader is thinking about a centralized effort or individuals to tap into within each functional area. These individuals are enormously effective in improving performance through understanding, motivating and getting the best efforts from employees. Real change leaders are committed to a better way, care about how people are treated and enabled to perform, and have courage and personal initiative -- just the right talents needed for a change effort! How do you identify them? Ask these questions, "Who are the people depended upon to get the tough jobs done on time and to expectation?" and "Who can harness peoples' potential to achieve results?" You will have your answer. When they are included in the effort, you are widely using an excellent resource and have a better chance of successful implementation.
7. **Monitor the successes and failures and course correct as needed.** As with any great endeavor, launching is but one phase. Leaders must keep on top of the effort—remaining visible, approachable and flexible. If an area needs special attention, give it! Avenues to institute the change initiatives may become blocked and require leadership Drains. Any problems with execution should be viewed as educational. Don't ignore signs indicating a correction is needed. Build the ability to course correct into your change strategy.

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8. Recognize that with all change there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Understand that change can be like a "little death." Remember Elisabeth Kubler Ross' stages of dealing with death—denial, anger, bargaining, sadness and acceptance? Employees may go through some or all of these stages during change efforts. Eventually, with your assistance in being open, supportive, creative and resourceful, employees will understand the need for it and accept the change effort. When the effort ends, don't forget to celebrate and reflect. A long journey together deserves a salute!

Conclusion

The organizational landscape is littered with unsuccessful change management initiatives. So how do you reconcile change at break-neck speed? Turn the process inside out. Instead of closing ranks during a change management initiative, be open, resourceful and supportive. Use a workable process taking advantage of all of your personal and organizational resources. Create a supportive system where the leaders and the followers recognize need and work together to institute a solution. Think abundantly.

