“MANAGING” EMPLOYEE REACTIONS TO CHANGE: PART 1

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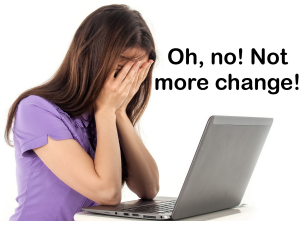

The issue of employee change resistance affects all change initiatives, especially the decision on how to handle it. Our response to the following client question provides insight into what’s needed to lower that resistance and increase the rate of adoption.

“We can’t control change around us but we can manage employees’ reaction to it. Based on your experience, how do you manage employees’ resistance to change?”

My first thought when I hear the phrase "...manage employees’ reaction..." is there is an attempt to control or manipulate employees’ emotional reaction to change rather than reduce the resistance to it. In such a scenario the individuals doing the "managing" usually attempt to coerce employee acceptance by demanding that they adopt the change ‘now’ or there will be ‘consequences’. These managers are then perplexed when resistance escalates and becomes increasingly vocal as they blame employees for the initiative slowing/stalling. Their choice of action indicates little/no understanding/acceptance of the emotional nature of change. The organization has failed to understand that commitment to change is an emotional process/decision and is achieved one person at a time, not en masse. It is not a cognitive light switch that can be turned instantly on or off at will.

The emotional reaction to change (and the resistance thereto) can be summarized is three words: fear (of personal harm or loss), fear (of being incompetent), fear (that others important to me will be harmed). Like any of the six emotions, fear is hardwired in the limbic system; it is a fight/flight survival reaction. To reduce fear to the point where change can be adopted is informed by three controllable factors: trust, transparency and knowledge. Individuals choose to embrace the change (or not) predicated on their trust in the messenger, the transparency of the process and, most importantly, their understanding of the "why", “what” and “how” the change is taking place. If there is a high level of trust in the person providing the answers, employees feel their fundamental “survival” questions are being honestly answered and change acceptance is advanced with resistance minimized. Conversely, if trust is low, employees feel manipulated, that they are not being told the truth and, out of a protective instinct, resistance increases.

Before suggesting (as organization’s often do) that the “building trust-increasing transparency-providing information” process is too time intensive (or expensive) to be implemented, consider the process by which leadership determines that change is necessary and the manner in which they decide to implement the change.

When change, however small, is in the discussion/consideration/decision/design phases, individual senior managers, through analysis (joint and singular), dialogue and Q & A sessions, move one at a time through the change acceptance cycle (denial, resistance, exploration, commitment) to adopt the change being considered. By the time the decision to change is made each senior manager has cussed, discussed, questioned and, if needed, negotiated with the others until each has a clear understanding of the change, its impact and goals as well as having decided to support the implementation process. In short, they have had the five questions below sufficiently answered to buy-in to the change. They know their role in the change process and have received the information (and the time) needed to assess how they (and their departments) will be impacted. They have taken the time they needed to move themselves, as a group and individually, through the change cycle to reach the commitment stage; if they had not, the change would not have been adopted. And, to be frank, they would not have gone about it in any other manner; they would not blindly adopt the change before gaining comprehension and understanding.

The process just described is 180^{o} out of phase with the way change is rolled out to others in the organization. Most often, once the decision to change (and how) is made, management adopts one of two paths by which to introduce it to the organization:

1) They play 'I've got a secret' by waiting until the very last minute to announce the change in the hope that it will minimize resistance; it doesn't.
2) They launch an enthusiastic 'rah, rah' campaign cheerfully touting the wonderful change that is about to take place in the hope that it will reduce resistance; it doesn't.

In either case, when the resistance becomes apparent, leadership's response is to then try to "sell", coerce or otherwise manipulate, employees into accepting the change; a process guaranteed to increase resistance and further reduce the level of trust. This becomes a cycle that the organization will repeat with change initiatives slowed to a crawl, or failing outright, for lack of support.

So then, broadly speaking, how should this repeating cycle be characterized and what can an organization do to reduce resistance to change and increase its rate of adoption? Simple. And, compared to the cost of a stalled or failed change initiative, inexpensive. More importantly, ethically it's the right thing to do.

When there is significant employee resistance to a change initiative there is invariably, as the warden in the film "Cool Hand Luke" observed "…a failure to communicate." The organization has not provided employees the information, nor the time, needed to understand the nature of the change, the impact it will have on their jobs and relationships and their role in the change process. This communication gap, and the resulting lack of trust, is compounded when organizations delay announcing change until the last minute and then plead that there is 'no time' to answer questions as they chastise employees for not being more positive and supportive of the change. If leadership would find this demand unacceptable for themselves, why are they surprised with employees find it unacceptable as well?

As change resistance is principally a lack of communication we would recommend the broad guidelines below be implemented forty-five to sixty days in advance of the initiative launch. This will, with proper messaging and resource allocation, provide sufficient information and time for employees to process the impact of the change with the consequence being reduced resistance followed by broader and more rapid acceptance and adoption.

1. First and foremost, implementing a communication, support and information strategy is not an open-ended process. Its purpose is to assist employees in moving themselves through the change cycle in a finite amount of time; as desirable as it may be not all employees will be onboard, nor do they need to be, for the change to be successful.
2. Instruct managers on the effects of change on staff. Train a small support cadre of cross-functional change advocates in change management skills to assist both leadership and employees.
3. The organization needs to provide honest answers to the following employee questions:
    - What is changing and how?
    - Why is it changing?
    - What is my role in the change?
    - How will I be impacted by the change?
    - Will I, or others around me, be harmed by this change?
4. Treat, with dignity, employees as adults and their questions/concerns with respect. Using honest, direct and empathetic phraseology let them know, as early as possible, why the change is happening, what's changing, and when, with no sugar coating the impact of the change. If there is to be downsizing say so, don't try to hide it. It is impossible to keep it a 'secret' until the last minute; it will leak with the rumor mill moving into high gear and not to the organization's benefit. If employees are being negatively impacted be clear about any accommodations being made to mitigate that impact.

5. Constantly link the smaller, incremental, changes to the larger goals, e.g., installing a new accounts payable system may be part of decentralizing budgets that is part of an initiative to increase managerial accountability.

Big picture, that's it. Understanding that change adoption is an individual process based on trust, information and time, using words such as "guide", "educate" and/or "support" for individuals, combined with implementing a comprehensive communication strategy, creates a more appropriate, and effective, framework for implementing change than "managing reactions" to it.

In order to accept, and support, change adults do not need to agree with it but they do need to understand it. Don't try to "manage" employees' response to change. Instead honestly and openly provide them with information, respect their questions and answer them with candor and directness and provide sufficient time for them to internalize the impact of the change. To do otherwise will cause the initiative, and employees, to struggle and may set both up for failure.