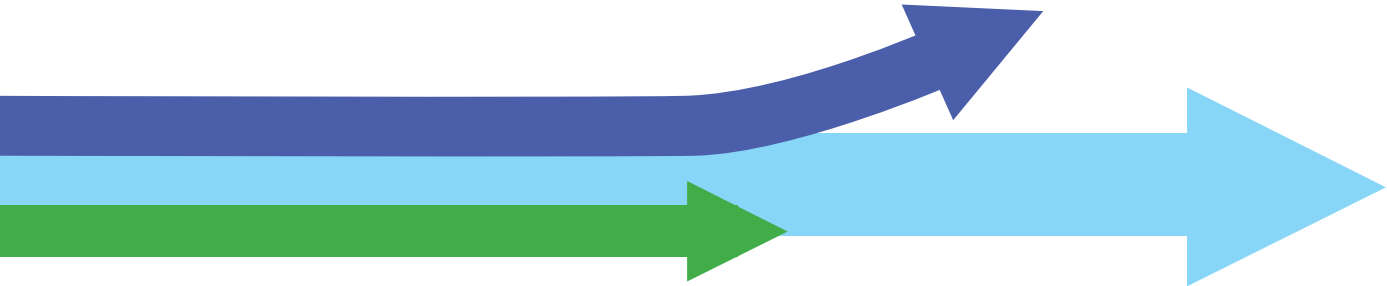


The Human Side of CHANGE MANAGEMENT



It is more critical than ever to address the human and business strategies needed for managing change today—how it affects your people, your awareness of it and the way to approach it.



Change is inevitable. Just consider the amount of change organizations have gone through in the last few years alone.

An organization's ability to respond adequately to change—to adapt and transform quickly to market demands—will have a significant impact on their trajectory and on whether they succeed or fail. For this reason, organizations implement change initiatives to improve their employees' resilience and to adapt their strategy to change.

A change management plan, however, is only as good as the motivation, focus, attitude, and leadership of the people who are implementing it. It's common to focus on goals, processes, or technologies to implement change—all the things that will help us systematically transform our organization. Most plans, though, are light on the human side of change management and tend to overlook some of the "softer" aspects of change.

Let's face it, the human side is often more challenging. But the underlying purpose of change management is to implement strategies for affecting change, controlling change, and helping people adapt to change.

"It's the people who make change happen," says KC Blonski, Vice President, Corporate Learning Solutions at American Management Association (AMA). "It's your employees who hold the key to real transformation and business results, and most people are creatures of habit. Change forces us to deal with ambiguity—the great unknown—and many people struggle with that."

"Uncertainty, anxiety and even resistance are normal reactions to change," says Jeff Becker, Director of Corporate Learning Solutions at AMA. "They are part of the whole change process. But they can slow the adoption of change initiatives, stalling progress, and can even hit the bottom line."

So how do we help people adapt to change? What's our role in bringing people around to it?

AMA recently polled more than 1,500 HR and learning and development leaders on their change management initiatives. When asked how employees have responded to change in the past, respondents indicated only 9% bought into and committed to change quickly.

The rest foundered a bit:

40% eventually accepted it

32% were nervous about it

9% felt agitated or alarmed

9% were neutral

The cumulative effects of this very human reaction to change are enormous.

In the same poll:

54% report an increase in anxiety and a feeling of uncertainty as a result of change

24% report an increase in resistance

10% report a lack of productivity

Change management is a systematic approach to dealing with the transition or transformation of an organization's goals, processes or technologies...with the purpose of implementing strategies for affecting change, controlling change and *helping people adapt to change*.

THE 4 HUMAN COMPONENTS OF CHANGE

When laying out your change initiative, you need to view it from the human perspective. "Clients often start with the 'what,' as in, what do you want people to know? What information do you want them to have, and what behaviors do you want them to change?" says Becker. "But real buy-in occurs in the hearts and minds of employees. So, you also need to ask yourself: What do I want them to believe? How do I get them to believe in the changes we're trying to implement? How do they feel about it, and how do I get them to *want* to change?"

Change happens when the pain of change is less than the pain of not making a change. Employees need to believe, on a daily basis, that the benefits of change outweigh the benefits of staying the same. Do they believe the change will work? Do they feel supported? Do they feel encouraged? Do they feel they have the resources they need to make it happen?

Learning can be surprisingly tactile. If you can get your employees to a point where they feel strongly about a change—so strongly that they can envision themselves doing it—you're more than halfway there.

How do your employees view change? "Some people love change," says Becker. "These are the people who stand in line overnight to get the latest technology. But others view change as a punishment. They think they did something wrong, and that change initiatives are a kind of correction." Having a good understanding of how your team, your employees, view change will give you insight into the barriers they will have in accepting it.

HELPING EMPLOYEES THROUGH THE 4+ STAGES OF CHANGE

Change happens in stages. Most people start with denial. Then comes resistance.

This is normal. Resistance is inevitable—it's going to happen, so don't let that surprise you or set you back. We like a routine. We like ritual, so when something's a little bit different, we have a natural tendency to resist some of it.

"Be careful, however, of both active and passive resistance that lingers," says Becker. Employees should start to move into the next stage—exploring change—within a few weeks. Resistance beyond that is something you'll need to address. Watch for negative comments, predictions of failure, or disruptive behavior. Passive resistance could simply be denial. It could be silence. It could manifest itself as a victim mentality. Passive resistance is a less overt behavior, but you need to identify it. Your role here as a change leader is to listen and observe their reactions.

Be aware of silence and what it might mean. "Don't assume it means someone's being passive and has not bought in," says Becker. They may have bought in and be just fine. They may have questions. They may be processing the change and trying to understand where it is. "So, just pay attention to that sense of silence, without jumping to conclusions about what it means. It could be resistance, or it could be that they are thinking through the changes they need to make."

Resistance isn't something to be managed. It's something to be facilitated. It's a necessary process people need to go through before they can embrace change. Your role, as a change leader, is to help move that along, to communicate with others who are in resistance. Sometimes this is hard, and you may find that you're also resisting. So, this process involves self-awareness in addition to awareness of others.

Ask yourself, am I reacting to this change or am I responding to it? Reacting typically has a much more emotional component to it. It's typically done without conscious thought. Sometimes you have to react if change is sudden and unexpected. But it's not where you want to be. You want to respond strategically. To do that, you must know how you respond to change personally and lead with emotional intelligence.



FACILITATING RESISTANCE

What can organizations do to help employees manage change? According to AMA's poll (referenced on page 2), 80% supply regular communication, and 34% try to actively anticipate responses to change. Leaders also reported attempting to remove barriers and providing weekly meetings.

But employees can also be moved into the next stage of change through active listening.

"Invite responses," says Becker. "Get people to talk. Ask questions. Listen without judging, because this is where you begin to build trust." This stage is also where you learn which of the "human" factors are likely to derail or stall your initiative later. You can't begin to remove obstacles if you don't have a clear understanding of what they are or why they exist in the first place.

Sometimes employees anticipate an obstacle you think is unlikely. You need to explore these fears without judgment. If they are real to your employees, they are a real obstacle you need to overcome, so treat it with due consideration and talk it out.

"You can't overcommunicate in this stage," says Blonski. "The ability to continue to communicate throughout a change initiative is absolutely critical. A communication plan and a multi-phase rollout can also help with this. Change initiatives are more successful in an environment where there is full transparency, a feeling of trust, and authenticity. Employees have to feel comfortable raising concerns and obstacles to change. By breaking larger initiatives into phases and smaller groups, we find employees are more likely to raise concerns and open up about anything that would hinder the initiative's success."

With trust comes exploration. Employees will feel comfortable enough to start experimenting with new behaviors or trying new processes or technology. This is the stage when employees begin to comply...but it's not the final phase of real change.

"I may comply, but it doesn't mean I'm committed," says Becker. "I'll go along with it because I have to. I might do it because I fear losing my job, getting furloughed, or my roles and responsibilities changing. This is still progress, but not the same thing as commitment."

FOCUS ON THE BENEFITS

In your regular communications with employees, reiterate the *why*. Let them know the benefits of the initiative, and your progress on achieving them. If you can make change attractive, you can inspire employees to want it and fight for it.

Regular reporting—not only of progress in your change initiative, but of results—can help with this.

PEOPLE SUPPORT WHAT THEY HELP CREATE

“Often when we roll out a change initiative, I’ll hear the old adage ‘You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make them drink,’” says Becker. “And I always respond, ‘Sure, but you can feed them a lot of salt along the way so they’re thirsty when they get there.’ You can make people want to change.”

It starts with involving people earlier in the process. People support what they help create. Engage employees in solutions. Make them a part of it, suggests Becker, “We generally don’t like to be told what to do. But if you can engage me in a solution, I’m more likely to support it because I helped create it.”

“Organizations often don’t involve their employees soon enough in the process,” agrees Blonski. “Sometimes you just can’t do that, of course. But, often, doing an assessment of the employees—getting input directly from them—on their needs and the current process saves a lot of time and effort later.”

Think about how you can involve them. Think about letting them have a voice and being able to communicate with you. What tactics will you use to engage the team in decision-making again, trying to get them on board and part of the process? And how and when will you solicit team member feedback?

ACTION FOLLOWS PRAISE—YOU GET WHAT YOU REWARD

Celebrate success, even if you haven’t reached your goal yet. People really crave that, especially in times of great change. It reassures them and inclines them to feel positively toward new processes and technology.

One variation of this technique is to offer closure. A benefit to breaking your initiative into phases is that you can close out early stages of your change initiative. This gives you something to celebrate and gives employees a sense of momentum.

“We are all looking for some finality in a lot of different things right now, because we’ve just lived through a long period of uncertainty and flux,” says Becker. “Anything you can do to say, ‘Great, close that gate. We’re done with that piece, and now we’re moving on to this one,’ the better. This is true for all uncertain environments, because closure contributes to the feeling of certainty. Closure is a sign of success and progress.”

BE A CHANGE DRIVER

If we learned one thing from COVID, it’s that one unexpected change can bring 50 additional unanticipated changes. You want to get ahead of that and make sure your team is ready for it.

Change may be inevitable. It will come whether you initiate it or not. But how you respond matters. You can wait for an external force to push you to react, or you can anticipate it and strategically prepare your people to respond.



“A great change management plan is only as good as the motivation, focus, attitude and leadership of the people implementing it...”



AMA supports individuals and organizations as they build effective communication and genuine team commitment and engagement during times of change. Are your managers ready to coach employees through the human side of change?

Ask our relationship managers about aligning change strategies with your people and practices to aid in mitigating change resistance.

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