

Workplace Wellness

Riding out Turbulent Times - How Managers Can Help Their Employees Cope with Change

Issue 3



As leaders, we sometimes struggle to find ways to help employees adapt to essential changes that are driven by economic, political or competitive realities. To address such a change or new directive, we put aside our personal reactions and do our best to plan an effective change process. The change is necessary - surely employees must also understand this. Or do they?

Often, the primary reason individual employees struggle with change is because they have not accepted the logic behind the decision. Consequently, they focus their energy on questioning the change instead of adapting to it.

During the time spent planning the change process, the "inner circle" of leaders and planners have had an opportunity to discuss the rationale behind the change and each has reflected on what it will mean at a personal level. Mentally, they've begun to adapt to the change **before it** is implemented. The process for employees is often quite different, since they typically learn about the change only shortly before its execution, and are given little or no opportunity for reflection, dialogue or input.

This disparity between the leaders' and the employees' process, and their respective abilities to adapt to required change, suggests that a good strategy to speed acceptance of a necessary change throughout an organization is to replicate elements of the leader's process within the entire employee group.

The following principles are beneficial in helping all employees understand and accept organizational change:

1. Impart knowledge in order to foster objectivity.

- Communication with employees must be honest and compassionate. Leaders should be sensitive to the impact their message may have on individual employees and be ready to help them deal with the anxiety and fear that often accompany changing expectations.
- What may seem 'self-evident' to a knowledgeable and experienced leader may not be evident to individual employees. Leaders need to provide a clear and complete rationale for the required change, along with plenty of background information to help employees understand the "big picture".

2. Help employees recognize their personal accountability and choice.

- Individual leaders need to be able to balance corporate and employee needs while keeping the overall goals of the organization in mind. They need to align individual employee's interests with organizational goals.

TRANSITION COPING STYLES

Enthusiastic

- ✓ Needs to understand the next step, and move to action quickly.
- ✓ Needs a chance to express their feelings.

Imaginative

- ✓ Needs to see the whole picture (context).
- ✓ Needs to share ideas with a small number of people.

Practical

- ✓ Needs to understand the expected result of the change and what will happen next.
- ✓ Needs to explore practical applications of the change.

Logical

- ✓ Needs to understand the theory behind the change.
- ✓ Reacts slowly, and wants facts.
- ✓ Needs to link/relate the change to the past.

This *Workplace Wellness Newsletter* is intended for Managers, Supervisors, Human Resource and Occupational Health Professionals
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- We are all motivated by self-interest. Employees need to understand how their self-interest aligns with corporate objectives. We all make choices about how we respond to organizational directives. Leaders can help employees recognize they have this personal power, along with accountability for the consequences of their choices.
- When an employee's self-interest can no longer be aligned with corporate objectives, due to situations such as down sizing or layoffs, it becomes the leadership group's responsibility to assist these employees to transition out of the organization with dignity and support, and with as much flexibility and responsiveness as possible.

3. Recognize that individuals manage change differently.

- An important goal in transition activities is to be clear about the required change and what it entails. Leaders must provide clear goals and objectives which help individual employees connect with them at a personal level.
- In times of downsizing, when the required change involves laying off individual employees, every effort needs to be made to ensure these employees understand that although they will be personally impacted, the decision that underlies their leaving is not personal. Their previous contributions to the organization need to be acknowledged and recognized - and their departure needs to be treated with the appropriate respect and dignity.
- Individuals have different transition coping styles (see sidebar for the most common coping styles). To honour them all:
 - Satisfy the need to see the bigger picture by defining the change within a broader context. Describe the challenges the change is intended to address and connect the future vision to past events.
 - Satisfy the need for a realistic view of the change by presenting a balanced view of expectations. Identify the expected (positive) results, present other (negative) implications and invite feedback and discussion regarding unintended consequences.
 - Satisfy the need for details by fully explaining the problem that needs to be solved, providing factually-based solutions and being prepared to outline the path the change process will take in its entirety.
 - Encourage employees to get assistance if they are struggling with the change process. Recognize that a commonly requested support mechanism is someone to talk to, and your organization's EAP program should be highlighted as a resource for employees.
 - Provide employees with ample opportunity for:
 - Individual reflection;
 - Small group discussion with leaders and colleagues;
 - Having influence on the change process whenever possible;
 - Influencing the timing and delivery of the change process where possible.

During times of change, it is important you remain aware of your influence as a leader. Be mindful of your behaviour and watchful of the message you are communicating both verbally and non-verbally. Employees may have a heightened awareness and sensitivity to activities that may not be usual day-to-day practice.

Even if you don't have the "complete picture" it is beneficial to communicate what you **can** to alleviate rumours and diminish the anxiety your employees may be feeling. Understanding the need for sharing information and open and honest communication is a powerful means of providing leadership in these uncertain and changing times.

For more information about this topic and/or related Leadership and Organizational Wellness Issues please call toll-free: 1-800-265-8310 (English) // 1-800-270-8373 (French)



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