Managing your team through change

Dealing with change can be challenging. More so if you are the manager or leader of a team with a 'local' change to introduce (e.g. new staff member, change of role, shifting office), or have responsibility for locally introducing an organisational change (e.g. new organisational structure, new technology, modified business process, etc).

There is nothing more difficult … than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.
~ Niccolo Machiavelli

These guidelines are offered to Managers who want to engage in effective action that increases the likelihood of successful change.

A. Prepare yourself to manage change; plan the people engagement

Smart managers make preparation and plans before introducing a change. 'Changing' is a process. Effective processes are designed and take significant time, effort and consideration to develop. Lack of effective process means poorly managed change that usually results in low morale, reduced productivity, loss of good people and goodwill and can be expensive for your business.

Thinking before acting

Have you thought about the aspects and impacts of the change before you engage with your people? Take time to do this. Think before acting. Find and define your story and key message. Prepare to describe the change and the change journey in terms of human values and benefits.

Differentiate between the change that is happening in the organisation and the change that people will go through to adapt to the change. The change in the organisation is external and organisational; personal change or transition is internal and psychological. Change strategies that consider both are more likely to be successful.

As the Manager responsible to implement a change, take the perspective of those who are undergoing change and reflect on their *motivation* (Am I willing to do this? What would make me willing?) and *capability* (Am I able to do this? What would make me able?). Draw on your insights to plan appropriate activities and an appropriate schedule.

Designing schedule, activities and conditions

Allow time in the 'change schedule' for people to acclimatise and prepare. The schedule will need to factor in the right activities in an appropriate order while maintaining a suitable pace for business and people objectives.

Prepare for some specific activities that will provide opportunity for engagement about the change. Create opportunities for people to 'make sense' of the change and to 'react' to the change. If you don't provide for this, people will typically make their own opportunities, in a vacuum of no information, to make and tell problematic stories about what is happening. And these stories are likely to spread quickly with problematic consequences.

You have the power to influence the message in the stories that get told in your organisation. Present a vision of the positive outcomes that arise from the change. Listen to your staff to learn what details they care about; the small things matter in terms of getting and maintaining their commitment to change. Address the "what's in it for me" question. *Don't overlook the importance of this question to your staff*. Prepare some answers that you are ready to use as you introduce the change.

Great things are done by a series of small things brought together.
~ Vincent van Gogh

Prepare for some specific activities that can motivate people and build an individual's and or a group's capability to undertake transition. Capability is about more than, for example, training on new software application or process you are implementing; it is about people's ability to adapt their behaviour and learning and practicing new habits. Some people are more change-ready than others; consider how you are going to address a lack of change-readiness in your people.

Chances are as a Manager you have already been processing the knowledge about the change and dealing with your response (i.e. you have been transitioning). Change is disorientating. Remember that you have had time to reorient yourself. Your people also deserve time and conditions to reorient themselves as well.

Consider what conditions and mechanisms you are going to provide to facilitate people's adaptation. It is not sufficient to just send a global email and send people to training. Human adaptation to change is a psychological process; it is a learning process. Individuals have different styles, experience and expectations for these processes – be careful not to treat people as a homogenous group. Provide forums and encourage open discussion; provide real practical support.

Going through change is additional work to a person's everyday job. Consider ways you can relieve the pressures of their everyday duties to give them time for their personal transition process. Factor in that there will be some loss in productivity and morale.

Involving others

Consider opportunities for people to be involved, to influence or to take ownership. There should be things that people can influence; even if it is just their own response. Fundamentally, treat people as collaborators of the change; recognise their power to help, or hinder, you.

Create and use opportunities *to ask* people what outcomes they want rather than *to tell* them what outcomes there will be or that you presume they want. Engage in dialogue not monologue. Provide information in various formats (verbal, written, debate) that assist people's ability to absorb and process information.

Devolving some of the responsibility of managing change can produce local and significant momentum for the change. Preparing to devolve responsibility requires a significant investment up-front to determine and develop opportunities for responsibility; however it can increase the likelihood of effecting enduring change.

B. Engaging with people about the change

Initiating engagement

Undertake an initial well-considered engagement activity as soon as possible to introduce the change. This may be a time intensive activity for which you don't feel you have time. However, failing to take time now may require larger amounts of time later. Be careful about the implicit message you send about how you value your people, if you don't make time for them.

Tell the person or group about the change in person. Don't hide behind email or newsletters. In addition, offer individual meetings with those people who will be directly affected to allow them an opportunity to react privately. Responses may be more than just questions seeking information. Allow for emotions to surface and be expressed.

Once all individuals have been told; meet as a group and repeat the message. You as the Manager should be present at such meetings. Resist any idea to let people deal with this by themselves. You are responsible for *managing* the change for your people, so you need to front-up to and address the people issues.

One option is to meet first as a group, then with one-to-one meetings. Whatever option you take, it's a really good idea to close the initial communication phase with a group meeting.

Guide the group to come up with ideas about how to deal with, manage and support each other in the change. Share the responsibility for transition. Have the group prepare some agreement or group 'rules' about what behaviour is acceptable (and not acceptable) particularly during the transition period.
For example, if someone is losing their job as a result of the change, then prepare some guidelines about how to engage with that person so they don't feel ostracised.

The only many who behaved sensibly was my tailor; he took my measurement anew every time he saw me, while all the rest went on with their old measurements and expected them to fit me.
~ George Bernard Shaw

Maintaining engagement

Allow the opportunity for individuals to react publicly where they might find safety in numbers. Some individuals will need the reaction of others as the public expression of their own private reaction. Use such opportunities to produce positive solidarity and to monitor the degree to which individuals are adjusting.

Use group meetings as an opportunity to identify the individuals who have the potential to be champions or saboteurs for the change. Prepare to give these individuals some extra time and attention and find ways to enhance or mitigate their influence.

Leave a 'next steps' message at group meetings. Facilitate people creating their own action items to take away; let people know what actions you will be undertaking. This gives forward momentum and opportunities to channel energy in positive directions. Sometimes people just need something specific to do to help them get through the process; provide leadership in showing them the steps in the journey.

Make a commitment and a schedule about future communication updates and engagements during the transition period. Stick to the schedule; even if the only message that can be shared is "no new news to share at the moment." Don't make assumptions about what people know about the change based on your level of awareness. You are not a good yardstick for monitoring how well the transition process is going; always check your perceptions with others.

C. Facilitating people's transition process

Experiencing emotions and reactive behaviour

Be prepared for some strong emotions. Don't presume rational behaviour from all those impacted by the change. Allow people to express their emotions without judgment. The change may have triggered old habitual behaviour around previous change they have experienced (badly) that has nothing to do with your change specifically.

Be empathetic; allow others to have a perspective and response that is not familiar to you. Don't judge others behaviour or reaction; simply perceive it. The act of perceiving means recognising that something is so, without evaluating it against some yardstick. Your staff will intuitively know when they are being judged and judgement often triggers defensive behaviour which inhibits change.

Providing safety and transparency

Keep in mind that some people will react privately. Don't assume that no visible reaction means people are okay; make it your responsibility to check in with them. And do it more than once – you may need to build trust over a few interactions to show that you are ready and willing to handle their reaction.

I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.
~ Maya Angelou

Hopefully you have designed or influenced a change process that minimises the pain the change brings. Don't offer platitudes and don't try to diminish the impact of the change as this can trigger defensive behaviour as people hold to a need to have their pain recognised. Allow pain to surface and be recognised so it can be treated.

Prepare yourself to be a 'grounding rod'. Provide psychologically safe spaces for individuals to release their emotional static before it discharges in ways that threaten the wellbeing of themselves and others. Ensure you also have a safe space to release the static that builds within you, so you can be static free for your staff.

Be transparent about what is happening while also being aware that everybody doesn't want to know everything all the time. People don't want to be overwhelmed. Mostly they want to know what is relevant to them: What's happening, how it will affect them, what's in it for them, what they are expected to do next.

Be real and share your own experience. You are part of the change and transition as well. Let people know that it is a journey that is being taken together.

For specific ideas, activities and resources to utilise in planning and managing change, consult a change management expert or resource.

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