

Tips On Managing Change

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by Jonathan B. Gilbert

Editor's Note: The following excerpt is taking from the white paper "The Change Management Life Cycle: How to Involve Your People To Ensure Success At Every Stage."

President Barack Obama entered the Oval Office on the platform of change. It is a desirable, if not always easy, state for organizations of all sizes. Change means growth. And it can also mean anxiety for the people involved.

There is a simple three-step process to relieve the anxiety.

- * Identify the issue
- * Engage the people
- * Implement the change

Step No. two is the most vastly neglected piece of the puzzle – and it is the most critical for the change process to get people on board as well as possible. By taking a neurological approach we can look at how the brain is affected by change. It is a literal fear response, adding a new twist to explaining why people inherently resist change.

Phase 1: Identify the Change

In the identify stage, someone within an organization – typically a senior executive – spearheads an initiative to change a current process. A single voice at a very high level is often the first step in establishing the need for change. This need is then presented to the organization with a general description of the current state of affairs, offset by a high-level vision of the desired future state.

While it seems obvious, identifying the change is an absolutely fundamental first step in successful change adoption. It is important that the changed condition be described in a common, consistent language. However, organizations often fail to identify and communicate the need for change in a way that is understood and embraced by people working at all levels of an organization – from the executive suite to the individual work station. Many leaders do not adequately consider how a proposed change (or even the rumor of one) may be received – at an intellectual, emotional and neurological level – by the people it will impact the most.

The Change Management Life Cycle

To ensure successful change, organizations should introduce a change effort during the

Identify stage using the following techniques:

Get Their Attention: Since change is disturbing and distracting to human beings, it's important to get their attention about the change. Getting people out of their daily routines – at an off-site location, if possible – helps them create a shared sense of urgency for change and concentrate on the change message, thereby internalizing it more deeply.

Align Their Disturbances: Neurologically speaking a disturbance is a conflict between a person's current mental model (the way they think about something) and the mental map needed to operate in a changed state. To align disturbances means to create a common disturbance among the minds of the people in the organization – to create agreement between the gap that people have between their individual current mental model and the mental model needed to operate in a changed state. When these gaps aren't in alignment, everybody will respond to the change differently, and won't be able to agree on the direction and intent of the organizational response needed. An important technique for aligning the potentially broad spectrum of disturbances is for leaders to craft and continually communicate a compelling vision of what the future will look like when the change is implemented.

The best way for leaders to make a compelling case for change is to consider the need for change at every level in the organization, not just at the top tier. The top-level need for change is almost always driven by bottom-line goals, and does not touch the day-to-day work experience of the organization's staff.

For instance, a financially oriented statement, such as "our organization must realize a

20 percent reduction in operating expenses" will likely be met with fear, uncertainty and skepticism in some levels of the organization, and with ambivalence and apathy in other levels. Ultimately, it is imperative to align these varying disturbances with a clarifying vision.

Some additional people-related items to consider when identifying change opportunities include:

- * Possible frustrations in performing (new) work
- * Clear job definitions
- * Job definitions and metrics that match the process
- * Understanding of the end-to-end process
- * Cultural dynamics within the organization that may inhibit people from moving to a new, changed state

The Neurological Roots of Resistance to Change

The prevailing contemporary research confirms that, while change is personal and emotional, it is neurological as well. Here's what researchers now know about the physiological/neurological response that occurs when an individual encounters change:

1. A new condition (a change) is created, introduced and transmitted.
2. The pre-frontal cortex region of the brain receives the transmission through one or more of the physical senses.
3. The pre-frontal cortex compares the new condition to the current condition by accessing another region of the brain, the basal ganglia, which stores the data we receive and contains the wiring for the habits we have.
4. If a difference between the new condition and the existing condition is detected, an "error" signal is produced and sent throughout the brain.
5. The "error" signal is received by the amygdala, the prehistoric part of the brain that tells us to be wary of a saber-toothed tiger.
6. The amygdala places a value to the changed condition and sounds an alarm, producing the emotion of fear.

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7. The pre-frontal cortex receives the fear signal from the amygdala and creates what it believes to be a necessary response.

8. The new condition is resisted by the pre-frontal cortex and, by extension, the person.

(Schwartz and Rock, 71-80)

If the disturbance that is produced by a change isn't adequately addressed through some alignment intervention, this resistance to change is prolonged and can be damaging to the change initiative.

Phase 2: Engage the People

Once the need for change has been identified and communicated, the next critical step is to engage people in planning for the organization's response to the change.

Successive levels of the organization must be included in a dialogue to help design an implementation plan. People within an organization must be allowed an opportunity for intellectual, emotional and psychological reaction to the desired change. Providing this opportunity enables people to become accustomed to the idea of change and to align their thinking in ways that will help both identify potential problem areas and contribute substantively to process improvement.

Consider this example: In a recent process change effort, an external consultant developed a new process, down to a very detailed level (with little input from the organization, and many requirements from executives), and proudly handed over the process design and documentation to the team responsible for implementing the new process.

The results were not surprising. The user team passively accepted the process, then aggressively refused to implement it. The user team had no energy or enthusiasm to implement something in which it had no emotional buy-in. In fact, team members told executives in the project post-mortem that they actively sabotaged the new process because "the consultants developed the process, even though we are the experts."

General George Patton of the U.S. Army is quoted as saying, "Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity." Wise leaders know that successful change adoption depends on engaging the hearts and minds, as well as the bodies, of the people facing a changed condition. Organizational leaders need to engage the energy and enthusiasm that comes from people having their own insights, for this is where true commitment to change comes from, and where the ownership of results are truly developed (Koch).

One technique to encourage people's adoption of a change is to conduct organization wide response/adoption alignment workshops. When practiced effectively, these sessions allow people to contribute their own ideas about how a deliverable should be used within the organization. Once these contributions are aligned—through multi-party conversations (where much thrashing may occur!)—an aligned approach for managing and adapting to the change will emerge.

When reactions have been aligned and individuals within an organization are asked to be involved in responding to change, typical human behavior moves to addressing the problem—creating a desired direction to facilitate change.

The implementation strategy for responding to the change is then developed at a high level. The people who will be executing the strategy, as well as the people who will be impacted by the strategy, should be included in the strategy development. This high-level strategy is important for aligning and clarifying the intent of the change, as well as for establishing a direction that the change implementation will take. The strategy needs to be seen by all as a flexible plan so that the organization can adapt to changing conditions once implementation of the strategy is initiated.

Insights—The Antidote to Resistance to Change

An important contribution of modern neuroscience to helping us be more effective as leaders concerns the phenomenon of insights—sometimes called an epiphany or an "ah ha" moment. Here's how insights help overcome resistance to change:

* During change, the disturbance an individual feels is produced by competing mental models (a conflict between various parts of the brain).

* Individual can either allow the conflict to continue, producing resistance to change (the old model wins out over the new model), or they can take active steps to move past the dilemma.

* If individuals (or their leaders) choose to move beyond resistance, reflection — quieting external stimuli and using the unconscious brain — will help prepare them for insights.

* When an insight occurs, new neural connections are made across the brain and adrenaline is released, producing a surge of energy. This energy creates the momentum to overcome the resistance circuit, and allows an individual to commit more readily to change.

(Rock, 105-107)

Phase 3: Implement the Change

In the implement phase, change strategies developed during the identify and engage phases are translated into tactics, or actions, for moving toward the desired future organizational state. Here again, people are critical to how processes and technology are created and implemented. They have direct, daily experience with these processes and technology and, consequently, they are most knowledgeable about how these components must be customized for the best results.

Most organizational change failures occur because insufficient time and attention was given to the first two phases of the life cycle: identify and engage. On the other hand, most organizations spend the majority of their time, effort and attention here, in the implement phase. But, as we've already discussed, without the proper alignment of people's disturbances and their response to a changed condition, successful adoption rarely occurs.

During implementation, employees throughout the organization need to remember why they are working so hard on implementing a change. Therefore, change leaders should continually remind people, using multiple media (formal e-mails, progress celebrations, informal conversations) what the change is and why it is so important.

Additionally, organizational leaders should ask themselves the following people-related questions to help ensure successful implementation:

* Does the individual have the ability or desire to work in the new environment?

* Are additional skill sets needed to transition to the new job?

* Are changes to job descriptions needed?

* Are job grades or pay impacted by this change?

* Does the change impact short-term productivity? If so, will additional support be needed to ensure business success?

If organizations successfully complete the first two phases in the change management life cycle, the implementation phase becomes essentially a monitoring activity for leaders.

They should assure that:

* Change-oriented tasks are being accomplished as planned

* Energy and enthusiasm are present

* Alignment still exists among the people

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