



Anticipate Resistance to Change

"Change is the law," observed President John F. Kennedy. But, as hard as we might try to observe a new law or change, it's often difficult to overcome the negative feelings created by these kinds of "bumps" in our established way of life.

Today, most businesses must constantly change in big ways and at a fast pace. Owners



like you usually take time to logically explain the reasons for these events to your team members but, despite this effort, followers often remain resistant to necessary changes in their environments and responsibilities. Leaders know that they cannot stop change; but convincing the team can be a formidable task.

Too often, we get caught up with the facts of the change and overlook the powerful feelings that new and different ways of doing things can engender. Resistance to change -- even positive change that will be good for everybody -- is common, and a good manager has to be ready to cope with it constructively. As Bertrand Russell said, "Change is one thing; progress is another." As a boss,

you are responsible for converting change to progress, but it won't happen unless you can get your team members to accept, adopt and exploit the changes you are promoting.

Indeed, in the early stages of a change, you should be actively searching for signs of resistance. It's easy to misinterpret employees' early shock and "numbness" as ready compliance. Also, many employees are inclined to believe "if we ignore it, it'll go away." As a result, what looks like "slam dunk" acceptance is really a false veneer that belies the personal turmoil and sense of loss that exists. You cannot simply "get on with business as usual" after you introduce the change. If you don't persist in your efforts to achieve genuine understanding and

acceptance, wary feelings will turn to rock solid resistance.

Accordingly, any significant change requires you to provide caring, continuing assistance with the transition -- even if it looks like everybody has bought into the plan.

Employees need time to sort out their fears and doubts, to talk over the probable impacts, and to say good-bye to the past. And all the while, they need you to reaffirm the wisdom and inevitability of the change, to show empathy (while not in any way bad-mouthing the change), and to demonstrate a willingness to do all you can to make the adoption process palatable and personally productive.

Remember, change can be extremely threatening and can create serious self-doubt, depression, anxiety and frustration. At the very least, those affected by change will feel a loss of security as the competence they achieved in dealing with the old ways will no longer be relevant. Their “territory” has been invaded and their relationships upset. Their sense of direction is lost and, worst case, their sense of identity diminished. For many, the sense of loss created can approximate the trauma associated with the death of a friend. These are real feelings and can't be easily talked away. With feelings like this abounding, you can imagine what is happening to productivity. It's helpful to get people to talk and express their feelings and fears at times like this. Both group meetings

and one-on-one discussions are appropriate and beneficial.

It will take time, but eventually the affected workers will begin to carefully examine the dimensions of this new reality in their lives. They'll try to figure out exactly what it means and how it will touch them. They'll begin to test the new circumstance and try to figure out how they will fit, how they'll relate to others, and, very importantly, how they might actually benefit from the change. Here again, it is important for you to be attentive and supportive. Organizing your charges into teams will aid in establishing individual and organizational commitment to "the new way." Keep them focused on the short-term goals and priorities that they can easily

relate to. Be generous with praise and rewards for those who become early, enthusiastic converts. Encourage experimentation on the premise “try it, you'll like it.” (By the same token, “TRY IT, YOU VILL LIKE IT” is verboten.)

Finally, your team members will see some clear, achievable goals, and they'll begin to appreciate that these outcomes will be beneficial to them as well as the company. It is critical that you help them gain some feelings of control with respect to the new future that is emerging. Here's where formal planning sessions -- with everyone participating -- can produce big results. If team members can feel that they are the architects of the future, they will be more inclined to

believe that they'll be safe and comfortable living in that future.

Since change will be the only constant in our future, efforts to aid workers in coping with change should be ongoing. One of the most important parts of your job description should forever be "handmaiden to change."

Keep in mind too, that a pre-established, well-demonstrated atmosphere of trust will go a long way toward helping your team members to confidently and productively reach out and touch the future as it is happening.

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