Dealing with Change: Part I, Personal Change

by Michael Comer, DM

This is Part I of a two-part article dealing with managing and implementing change. Part I examines methods of leading personal change among employees. Part II examines change within organizations.

"People don't mind change they do mind being changed." As leaders it becomes our responsibility to assist people in moving beyond their comfort zone into a level of acceptance of change. Professional counselors are trained to assist people in overcoming dramatic change in their personal lives. But often as managers, we too deal directly with assisting in personal change acceptance. Also it is often necessary to help employees to adjust to changes in methods of operations, changes in processes or implementation of new technologies.

Over 400 years ago Machiavelli observed: " It must be considered that there is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies in all those who profit by the old order, and only luke-warm defenders in all those who profit by the new order. This luke-warmness arises partly from fear of their adversaries, who have the laws in their favor, and partly from the incredulity of mankind, who do not truly believe in anything new until they have had an actual experience of it".

To assist people in accepting change, a concept called the "Change Acceptance Curve" can be applied. Basically the change acceptance curve states there are five steps individuals initiate when encountering change: awareness, self-concern, mental tryout, hands-on trail, and acceptance.

As a person finds out about a particular change (awareness), in most cases they respond by asking how the change will affect them (self-concern). Sadly, in many organizations people resist change because they fear it will affect their influence or power-base within the organization. If a person can move beyond the self-concern stage, they will find themselves thinking through the alternatives of how they will deal with the change and what alternatives are available (mental tryout). Usually a rational person will move to actually implementing or trying-out some of the changes (hands-on trial). This may eventually move to the acceptance of the change.

Several years ago I worked with a large government agency in implementing a major administrative computer system. The system's changes would affect processes, job design, skills and even the corporate culture. Basically the system would allow direct ordering of supplies from a central warehouse and would allow documents to be shared electronically. This system would drastically change some clerical jobs including the job of Alice, a file clerk, who was very social and generally took time to chat with all the employees who would drop by the file room to pick up documents. Alice would need to be retrained for a data entry position. Little did we realize that the data entry position would drastically alter what she enjoyed most about her job - the social interaction. Neither did we realize the effect she had as an "informal" leader of the organization. After spending ten months planning, thousands of dollars on training, and hours of detailed implementation, the system failed - primarily because of one file clerk. While multiple consultants, high-level managers, and IT experts were implementing a state-of-the art technology, she was busy convincing future users the system would never work as they visited her file room to pick up daily documents. The project was scrapped and the manual document filing was continued. The cancellation of the project even made the front page of the Wall Street Journal. The lesson learned: The power of change and its impact on corporate culture and personal identity has a tremendous impact on bottom-line results.

As people move through the change acceptance curve there are some specific strategies that leaders can use to move people toward the acceptance of change.

Phase	Leadership Response
Awareness	Communicate
Self-Concern	Counsel
Mental Tryout	Demonstrate
Educate	Hands-on Trial
Acceptance	Support

It is imperative that people become aware of the change from the leadership perspective. This is why it is extremely important to constantly communicate during the awareness stage. It is much better for an employee to hear about a change from his or her direct manager than from another employee in the cafeteria. During the self-concern stage, it is often necessary to spend time counseling with those the changes will affect. This is not consoling in the traditional sense of the word, but time spent explaining the change individually with key leaders and influencers. Spending time in this stage can assure the success of the change. Likewise, not spending individual time with key leaders and influencers (like the file clerk) can result in the failure of the proposed change.

As one moves to mental tryout, the leader should demonstrate the new culture, behavior or idea by showing what the situation will be like after the change is implemented. As people begin to accept the change, it may be necessary to re-educate employees on certain aspects of a change. Many times leaders fail to realize that once a change seems to be accepted, it must be constantly supported with communication, demonstration, and counseling for the change to continue. Too many times leadership contends that a particular change has been accepted by employees, only to see it fail because of a lack of on-going support.

At any point in the change curve, people can fall into the "land of resistance". True leadership realizes the mental model of the change acceptance curve and "baby-sits" the proposed change through and during the acceptance stage.

Leadership in the 21st Century demands proactive change implementation and seizing appropriate change opportunities. All good leader/managers know this and have heard it multiple times. What leaders sometimes forget is that people (both formal and informal leaders) can make or break a change initiative. Proper understanding and implementation of the Change Acceptance Curve can position your organization for success in a changing environment.

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