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# MANAGING CHANGE

By CAROLE SPIERS



THINGS do not change. We do.

We live in a world of constant change, and even though the vast majority of these changes are for the better, change is still something that many people – and therefore many organisations – can find extremely difficult to deal with. Why is this, and what can be done to help people embrace change rather than fearing it?

## **The nature of change**

Change is all around us. Changes can be small or large, but the overall impression they create is of a world that is in a constant state of flux. Change may be welcome, but for many of us the reaction to certain changes will be one of automatic resistance, which in turn often results in stress.

By definition, moving forward involves some change in order to keep on course. An organisation is either continually improving or it is failing, because no successful organisation can afford to simply 'stand still'. This is why it's so important that employees are given all the tools they need to help them embrace change and new ways of working.

## **Why is change so difficult to handle?**

People are programmed into a pattern of behaviour with which they feel safe (their 'comfort zone'). Change can threaten this feeling of safety, and people can feel disempowered by change – particularly if it is imposed on them or challenges their accepted thinking. It is therefore vital for people to understand clearly why imposed changes are necessary, and how those changes will impact on them, their position, their responsibilities, and possibly their remuneration and future prospects.

One reason why staff may resist change is if they don't think they will be comfortable in the new job environment or able to meet the new standards etc. If a change, particularly a fundamental change, is imposed

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within a company, a proportion of the staff affected will be bound to be dissatisfied. It is important to listen to their concerns and not to dismiss them out of hand – some of their worries may be valid and it is important for management to acknowledge this.

### How to make change work

If your organisation is contemplating a major change, you can help to facilitate this by taking account of the following:

- Think through the change and what is required of the personnel affected, in detail, so that a clear plan of implementation is available. Be aware that some retraining may be necessary and have a plan of action ready to implement this.
- Staff will respond best if they feel involved in the decision-making. Maybe they cannot be involved in all the major decisions, but their implementation will involve a number of smaller steps and they can almost certainly be involved somewhere (and add value by bringing in their experience).
- Everyone copes better with change if they feel at least in partial control of it. It is the feeling of being out of control that can be frightening to most of us. So involve your staff, as far as possible, in their own areas of the change. Perhaps set up an implementation team involving a member of staff from within each department and reporting up to – and down from – management.
- Keep everyone informed as far as is possible of timetables and details. The imagination and concerns of staff can run riot when they are kept in the dark, particularly if they are anxious about the change. Regular meetings are essential, and even if time is short, don't abandon them. Make sure that the planned changes are clearly understood at all levels.
- Don't give in to the temptation to impose changes without consultation. Unless you can persuade your staff to buy into the change by means of the steps above, they may leave or become demotivated, neither of which will benefit the company. Similarly, a culture of fear (where staff are actively discouraged to convey concerns or show vulnerability) is counterproductive.
- Everyone works better where they can see the benefit for themselves. So take time to think through not just the overall plan of the change, but how it will affect and benefit individuals, then 'sell' these benefits to those affected. Don't oversell them though, as staff will subsequently disbelieve anything you say. It is far better to be honest and admit that some things still need to be worked through, as this will help to build up trust with your employees.
- People need to feel they have some input to enable them to overcome their fears and anxieties. If you

encourage them through this stage, they can become great advocates for the change and will work with you instead of automatically resisting.

- Accept that everyone's capacity for change is different and some will respond quicker or more easily than others.
- Try to break the change down into manageable parts so that the overall change does not seem too overwhelming. Consider running a pilot operation to smooth out the glitches and allow input from users.
- Once the change has been implemented, don't allow any return to the old ways or allow this as an option.

### Preparing your organisation for change

Because change is so much a part of everyday life, your employees will benefit greatly from initiatives that make them more resilient. At its most simple, this means helping your employees maintain a healthy mind, healthy body and the positive mental attitude needed to approach change as a challenge and opportunity for improvement.

We all know that the only way a skyscraper or any very tall structure can remain upright is for it to possess an inherent ability to move – albeit ever so slightly – with the prevailing wind and rain. We have to do the same, by learning to work with the forces we meet, and moving and giving a little when the conditions demand it.

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