

Change Management - It Starts at the Top

Change is a common occurrence in business today. Because of this, it is important that you possess strong change management skills if you want your business to be a success. Change management skills include leadership development (to get people to believe in you), marketing and sales abilities (to promote your case for change), and communication skills (to help build support for the decision to change). It will also help if you know a little about the stages people go through psychologically when they are dealing with change so that you are able to tell if you have managed a successful transition or if there are additional problems that you need to address.

The first thing you will want to focus on is your leadership ability. Companies continue to make the mistake of focusing too much on business processes and not enough on good, strong examples of leadership. To be an effective leader in the change management process, it helps if you:

- **Set an example.** As the top person in your business, others look to you for direction, not only in terms of business needs, but also related to behavior, ethics, and standards. If you want others in your business to change, you must set an example for them to follow.
- **Eliminate perks.** Perks suggest division and hierarchical thought processes. By eliminating or reducing your own perks, you show your desire to level the playing field.
- **Walk around and talk to people.** The old school of business management promoted the idea that the top person was off limits, enclosed in his or her own glass tower. Leaders of today interact more with their employees. They manage by walking around and getting to know their employees and learning about the problems they are facing on a day-to-day basis.
- **Be genuine.** As a leader of change, it is important to be as real and honest as possible in your interactions with others. Let others get to know you. Being a leader doesn't mean hiding your emotions. By interacting with employees on a one-to-one basis, you will build rapport and trust.
- **Have passion.** To be a strong leader, you must have passion around your vision. Without it, you will soon find yourself facing burnout. Leadership is tiring and saps energy at a very high rate so make sure you are passionate about what you do.

Building your ability as a leader is the first step in the change management process. Once employees believe in you and trust what you're doing, you can then begin your campaign for change. Your campaign for change should target the different "groups" within your business and outline for each the reasons why a change is necessary. For instance, the board of directors will want to know what the long-term effects of the change will be. Similarly, your employees will want to know how they will be personally effected by the changes you are proposing.

Once a change occurs, it is very important to communicate on a regular basis with all effected. Let your employees know what is happening. If your communication skills are weak or you don't have a formal way of letting your employees know what is happening, set one up before you hit this stage of the change process. By keeping everyone informed, you reduce the chances of low productivity and low morale that often accompany unaccepted change.

It is important to realize that although you can use techniques to smooth the change transition process, you will never be able to completely jump from one way of doing something to another without experiencing at least some resistance. Why is this? Well, people adjust to change at different rates. It's just part of human nature. To reduce your frustration with this process, it helps to know the six phases people go through whenever they are experiencing any type of change, be it personal or professional.

- **Anticipation.** People in Phase 1 are in the waiting stage. They really don't know what to expect so they wait, anticipating what the future holds.
- **Confrontation.** At some point, people reach Phase 2 and begin to confront reality. At this stage, they are beginning to realize that the change is really going to happen or is happening.
- **Realization.** Once the change has happened, people will usually reach Phase 3 - the stage where they realize that nothing is ever going to be as it once was. Often times, this realization will plunge them into Phase 4.
- **Depression.** Phase 4 is a necessary step in the change process. This is the stage where a person mourns the past. Not only have they realized the change intellectually, but now they are beginning to comprehend it emotionally as well.
- **Acceptance.** Phase 5 marks the point where the person begins to accept the change emotionally. Although they may still have reservations, they are not fighting the change at this stage. Usually, they are beginning to see some of the benefits even if they are not completely convinced.
- **Enlightenment.** In Phase 6, people completely accept the new change. In fact, many wonder how they ever managed the "old" way. Overall, they feel good about the change and accept it as the status quo from here forward.

It is important to note that people in your organizations will proceed through the different phases at different rates of speed. One person may require two months to reach Phase

6 while another may require twelve. To make things even more complex, the cycle of change is not linear. In other words, a person does not necessarily complete Phase 1 through 6 in order. It is much more common for people to jump around. One person may go from Phase 4 to Phase 5 and then back to Phase 2 again. That is why there is no easy way to determine how long a change will take to implement. However, by using the skills we've outlined above, you increase your chances of managing the change as effectively as possible.