C O M M U N I C A T I O N S

Communicating For A Change

BY CANDY TYMSON CSP

It is not necessary to change. Survival is not mandatory.

W. Edwards Deming

I don't think I know anyone at the moment who isn't experiencing major change in their workplace, it's almost become a way of life! So it has therefore become even more important for us to know how best to deal with change, and motivate those who need to change with us.

In the McKinsey Quarterly, consultants Emily Lawson and Colin Price have identified that while programs designed to improve organisational performance abound, they are difficult to carry out. Success depends upon the ability to alter the mind-sets of those working in the organisations, before any major change can successfully be adopted.

Boiled down to the most basic level, there would seem to be three major elements that need to exist for change to be successful. They are: information, support and resources.

Let's start with information. I'm currently working with a number of organisations that are going through major change, and as I chat to team members it is amazing the difference in their attitudes about the changes. One thing I have noticed is that those organisations which have been open in their communication about the change seem to have been more effective than those who allowed rumour to cloud the truth.

Good Communication

During times of change, clear, honest communication is vital. Are you doing this?

- Involve each team member in the vision and mission statements for the 'new' organisation. Be sure they are clear what the new focus is and why. They need to feel part of the re-creation.
- Communicate in small, team-based meetings, or one-on-one to ensure involvement and understanding. Encourage team members to contribute their ideas and suggestions. Listen, listen, listen.
- Control rumours by having open, honest and regular updates on progress and likely changes. Use a number of tools to keep the lines of communication open, including email updates, regular team meetings and 'walk arounds' (that is, walking around the organisation, talking causally to people).
- Ensure that top management 'walk the talk'.

Resistance to Change

The cycles of resistance to change are well documented; perhaps you have personally experienced them!

Don't be concerned if the initial reaction you receive is that of denial, it's normal. You hear it around the corporate corridors all the time. "It's just another fad", "I'll just do my job and they'll leave me alone". Problem is, change is not a fad, it's now become a way of doing business and if you don't change, you probably won't survive (nor will the business).

Many staff members handle it by simply resisting any changes, which is the next stage. It's very common for people to agree to do things differently, and then go right back to what they were doing before, once the pressure is off. So how do you move people into the next phase, exploration? Involve them and give them reasons to change.

Give People Reasons To Change

For people to want to change, they must have good reasons and feel comfortable about the new direction. To achieve this team members need to believe that they have a role to play, and that their contribution will be valued. Fear of change is usually fear of the unknown. You know from your own experience that the difference often between feeling excited about something or feeling wary could simply be your level of confidence in handling the situation.

Being part of the process in developing what needs to change, and how it can be most effectively done, gives people ownership of the final outcome and usually creates a more motivated team.

Also, according to the McKinsey Report, many change programs make the error of exhorting employees to behave differently without teaching them how to adapt general instructions to their individual situation.

Provide Resources

People must have the skills to do what is required, and the resources to do a professional job. The trend to keep downsizing, giving those who are left more and more work and no additional support is simply bad business. The attitudes of stressed out, resentful employees reflects on the image of the organisation, and the products and services it offers.

As the adage says: "Don't Blame Them—Train Them". Feeling that you don't have the skills to undertake a task can be very de-motivating and stressful. Investing in the future development of your team will pay big dividends, not only by providing more happy and productive team members, but also in ensuring that your business practices are right up to the minute too.

And the final stage is commitment. Once the whole team is singing the same song, they know what their role is and how they fit into the new organisation, things will really start to buzz … and then it will probably be time to change things again!

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