

SUPPORTING CHANGE

Why is change so difficult? Why would folks rather stay the way they are – even if it's not working – than go through the change process?

The problem is not about the change – or the outcome of changing. It's that people don't know how the end results will affect them. At the beginning of the change process they have no way to know:

- If their beliefs, values, needs will be served;
- If they will like the new better than the old;
- If their comfortable work systems will shift;
- How the new environment will feel to work in and if the new structures will serve the needs they hired on for;
- How much – and what - they will be asked to change;
- If their ego and status and interpersonal needs will remain stable.

After all, when we seek change, we are walking toward the unknown. As one of my client's said, "If this is change, I need a new definition of the word Chaos."

Let's look at the systems that make the status quo so comfortable, and move from there into some skills that will help you coach your employees through the change process.

1. folks have bought into, and have chosen to remain in, the current environment just as it is. Simple. They've already voted with their feet. Whatever is going on is just fine.

I worked with a large insurance company that initially used a phone/appointment/visit system to open new accounts. They hired me to train folks to use the phone as the initial contact and then visit them after they were ready to close. Their sales skyrocketed – 600% in 4 weeks! But the reps revolted and the managers either had to get rid of the training or get rid of the reps. The reps went from making 110 field visits a month (closing 18 of them) to making 27 a month (closing 25). All of a sudden they were in the office more than they wanted to be ("We're FIELD reps"); they were on the phone more than they were used to ("We're FIELD reps, not telemarketers."); they were being coached more than they desired ("We don't need micromanagement."). By focusing on increasing revenue, the company overlooked the reasons people worked there; unfortunately, helping the reps discover new job descriptions was not part of the change process.

2. people understand their roles and relationships within the current environment. With change, who knows what will happen? How will anyone be seen or positioned or regarded in the new work environment? They've finally got this one down on a daily basis and now you're asking them to face the unknown...and possibly end up worse off.

I have worked with several senior managers who claimed they embraced change – until it became clear that the new job was bringing out their flaws. Some just needed several interventions before they'd come out of their caves; others sabotaged the change process.

3. people are working from their strengths. They've chosen THAT job and THAT department and THAT team because it's what they are good at. Who knows what'll end up happening once they're asked to do something different. How will they manage the new learning? What if more is demanded of them than they know how – or are willing -to deliver? What if the learning curve is huge, and they lose their place in the pecking order?

I was once greeted with a hardback copy of my own book thrown at my head one morning as I began a training program at a client site. The top salesperson in a large multinational shouted some epithets and stomped out the door - before the training started and before he'd met me. He then went to the Regional VP and told him that if I ever came back to the company, he'd leave, and take his 250 biggest accounts with him. Guess who won.

4. managers understand what results to expect in a given environment. Indeed, no one knows what to expect when change is initiated, so there may initially be no way to track results or even decide on what measurements to track.

Who knows what 'success' will look like? How will teammates interact with themselves, with other departments? How will they be monitored? What personal and personnel issues will arise?

5. people have ego needs that are managed within their current work environment. What happens to egos during and after the change process?

In my years as a consultant, I've found, sadly, that egos are often more important than the focus of the change. I sometimes make the mistake of thinking that my job is to help the transition process; I forget that one of my jobs is to make everyone look good – no matter what. This is akin to having a landscaper tear up your yard, and getting annoyed because the resultant mess brings dust into the house. You can't have it both ways: you've got to tear up the yard and make a mess before it gets pretty. Destroy – mess – pretty. In that order.

6. people are comfortable with the current operating policies and probably helped create them. When the change process begins, no one knows what type of influence they will have on policy.

Someone (else?) is going to change the rules. No one knows who or what. No one knows anything.

The real problem? If you go back to all of the above, it's all the same problem. Loss Of Control. Lack of Stability. Fear of the Unknown. Whatever angle you look at – people, roles, rules, systems, growth, revenue – they all spell No Control.

LOSS OF CONTROL

In order for folks to be willing and able to accept change and thrive – no matter what the focus of their fear - we need to offer them an environment in which they can air their issues and be heard in a way that they recognize the chance to have an input.

As Meg Wheatley says in Leadership and the New Science,

“As long as we keep purpose in focus ... we are able to wander through the realms of chaos, make decisions about what actions will be consistent with our purpose, and emerge with a discernible pattern or shape to our lives” (page 136).

People need a way to enable discussion and resolution through all of the personal, professional, and systems issues that people need to think through.

To state a complex problem simply, change hinges on beliefs. No matter how much change is going on around us, the ultimate change is within: an external change always causes an internal, personal change. The old adage goes, ‘Change one part of a system and the entire system changes.’ And to make an internal change, we must examine who we are, why we are where we are and doing what we’re doing, and what needs to happen for us to be willing to change.

In The Change Monster, Jeanie Daniel Duck talks about the inherent difficulties in ‘change’, and quotes Leo Tolstoy:

“‘Everyone thinks about changing the world, but no one thinks about changing himself (sic).’

Individuals may accept that their behavior needs to change, but have little or no idea how to go about doing so” (pge 103)

Before going into the model of how to help folks work through their issues in a way that will sustain growth and create acceptance, let me digress and talk for a moment about the core of resistance to change: 'beliefs'.

Beliefs are what we all hold dear, as an explanation of who we are - as individuals, teams, or corporate cultures. Beliefs encompass our values, our experiences, our hopes and fears, our histories, our social and moral ethics. Beliefs are our standards.

Every person and every group has a unique set of beliefs. I once asked Dennis Bakke, ex-CEO and Founder of AES Corp, how he managed to hire a majority of employees who liked making and taking responsibility for their own decisions. "We sort for folks who think it's fun to make their own decisions and get others to follow them. The whole culture is set up that way so they figure out real quickly if they don't fit in. They just fly outta here within a month if they can't take it."

Throughout the change process, we are challenging personal, interpersonal, and community beliefs. And it's the managers who are ultimately responsible for leading the change charge.

According to Terah Stearns, President of Strategic Transformation in Austin, Texas, managers are often fearful of entering the realm of the personal with their staff. Managers are afraid they don't have the right skills or the time, or it's none of their business, or they don't know how to solve the problem. Stearns says: "This is a wonderful opportunity for managers to become leaders. They need to help their staff embrace the change, communicate any grief around the change, and find those people who have withdrawn into fear."

Given that

beliefs will most assuredly be challenged through the change process,

folks might not end up with the job or situation they hired on for, and

egos and alliances might be challenged,

how can we help our people go through the change process not only unscathed, but better off? How can we ensure our employees end up operating as a cohesive entity together and support the change - and each other - through the hard times?

DECISIONS AND COMMUNICATION

As we get into the skills that will help our people accept change, we must first assist them in untangling the issues that are inhibiting them.

In order to actually break down resistance patterns, managers must help their people:

1. recognize all the issues. What's bugging them? What beliefs are being stepped on? What values are being challenged that cannot be overruled? What are they frightened of? What are they planning on doing about it? What would they need to know or do differently to have greater choice in their response or actions? During this time, many people walk around with a vague feeling of discomfort, or a generalized negative feeling. They are either unable or unwilling to pinpoint/name their personal issues for fear of looking vulnerable in front of others.

2. communicate the full range of issues and be willing to explore new possibilities in feelings, beliefs, needs and actions. What's the difference between a person recognizing feelings, and his/her ability to communicate them into needs or requests? What type of environment will offer a vehicle for shared concerns in order to create a group support network? What happens if the group wants to rebel? Or request additional changes? Or alter the plan significantly? Or add new data for consideration?

3. create an entity (group, retreat, off-grounds idea session) that operates expressly for discussion and decision-making. How will you create an environment that holds the container for individual expression within a larger group? How do teams decide to take action, or fight for an idea that's different from the general decree? What needs to happen for this group, with these ideas, to work toward an implementation strategy? How will this group move forward once their direction is agreed upon?

4. monitor implementation. What's the difference between when an implementation process is proceeding smoothly, having difficulty, and proceeding effectively with bumps. How will the group recognize Trouble? Fix the problem? Get help? What personal issues come up as the change nears completion?

THE SKILLS OF EMBRACING CHANGE

Let's now take a look at the actual skills managers could use to carry out the above. There is a note of caution here, however: employees will not be committed to working through their own resistance, and the management must accept this 'personal awareness support' as part of the change process itself.

I will break down the areas that need to be addressed and add a list of Facilitative Questions that will help the process. Note that Facilitative Questions are a type of question, asked in a specific sequence, which

initiates discovery, and repatterns thinking to create belief change and new behaviors. They are NOT information gathering questions.

These questions can be asked by the manager in a one-to-one session, or asked during a team meeting. Note that these questions get to the *criteria* of the team and individual – the values, the beliefs, the fears, feelings and presuppositions – and therefore, to the heart of change.

DISCOVER WHAT'S MISSING

The focus of these questions is to help the employee recognize what they perceive as different or uncomfortable for them as the change process proceeds, including: what's affecting them adversely, what their fears are, what their assumptions are, etc. This set of questions will bring to the surface areas of discomfort.

What did you like best about our current environment?

What do you expect to see happening differently as this change progresses? How do you see that affect you? Your job? Your responsibilities? Your relationships with your peers? Your results?

At what point will it feel like you are being asked to make more changes than you'd prefer to? What would you be willing to do to bring your problem issues into alignment with your own beliefs? With the management? With the company?

How do you see yourself within the team – as an employee? As a person? How do you see this shifting as a result of the change? If your role or relationships change to the point of being untenable, how to you propose to seek support to alleviate any problems? What would you need to see from the team to understand you could bring your issues into the team body, rather than leave the job or remain unhappy?

Given that we don't want you to leave the company as a result of these changes, what might you be experiencing if you felt you were considering leaving the company? At what point would you be willing to have a conversation with one of the managers to address your issues? How would you know that you would be heard? Get your needs met?

HOW TO MAKE INTERNAL ADJUSTMENTS

Once your folks realize that they have a role to play as part of the team and part of the culture, it's important they understand their responsibility to do whatever it takes to make personal changes.

What about this change do you see as being positive? Negative? What will you need to know or understand differently in order to accept those parts of the change that you currently are not comfortable with?

What skills do you already possess that will help you through this change? What skills are you lacking? How do you propose getting the additional skills? What would you need from the management to support you through any re-learning that you might have to do?

At what point will you recognize that you are having difficulty handling your internal issues on your own? What would be happening in your own behavior that you might want to check out? How could you use your teammates to help you?

BRINGING THE PERSONAL INTO THE CULTURE

Once folks accept their personal change issues, it's time to align the individual issues and needs with those of the change environment. Failure to take this step will result in a loss of the group and an emergence of anarchy – a bunch of individuals who are not working together.

What beliefs are held by the team, by the culture, that need to be upheld during this process? How will you know if they are being suppressed? Once all the people on the team have aligned their personal issues and company commitment, how will you recognize that the team is functioning optimally? That there needs to be more work done on team dynamics and buy-in?

What would you see as warning signs that the change was creating a crisis in your work environment? Your work output? What actions would you be willing to take to enable others in your team to avert crisis? What skills would you need to learn in order to take responsibility to assist the team?

At what point would you note that your own personal change issues were causing problems in the team? How would you go about ensuring that these issues would not hamper success short term?

How could you support the entire team learning and change process to grow into a more mature, skilled team with additional possibilities?

CONCLUSION

When working with Bethlehem Steel many years ago, I found myself in the middle of chaos: my client – a senior VP in charge of all customer contact

– demanded that all people in his department move to one of two sites. He gave them two months to do it, and the move was to have been completed in May. By the time I got there, I found two groups of raging employees. Not only were they angry, they were using every type of resistance known: they were getting very, very ill; they were breaking bones; they were doing half their jobs; one person even had a heart attack. My client was quite annoyed by this. He figured he gave them ample time, plenty of money, and plenty of financial incentives. Still they raged.

I spent two days going around and listening to the rage and seeing the tears – grown men who had to leave their school-age kids back home so they could finish their last weeks of school, or leave wives and friends behind on a moment's notice, or who were living in sub-standard housing because there was nowhere to move in the time frame.

On day three I sat down with my client and handed him an envelope with a speech in it.

“Hell. This is an apology for goodness sake. You want me to APOLOGIZE after all I've done for them? I fought for them to get extra moving expenses, to get 10 days off to move with pay. I got them all a \$10,000 stipend. Do you realize how much this has cost me?”

“Yup. And they will be coming in here in about 10 minutes for you to apologize to them.”

“Why? Why should I apologize? It's their JOB! They didn't have to stay here! Why is it MY FAULT?”

“Cuz you're the boss. And you never even talked to them. You never took the time to listen to their fears or complaints or problems. You moved them without regard to their families or friends or lives – all based on your vision of how they needed to operate to bring in more money. You did it all for you and for the company. They were never brought into the decision or even considered as human beings with lives outside the company.”

Moments later they all came in, with eyes cast down to hide their rage and betrayal. Joe stood there in front of them.

“Well,” he began. “I guess I never discussed any of this change with you, or really considered you, and

“JOE. ARE YOU APOLOGIZING TO US?????”

“Um. Yea. I guess I am.”

That was all they needed to hear. They burst out laughing and crying and applauding. They gave him a standing ovation. He never got to use the speech. He didn't need to. He had listened to them. He had recognized they were people. That was all they wanted.

By its very nature, change is unsettling; implementing change causes chaos, and will extract every available resource you, your team, your company maintain at an operational level as was as a human level.

The easiest way to go through this process is when each person is seen, heard, and cared for, and is brought into the process anew, each day, as an active advocate.

After all, what is the change challenge but a group of people being pushed beyond where they thought they'd need to go?

As a manager, you've got the job and the joy of supporting your people through their changes. And the results will be the merging of the personal, the professional, the organizational, and the operational.

Good luck.