

Should You Change Your Thinking about Change Management?

By Kathy Gans

Change is inevitable in all aspects of life. Perhaps no arena is more subject to the shifting winds of change than the business landscape. Each day ushers in new technology, new regulations, and new challenges. Additionally, in the wake of the recent recession, organizations are routinely questioning the status quo as they redefine some long-standing practices in order to gain a competitive edge.

Clearly, the individual pieces of the business world are in a constant state of flux. As a result, your strategy and your organization no doubt will evolve to accommodate these shifts. At the end of the day, however, somebody has to pick up those pieces, put them back together, and continue working toward the goal of advancing your business.

That somebody is your workforce, and, as you might already know, putting the puzzle back together again is often easier said than done. That's what makes developing a reliable and effective change management strategy so essential.

Understanding the Role of Change Management

Change management is a big part of today's business nomenclature, but do organizations really understand the concept? A recent informal poll by Prosci, an independent research company that focuses on change management and business processes, revealed that more than 80% of respondents experienced at least some confusion with the concepts of change and change management. In fact, 57% of those polled said they often experienced this confusion (www.change-management.com/tutorial-change-vs-change-management.htm).

To clarify, change management is the process by which companies support employees who are impacted by an organizational change. Any person impacted by the change—that is, anyone whose future state will differ from his or her present state as a result of the change—should be accounted for when developing a change management strategy. In short, change management focuses on the human aspect of any business change.

Gauge the Potential Impact of Each Change Individually

Before embarking on a new implementation or rolling out a new organization best practice, take the time to understand the implications such a change will have on your employees. Using readiness assessment questionnaires and surveys developed internally or in conjunction with transition experts, measure the size of the change, how many people will be affected, and how quickly the change will begin impacting your workforce. From there, you can delve deeper and get a better understanding of the specific groups or individuals that the change will impact and begin to structure your approach accordingly. This initial step is important in laying the foundation for successful change management.

Build and Develop an Effective Team

As with any other critical business function, developing a team to focus on change management should improve results. In fact, many companies have gone beyond the team concept and formed full-time departments dedicat-



ed exclusively to ongoing change management activities.

Whether you're building a small team or a large department, it's essential that the team consist of employees with specific attributes and qualities. Some of the traits you should look for are:

- ◆ A deep understanding of your company values, operations, and culture.
- ◆ An optimistic attitude and a motivating personality.
- ◆ Strong communication skills.
- ◆ A track record of accountability.

In addition, it's important to identify a team leader who can facilitate and take ownership of the entire change management process. The leader should be someone who is both knowledgeable and compassionate, and he or she should have the ability to comprehend and optimize both the procedural and

psychological components of change management.

Together, the team and the leader should establish a clear vision and strategy while focusing their efforts on meeting the emotional needs of the workforce in tandem with the business needs of the organization.

Get Buy-in at the Top

In addition to the designated change management team, it's crucial for organizations to identify change champions who have the status and influence to ensure a successful change. These individuals should be executive-level leaders who can demonstrate the importance of the change and make sure it is taken seriously.

Once these individuals are identified, it's imperative that they serve as active and visible champions of the change, not silent advocates. In fact, the change management team should develop sponsorship activities that help these executives connect with the workforce at large. Sponsorship activities can take many forms, from formal presentations to collaborative town hall meetings to informal lunch-and-learn sessions. No matter the setting, having high-level champions attach their name—and influence—to the initiative helps ensure its success. Sadly, however, procuring this executive buy-in and participation is where many organizations stumble.

From there, the change management team should work to ensure buy-in all the way down the organization chart from department supervisors to functional managers. These employees play a key role in managing change as they have direct influence over their employees. Unfortu-

nately, supervisors and managers who have an established way of doing things can be the most challenging to work with and a major source of resistance. Therefore, it's important to budget significant time and effort in order to get this population of your workforce on board with the change. Allocate time and resources for meetings, drafting and distributing communications and soliciting feedback along the way. After all, if your supervisors and managers don't believe in what you're doing, chances are that attitude will permeate their subordinates as well.

Communication Is Key

You may understand the reasons behind your company's planned changes, but chances are your employees won't. Never assume that your workforce has the same perspective and access to the same information as you do. Rather, you need to impart this knowledge to your entire workforce through regular, timely, and targeted communication.

The first piece of information or communication you distribute should clearly delineate the benefits of the forthcoming change. State your business case for adopting the change, and highlight the dangers of not pursuing the change. The goal is to get as many people on board with what you're doing as quickly as possible so that everyone can begin working toward the common goal.

From there, communications should be tailored to specific audiences because different members of your organization will be affected differently. Supervisors and managers should receive a separate set of communications for their subordinates so that they can effectively communicate the company's message and intention themselves.

Finally, don't be afraid to be redundant. You may have to distribute the same message several times before a majority of your workforce appreciates and understands the content—and you may have to distribute the same message in different formats, such as e-mail, regular mail, meetings, phone calls, or presentations. Whatever methods you choose, it's better to overcommunicate than undercommunicate when it comes to change management.

Take Training Seriously

After communicating the details and background about the upcoming change, it's time to prepare your employees to perform the daily tasks and responsibilities of their future state. Make sure to brainstorm all the ways in which the new environment will differ from the current one, and delineate the new skills that will be needed because of the change. Training can take a significant amount of time, so it's a good idea to identify training

requirements and approaches early in the change management process.

Expect Resistance

As I mentioned before, resistance to change—especially among long-tenured employees with an established routine—should be expected. But you also should plan for such resistance and how you're going to deal with it.

In addition to the communication methods mentioned earlier, allocate time for one-on-one discussions with those employees who are uncomfortable with their proposed future state. Get a detailed understanding of their fears and expectations while you correct any misunderstandings and answer any questions. One-on-one meetings can go a long way to alleviate the threat that resistance poses to a successful change. It will also give you a better rapport with those affected employees so that you can continue to work with them after the change has taken place.

Recognize and Reward Successes

Throughout the change management process, important milestones and achievements should be celebrated. Send out e-mails highlighting a job well done, offer small gift cards as congratulations, or simply take employees out for lunch or coffee to show your gratitude for helping execute the change. Doing so will help keep everyone motivated and committed to the process and can promote buy-in and acceptance from those who remain resistant to the change.

Change Management Doesn't End Once the Change Has Taken Place

Even after the change has taken place, the job isn't over. Instead, it's time to go back and gauge feedback from all employees who were impacted by the change. Solicit input about what you did well and what could have been done better, and document the suggestions you receive. This information should empower you to improve your change management approach for the future.

Change is the one constant we can all anticipate. But when it comes to business, it's vital that companies develop a change management approach they can rely on to mitigate both expected and unexpected changes. That way, they can meet any challenges head-on and not be derailed by whatever changes come their way. **SF**

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