

# Change - Overcoming the challenge

by Marilyn Manning, Ph.D.

**C**hange can be viewed as either an opportunity or threat.

Unfortunately, most organizations undergo significant change when faced with a crisis, rather than using change as a vehicle for continuous improvement and innovation.

Don't wait until some of your better people are leaving, when absenteeism increases, and when grievances increase. Learn to recognize some of the crisis mode behaviors such as increased complaints of stress, or a decline in enthusiasm or participation. These behaviors often signal a need to conduct an internal audit and develop some recommendations for positive change.

When change is reactive and not well planned, an organization will get stuck in the maintenance or defensive cycle. Most employees view change as a threat and become defensive, reacting with a range of behaviors from yelling and blaming to avoidance and justification. On the other hand, when change proactive, well planned and carefully implemented, the organization can function in a growth cycle. Staff can overcome their fears and anxieties and shift their attitude to embrace change as an opportunity for innovation and problem-solving.

I use four key steps when I facilitate a change process for an organization. The primary benefit of using these steps is learning how to successfully deal with fears that normally accompany change. The most common fears are loss of identify, control, meaning, belonging or even the loss of a future. When any of these areas are threatened, people usually resist change and use defensive behavioral patterns such as blame or gossip.

In Deming's *Fourteen Points for Quality*, number eight says: "Drive out fear, so that everyone may work effectively for the company." We have seen a lot of lip service given to this principle, but very little true acknowledgment of the importance of facing and discussing fears. When management can accept that fear and change usually go hand in hand, the undiscussables can be discussed. I recommend that you use an outside facilitator to help create safe environments where staff can freely express and hopefully overcome resistance.

## **S**TEP ONE: Establishing the Need and the Benefits

Organizations that are successful in implementing change usually undergo a thorough organizational assessment to determine customer satisfaction, internal morale and structure, productivity and efficiency levels. They carefully weigh their options for change, assessing advantages and the downside. Once they identify the major changes they plan to undergo, they clearly articulate the primary benefits for all stakeholders. Next, they assess resources. Who will be the various internal champions for various stages of the change? What money is designated for needed training and implementation? What type of outside experts can guide the process, train during and after the changes, and help with the implementation and evaluation stages? Is there designated budget for consulting needs? After this initial plan is developed, how does the leadership team present the needs and benefits to staff?

## **S**TEP TWO: Leadership Readiness

Organizations that thoroughly prepare their leaders and obtain their commitment up front are far more successful than organizations that hope for commitment as change occurs.

I suggest holding a kick-off celebration management meeting. Top leadership should articulate the clear and exciting vision for change. Map out the process, timelines, identified champions, and benefits. Discuss past successes and learnings. What changes have worked well and why? Which have failed and why? Give people ample time to talk about resistance and fears as well as what they expect from leadership.

Managers, supervisors and team leaders need training in change management, managing conflict, team building and coaching. Plan to have skill building sessions throughout the change process.

In the past, many clients have invested vast amounts of money in new technology and quality or re-engineering programs that report little success. They admit that leadership was not trained or ready. When significant change is implemented, weak management practices surface like wild fire. Invest in your leadership and their people skills. After all, people will either resist and sabotage the change or get on board and be your champions and partners.

Set up special "change" meetings throughout the process. It's important to keep lines of communication open and honest.

**STEP THREE:  
Core Values Mission  
Vision - Goal Clarity**

Research supports that mission-driven organizations are more efficient and productive than rule-driven groups. For an organization to implement meaningful change, it is imperative that the fundamentals of strategic planning are present. The core values, mission, vision and goals should be re-examined and recreated, if needed.

Change needs to be compatible with the purpose and mission of the organization. The change should be incorporated into the future vision which reflects a response to the needs of all stakeholders. A well written strategic plan should include clear goals for each step of any major change. The strategic plan, in fact, will forecast anticipated changes which can then facilitate any future change processes.

Step three can be incorporated into the ongoing management meetings. Dedicating management team time to revisit mission, vision and goals will expedite the anticipated changes. Management can be coached to take this process down into all levels of the organization. When staff members participate in writing their team/department mission, vision and goals, the commitment and buy-in accelerates.

**STEP FOUR:  
Formal Communication**

Open lines of communication, both formal and informal, are essential for assuring a positive change process. Formal communication forums include staff meetings and regular management team meetings throughout the change process. Consistent meeting management practices should be followed. Staff will greatly benefit from facilitation or meeting management training.

Each department can hold "All hands meetings" at least quarterly. This is an opportunity to keep everyone informed, to celebrate successes, to offer some skill building, and to hold open dialog. No one likes surprises. Ask for lots of group input and demonstrate direct actions and follow-up from this. Then, let people know how and when you use their ideas. Some organizations even create an internal newsletter which publicizes updates, benchmarks, and successes.

Each team should have regular informational and discussion meetings to stay current in the change process. Everyone throughout the organization needs some formal communication link. They need to feel that there is an appropriate place to ask questions, express concerns, deal with fears and anxieties, and receive acknowledgment for successes.

**SUMMARY**

**Using a change preparedness process as described above, can empower both management and employees. Ongoing solicitation and implementation of ideas promotes participation and can positively impact morale and productivity.**

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