

laying the foundation for change

By Daniel Cheng

Leadership is often about managing change, but before change can succeed it is essential to lay a strong foundation.

Perhaps one of the greatest attributes of an effective corporate leader is the ability to drive change. In hindsight, the benefits of big changes are always clear, but getting change off the ground is highly challenging and often fails. For managers to push change through it is essential to first lay a strong foundation for change with employees, many of whom will likely fear (if not actively resist) major changes.

“The secret to successful change is to make each step along the path of change have some recognizable value,” says Pat Mitchell, Chief Executive officer of PBS Corporation. “You have to stand behind your risks and make your case for change in a very reasonable way. Then, you lead by doing and setting the example. Building consensus is critical for a major strategic change to work.”

Once a manager decides on a course of change it is essential to win support from key team members. This is best done incrementally, reaching out to individuals, for it is their support, or lack thereof, which will see a change initiative succeed or fail. A manager should schedule time to meet with each team member: announcing a major change to everybody in a meeting could come as a shock to the system, and perhaps result in a long, wandering debate about the initiative’s merits. Before meeting individual team members, managers

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should weigh their specific interests (money? Work life balance?), and frame the arguments for change in a way that will help people see the direct benefits to themselves.

A good starting point is to lay out the rationale for the change, as well as how the change will affect both the individual and group. Be energetic and positive, for a sense of urgency is necessary for change to work. Describe as specifically as possible how the change will resolve current issues, for example making work less difficult, stressful, and costly. Having done this, it is easier for team members to see the benefits change will bring, and how it will generally improve the situation for themselves and the team.

It is crucial to actively solicit ideas and implement the better ones: people are more likely to change if they feel they own the change process, as opposed to feeling that they have been ordered to change.

During such conversations good leaders ask for comments and input on the options available – before meeting team members, it is wise to think through what objections and obstacles may come up. It is crucial to actively solicit ideas and implement the better ones: people are more likely to change if they feel they own the change process, as opposed to feeling that they have been ordered to change. Finally, it is important to ask team members for their support, preferably being specific about the role the individual can play in the change initiative.

“If people feel they have been listened to, they are a lot more likely to become spokes in the flywheel of change than they are to stand outside and throw sticks your way,” says PBS’s Mitchell. “Everybody needs to feel heard...that doesn’t mean they’re going to be served equally well by every risk you take, but they have to be willing to take the risks with you.”

If concerns are laid out in an honest way, it is easier to defuse them. During meetings about big changes managers must be alert to hesitation or negative reactions. A paper published by Heidrick & Struggles in conjunction with Elspeth Murray and Peter Richardson, Professors of Strategic Management at Queen’s University in Canada, contends that in most organizations relatively few employees are willing to engage in early stage change activities, with some executives saying 20 percent of employees can be motivated to drive early change, with 70 per cent remaining neutral, and 10 per cent actively opposed

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Finally, perseverance is key to successful, long term change. Change will never happen over night, and while many managers enjoy the early stages of a new initiative, some find it challenging to continuously follow up in the ensuing months.

to it. One error many managers make is focusing on converting the 10 per cent in opposition, who will probably never change their view.

Kenneth D. Lewis, Chairman, President, and CEO of Bank of America Corporation, warns that the most challenging thing about being a change agent is managing passive-aggressive behavior. “It’s hard to identify because people who practice passive-aggressive behavior get very good at it,” Lewis says. “You see people nodding their head and acting as if they accept something, but then doing things in ways to thwart the change...blatant opponents to change you can deal with; it’s the passive-aggressive behavior cloaked in professionalism that is difficult to identify and do something about.”

Finally, perseverance is key to successful, long term change. Change will never happen over night, and while many managers enjoy the early stages of a new initiative, some find it challenging to continuously follow up in the ensuing months. Following up, however, will be far easier if change is built on a solid foundation, with team members feeling as if they own the process of change.

Laying The Foundation For Change

- Assess how the change will affect key team members.
- Meet team members to discuss the change, and demonstrate the benefits change will bring them.
- Demonstrate a sense of passion and urgency.
- Seek out team members’ recommendations for how change can be carried out.
- Watch out for passive-aggressive behavior.

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