

Ease the Pain of Leading Through Change

Peggy Grall, The Change Coach™

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Change has a mean streak. It can rip the heart out of an organization and kill the spirit of individuals if you let it. So don't let it.

That's one of those things easier said than done. Managing people during times of intense change is like herding cats. Just when you think you've got everyone going in the same direction, someone or some group breaks ranks.

But a good leader can build a flexible work force capable of handling the most daunting changes on a day's notice. To be successful with change initiatives, leaders need to understand the impact of change on people and process, and discover effective ways to gently, yet boldly, guide their team or organization through the delicate process.

Here are the five naked truths about what good leaders need to lead through change:

Naked Truth # 1

Most employees fear change

Change is hard for most people. The fear of it is as intense and debilitating as the fear of public speaking and the fear of heights. When humans are fearful, we tend to revert to self-preservation mode. As soon as an announcement about change is made, people start to focus on how they will be affected. They wonder about the security of their jobs and how long it will take to get back to normal. If there are no answers, people create their own. They need to have the "how will this change affect me" questions answered quickly. In most instances, they'll ask, stall and frustrate management's plans until they get satisfactory answers.

Strategy

- Listen to everyone's concerns, even when you can't change the reality.
- Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know."
- Be genuine and give people as much of the truth as you are free to share.

Naked Truth # 2

Timing is everything

In love, war and business, timing is everything. Savvy leaders know when too much change is too much. Employees embrace change when it comes at a time that they can make sense of it. When organizations pile change upon change, preventing employees from being able to effectively process the important parts of the initiative, they do themselves and their employees a disservice. Sometimes change sweeps in without an invitation -- a downturn in the economy, the death of a loved one, a marriage break up, an unexpected career change. Unwelcome change is particularly hard to work through. When there have been an abundance of unsolicited changes in an industry, a wise leader will put less urgent changes on hold until the dust settles.

Strategy

Take great care in planning when you launch your next change initiative. Position the launch in a way that takes advantage of everything from the weather, seasonal market demand, age and stage of your work force, time of year and anything else that might hamper your efforts.

Naked Truth # 3

Successful change requires strong leaders

Sometimes the best management tool is a mirror. How do you approach change? Are you a change agent, or a closet resister? Strong leadership is the key to success in making positive change. Leaders need to be honest, credible and possess a great deal of integrity. When these qualities don't exist, the environment is ripe for chaos. A leader's job is to justify the struggle and to aim people toward the goal. However, maintaining the organization's vision is only one aspect of great leadership.

If the three most important considerations in real estate are location, location, location, then the three most important elements in a large change initiative are: communication, communication and communication. Remember, when people are still in the early stages of a change process they're still in shock. They don't hear everything that gets said the first time. Tell them again.

Strategy

- Communicate the vision -- clearly, often and in a variety of formats.
- Use intranet, memos, newsletters, team huddles and face-to-face meetings.
- Walk your talk. Be the kind of leader that people are proud to follow.

Naked Truth # 4

People need to honour the past before they can move on

Often, employees have trouble moving to the new way of doing their jobs until they've been given time to honour previous successes and familiar routines. An employee's resistance to a new idea or process is often related to needing to be recognized for how his or her job was done before the new system, new management team, new facility or new culture was introduced.

Strategy

- Give people time to recount how successful they've been in the past before asking them to do something new -- and watch the resistance fade.
- To help honour the past, give out simple acknowledgments of past victories won.

Naked Truth # 5

Stop romancing the resisters

Employees fall into three general categories of how they approach change. About 20 per cent are "change-friendly." These are your change agents -- champions you can depend on to take up the charge and lead others through the treacherous waters of change. Change agents are characterized by their flexibility, creativity, listening skills, collaborative nature and their realistic approach to life. Change champions will have the ear of the people and can influence groups that you might not otherwise be able to reach.

Another 50 per cent of the population is neutral to change. These are the employees that aren't actively hostile to change, but aren't likely to lead it either. They spend a great deal of their time watching the rest of the group, trying to decide which way to go. The neutral employees can often be influenced to go along by those employees I call "the cool kids."

The final 30 per cent are the hardcore resisters who present a real obstacle to an organization on the move. They don't like change -- or you -- for asking them to change. These resisters make a career out of protecting the status quo. When a change is being introduced, they're the first to complain and the best at finding all the reasons why the change won't work.

Strategy

- Identify the change-friendly employees who are popular with their peers: those unofficial leaders in their departments and working groups. Spend time coaching them toward the needed changes, reward them for their efforts and watch them march the troops toward the goal.
- Don't romance the resisters. Concentrate on the employees that are more change-friendly. They're the ones that will drive the change for you. Deal with resisters gently but firmly and swiftly. Remember, change is an integral part of everyone's life.
- As a leader, your job is to build a burning level of job commitment in your people, ensuring that you openly, honestly and continually communicate with them about the nature of and necessity for change in your organization.