

How to Help Employees Buy in to Change

By Jim Kimberly

Change is a fact of life. When something is not working, or a better option is available, change is necessary, beneficial and sometimes even exhilarating. Unfortunately, it is rarely easy.

Think back to when you last changed jobs, had to learn a new technology system, got transferred, went through a merger/acquisition, or simply moved your office. If you are like most people, you experienced anxiety and a sense of disorientation as you said goodbye to the old way of life.

Human resource professionals and other leaders can help their organization adapt to change by remembering that change and transition go hand in hand. "Change" is an event, but transition is a psychological process by which people adapt to the change. Transitions take time and a successful journey through the stages of transition requires corporate and individual commitment, not just compliance.

5 Ways to Help Employees Navigate Transitions

1. Honor the old while welcoming the new.

Focus on honoring the past culture ("how things were done around here") and the old order while still outlining the new strategy. People need to feel their previous dedication and sweat have meant something before they are likely to sign up for the new way.

2. Sell the reasons for change, not just the actions and plans.

Describe the business case for the changes, be it a merger or IT conversion. How does this fit into the vision and mission of the organization? What business problem needed to be fixed? Translate the answers into the various department's/division's language. Be sensitive to the winners and losers of resources, access to power, and changes to the informal communication network.

3. Look at change from the viewpoint of your employees.

Define what will change for your employees, how their life will be different and why the change is important. Take big picture goals/changes and bring them down to the employee level. Use your HR expertise in communication and creativeness to craft a scenario of likely outcomes based upon the plan and the part employees play.

4. Communicate clearly and compassionately.

Help leaders understand that the impact of the message is often more important than the content of the words. A calm tone and open style will reflect sensitivity to perceived losses and go a long way to support people through changes. Have leaders communicate the changes and the reasons behind them in person, on conference calls, in email and other written communications.

5. Accept that there will be a wide range of reactions.

Senior leaders are often far more advanced in their transition process by the time an official announcement is made. They have been planning and organizing for months while other employees are just hearing about it for first time. People who have just heard about changes will need time to adapt. Some employees may be accepting right away while others will be all over the emotional map with their

reactions. Don't be surprised by over-reactions. That's just the way some people adapt to the stress caused by change.

What to do when a major change is on the horizon

Do not:

- Assume that people will respond negatively. Many people embrace change and have creative solutions to share.
- Hide in the corner office and avoid conflict with difficult employees or groups. They will not go away and when they resurface their concerns will be stronger.
- Use language that belittles employee concerns. Avoid such phrases as "Don't worry, everything will be the same!", "Just keep a stiff upper lip, look at the bright side", or "Don't worry, nothing will change for *you*...".

Do:

- Candidly admit the changes ahead with compassion, even if it means some ruffled feathers. Employees prefer direct communication when it comes to difficult news.
- Acknowledge and anticipate employees' feelings of uncertainty and be careful of arrogance in assuming you know how they feel. Say: "We can imagine how this may feel to some ..", instead of "We all know how you feel.."
- Conduct planned and frequent updates throughout the transition period to help people anticipate when news will be available. This reduces the potential feeling of being "left in the dark" and although you don't have all the answers figured out, some news is better than no news.
- Increase visibility of decision makers so they can be seen as going through the changes *with* employees, not just doing it *to* them. Insist leaders attend employee gatherings, departmental updates and informal "drive by" briefings.

While change can be hard, successful organizational transitions can hasten the promises that corporate change offers. It can facilitate broader opportunities for employees, customers and shareholders. When human resource professionals reach out to leadership to discuss the proactive planning necessary for an effective change, they plant the seeds for a great outcome.

Jim Kimberly is the founder of Sapphire Consulting, a workforce training and consulting company based in Amherst, NH. For more information, please visit www.consultsapphire.com or contact Jim at: jim@consultsapphire.com, (603) 889-1099.