

#### Leading Employees Through Organizational Change

Susan Skinner, President, Personal Assistance Services

Every organization and every work group must undergo changes as its life cycle continually evolves. Some changes are significant and affect the entire organization as well as its parts: major restructuring of product offerings, reporting hierarchies, cultural environments, or ownership/key leadership. Some changes more predominately affect specific work groups or employees within the organization such as benefits restructuring (eligibility, premium penalties), new hardware and software systems, and reengineered work flow processes. Some changes have their basis in proactive organizational growth and expansion while others are based on remediating deficits in profitability, product or service quality, or market demand.

Change is typically experienced in one of two ways:

- Intentional – chosen and controlled, a conscious decision to solve a problem, a natural outcome and anticipated.
- Imposed – decided by others, no ability to exert control over pace of change, disruptive, sudden or unexpected.

Those on whom the change is imposed will have the most resistance to change since “people don’t resist change. They resist being changed.” (*Peter Senge*)

#### Employee Reactions

Depending on the scope and size of the organizational change, the way in which changes are communicated and implemented, and the overall culture of respect and trust that employees have for leadership, employee reactions can vary from highly adaptive to highly disruptive. Many employees closely identify with their jobs and have formed attachments to their work group and their way of working. It may be difficult for some people to adjust and move forward in the face of change. They may blame the organization or top management for making changes that adversely affected them personally. They may become disgruntled and possibly verbally disruptive at work as they focus on expressing fear, loss, anger and even guilt.

However, most people have a strong level of resilience and ability to focus on the positive aspects of change

if they are well informed about the intent of the change. For them, any adverse reactions to organizational change will subside within a short time and they will come to terms with the “new normal.”

While employees will react to change differently, one important piece to the overall success of every work group and every organization is the ability of leadership to understand the human factors at play and to implement and lead change effectively.

*Change* is situational – it is external to the people it impacts. *Transition* is the psychological process people must go through in order come to terms with the *change*. There are four common phases in the *transition* process:

1. denial,
2. resistance,
3. exploration and
4. commitment.

#### Communicating Change

Understanding which phase any employee or a group of employees are in can help guide communication.

Every level of leadership must master a detailed understanding of the overall business needs in order to effectively communicate the strategic plan for change to their employees. It is important for employees to know about the financial, competitive, efficiency and human capital considerations that have led the organization to make changes.

Effective change leaders:

- are genuine and acknowledge that some of the decisions have been difficult for them personally but that they are committed to getting through this together. This engenders employee respect and trust for the leader.
- let employees know that they are valued and that they are an important part of the change process.
- give employees permission to offer their suggestions and input as new ways of doing things rarely occur without glitches—identifying and solving problems as they occur is key.

## Leading Employees Through Organizational Change (continued)

- tell their employees that they expect them to succeed, to be supportive of each other, and to continue working hard to serve their internal and external customers;
- tell employees that they can count on regular updates on the progress of the organization
- ask employees what they need in order to build and maintain a culture of on-going communication and skill development;
- are open to addressing questions and concerns as they arise. Employees who trust that their leader is open and honest with them will spend less time speculating and worrying about what the leader is hiding and what surprise is next.

Within the phase of *denial*, provide information, affirm that the change will happen, explain what to expect and suggest measures to adjust, schedule a planning session to talk through the change.

During the *resistance* phase, listen, acknowledge feelings, provide empathetic support. This will allow you to respond to some of their concerns, without having to feel the need to talk them out of their feelings.

In *exploration*, focus on priorities, provide training, set short-term goals (this helps demonstrate that adjustment to change is achievable) and conduct planning and problem-solving sessions. Employees will begin to take ownership for the change.

During the *commitment* phase, set longer-term goals, concentrate more on team-building, reward those who are responding to the change and increase focus on overall mission.

### Managing the Human Factors

When employees first learn of a change at work, most will only want details about how the changes will affect them personally – their salary and benefits, their work schedule, their reporting structure, etc. Productivity may plummet.

Once the initial shock has passed, common emotional reactions to organizational change include anxiety about the future; grief over personal loss or that of co-workers; denial, resentment and anger. It is natural for employees to resort to basic defenses of distrust, withdrawal and self-protection as they move through assimilating the organizational change. These are normal reactions to change and they will generally diminish if the leader maintains a culture of trust, respect and honest communication.

Employees who personalize change and “hear” that the way they have been working is no longer good enough often develop feelings of diminished value.

They may think that they lack the job skills to perform well under the new expectations for conducting business.

They may become fearful and continue to resist change and remain angry instead of showing signs of adjustment to change. These are troubled reactions to change and require the leader’s intervention.

It is important that the leader spend one-on-one time with employees who are experiencing troubled reactions in order to solicit and acknowledge their feelings, concerns and questions. The leader should directly address the human factors – “It is natural for anyone feeling threatened by change to feel emotions like this, change is difficult, you are valued, we will provide you with training to develop new practices and skills.”

An effective leader understands the link between employee well-being and organizational performance. Be sure to offer employees confidential assistance through PAS, your organization’s Employee Assistance Program. The professionals at PAS provide valuable and effective personal support to employees and their families in times of change, uncertainty and stress.

### Personal Tips for Leaders

Recognize that you, the leader, may also experience some of the same reactions to organizational change that your employees experience. However, refrain from comparing your reactions to those of your employees or taking responsibility for how others are responding to the changes. We are all different and each experience is unique and personal.

Give yourself time to adjust and recover. Difficulties with concentration, memory or decision-making are common but short-term reactions. Take good care of yourself. Eat well, exercise, and get enough rest.

In difficult times, it helps to tap into the power of purpose. Try to keep your perspective and look beyond the current challenges. Every single day you have a chance to make a situation just a little bit better, to encourage someone, and to motivate others to be the best they can be.



Personal Assistance Services  
(800) 356-0845  
[www.paseap.com](http://www.paseap.com)