The Human Side of Change Management

BY CHRISTIANE TRUELOVE

It is more critical than ever to address the human and business strategies needed to manage change today— how it affects your people, your awareness of it, and the way to approach it.

In life, change is inevitable. The way our reality has changed in the last two years as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented, and many of these changes are not going away. As COVID-19 shifts to being endemic, leaders will have to continue to think on their feet and be ready to deal with ongoing change.

AMA defines change management as "a systematic approach to dealing with the transition or transformation of an organization's goals, processes, or technologies, with the purpose of implementing strategies for affecting change, controlling change, and helping people adapt to change." AMA executives say that because a change management plan is only as good as the motivation, focus, attitude, and leadership of the

people who are implementing it, learning the skills of how to effectively manage change is essential.

KC Blonski, senior vice president, Corporate Learning Solutions, at American Management Association, states, "It's the people who make change happen. It's your employees who hold the key to real transformation and business results, and most people are creatures of habit. Change forces us to deal with ambiguity—the great unknown—and many people struggle with that."

According to Jeff Becker, director of Corporate Learning Solutions at AMA, the normal reactions to change are uncertainty, anxiety, and resistance. "They are part of the whole change process," he says. "But they can slow the adoption of change initiatives,

stalling progress, and can even hit the bottom line."

THE STAGES OF CHANGE MANAGEMENT

AMA leaders say there are multiple stages to change. The phases of the change management cycle as defined by AMA are understanding change drivers and their impact; understanding the barriers to change; communicating change; managing resistance to change; getting further buy-in and commitment; and evaluating the impact. Each step flows into the next. Usually, in the first stage is denial, then resistance. Next comes exploring the change.

According to Becker, leaders need to be aware of active and passive resistance that lingers. While employees

should start to move into exploring change within a few weeks, resistance beyond that will need to be addressed.

"Watch for negative comments, predictions of failure, or disruptive behavior," Becker says. "Passive resistance could simply be denial. It could be silence. It could manifest itself as a victim mentality. Passive resistance is a less overt behavior, but you need to identify it. Your role here as a change leader is to listen and observe their reactions."

Resistance isn't something to be managed—it needs to be facilitated. "It's a necessary process people need to go through before they can embrace change," AMA executives say. "Your role, as a change leader, is to help move that along, to communicate with others who are in resistance. Sometimes this is hard, and you may find that you're also resisting. So this process involves self-awareness in addition to awareness of others."

Another thing that leaders need to look for is silence, but this may not necessarily be a bad thing. Becker says that silence does not always mean that someone has not bought in. They may have bought in and be just fine, or they may have questions or may be processing the change and trying to understand where it is. "So just pay attention to that sense of silence, without jumping to conclusions about what it means," he says. "It could be resistance, or it could be that they are thinking through the changes they need to make."

ADDRESSING RESISTANCE
An AMA poll found that to manage change, 80% of the responding leaders said they supply regular communication, and 34%

AMA recently polled more than 1,500 HR and learning and development leaders on their change management initiatives. When asked how employees have responded to change in the past, respondents indicated only 9% bought into and committed to change quickly.

The rest floundered a bit:

40% eventually accepted it

32% were nervous about it

9% felt agitated or alarmed

9% were neutral

The cumulative effects of this very human reaction to change are enormous.

In the same poll:

54% reported an increase in anxiety and a feeling of uncertainty as a result of change

24% reported an increase in resistance

10% reported a lack of productivity

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try to actively anticipate responses to change. Leaders also reported attempting to remove barriers and providing weekly meetings.

But active listening can also be used to move employees through the next stage of change. "Invite responses," says Becker. "Get people to talk. Ask questions. Listen without judging, because this is where you begin to build trust."

By listening, leaders can learn which of the "human" factors are likely to derail or stall an initiative later. According to AMA leaders, "You can't begin to remove obstacles if you don't have a clear understanding of what they are or why they exist in the first place."

As Blonski puts it, "You can't overcommunicate in this stage. The ability to continue to communicate throughout a change initiative is absolutely critical. A communication plan and a multiphase rollout can also help with this. Change initiatives are more successful in an environment where there is full transparency, a feeling of trust, and authenticity. Employees have to feel comfortable raising concerns and obstacles to change. By breaking larger initiatives into phases and smaller groups, we find employees are more likely to raise concerns and open up about anything that would hinder the initiative's success."

GET EMPLOYEES INVOLVED AND PRAISE THEM

AMA says that to make people want and accept change, leaders must get them involved early on. Ultimately, people support what they help create. "We generally don't like to be told what to do," Becker says. "But if you can engage me in a solution, I'm more likely to support it because I helped create it."

Leaders need to think about how they can involve employees. At the very least, do an assessment of employees' needs and get their input directly on the process, Blonski says, which can save a lot of time and effort later.

As the change process moves along, AMA advises celebrating each success, even if the goal has not been reached yet. One way to do this is by acknowledging the closure of each phase. "We are all looking for some finality in a lot of different things right now, because we've just lived through a long period of uncertainty and flux," Becker says. "Anything you can do to say, 'Great, close that gate. We're done with that piece, and now we're moving on to this one,' the better. This is true for all uncertain environments,

because closure contributes to the feeling of certainty. Closure is a sign of success and progress." CQ