

Leading Change -- Creating an Organization That Lives Change

To effectively lead change, you must recognize that the phenomenon of "change" does not need managing as much as do the people involved with it.

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There is a lot to learn about the human relationship to change. Just as the nature of change varies, so do the human responses and reactions to it. Some people seem confused and confounded by change and unpredictability, and do their best to avoid it. Others find the prospect of uncertainty invigorating, often seeking out situations that promise opportunities for new adventures and exploration.

You can see this difference in how people experience things in the way two people will describe the same event. What is exciting to one may be a major crisis to another.

The ancient Chinese seem to have understood this paradox of perspective well, as the character for the word *crisis* is a combination of the characters for the words *danger* and *opportunity*. Likewise, people relate to change in unique, varied, and sometimes unpredictable ways.

While people may feel differently about change in general, when it comes to change in the workplace, research shows that most people are open to it -- an astounding 78 percent in fact. That's according to research of more than 5,000 mid-to-upper level managers*. The bad news is that most of those managers and executives don't know how to effectively lead others through that change.

The good news is, they (and you) can learn. In fact, through increased awareness of your own and others' differing change styles and preferences, you can help your company do more than just handle change -- you can create an organization that lives it.

Don't confuse change style with change competency

Often the discussion on change revolves around simplistic ideologies that label some people as "pro-change" and others as "change resisters." Predictably, the pro-change forces are seen as good and the resisters as the evil enemies of progress.

The problem with this thinking is that the people who frame these arguments have their own unique attitudes, beliefs and preferences about change. The fact that the pro-change person may lead his/her organization into a disaster or that the resistor may present very reasonable objections is often overlooked. In other words, personal change styles are often confused with change competency.

Understanding change styles

Research indicates that people have different habits and preferences when faced with change. If you can recognize these differences in yourself and others, and address them when communicating and implementing change, you are much more likely to face fewer misunderstandings, complaints and saboteurs along the way.

In the effort to help organizations recognize these differences, Discovery Learning Inc. has taken the aggregate results from 150,000 change-style assessments performed using the Change Style Indicator® and grouped people into three categories according to the way they deal with change: Conservers, Pragmatists and Originators.

On the far left side of the change preference continuum, you'll find the Conservers. Conservers prefer to work within the existing structure to create change incrementally. When facing change, Conservers appear deliberate, disciplined and organized. They prefer change that maintains the current structure. They honor tradition and established practices and usually operate from conventional assumptions. Conservers enjoy predictability so they may appear cautious and inflexible.

In the middle of the continuum you'll find the Pragmatists. Pragmatists deal in outcomes and seek practical, functional solutions to problems. When facing change, Pragmatists appear practical, agreeable and flexible. They often operate as mediators and catalysts for understanding and are open to both sides of an argument. They may take more of a middle-of-the-road approach and often appear more team-oriented.

To the far right are the Originators. (Here is where you'll find most entrepreneurial types.) Originators sometimes favor something that's different just because it's different. When facing change, Originators may appear unorganized, undisciplined, unconventional and spontaneous. They prefer change that challenges current structure and are likely to challenge accepted assumptions. Originators enjoy risk and uncertainty. While they may appear as visionary and systemic in their thinking, they can also be impractical and miss important details and often treat accepted policies and procedures with little regard.

These descriptions make it easy to see how all three change styles are necessary when leading and accomplishing change within an organization. The key to making these styles work best for your organization is to know your own change style preference and understand how that dictates the way you should interact with people with similar and different preferences.

For example, if you are an Originator (many entrepreneurs are) you might be perceived by others as impulsive and unfocused. If your colleague is a Conserver, you may view him as too cautious or as inflexible. If your direct report is a Pragmatist you might view her as indecisive. And while she might understand your point of view, she may feel that you're too risky in certain situations.

And just in case three change styles wasn't enough to consider, there are a couple of other players you also should be aware of: change agents and resisters.

Change agents are often consultants who come in from the outside and without really understanding your company's culture or needs, try to impose the changes they think you need. Change agents can also be overenthusiastic members of your own organization who, just like their external counterparts, run the risk of alienating the very people necessary to make the change work.

Resisters, on the other hand, are often seen as people who don't care about the company's success. It's important to remember however, that often the biggest objections to change come from the people most devoted to the company. Hearing and acting on the concerns voiced by resisters may help you head off problems you hadn't anticipated. Being able to tell the difference between hardcore resisters who will fight any change no matter what and the concerned employees described here is crucial. If you treat every skeptic as a hardcore resister, you risk encouraging alliances between these two groups that could further stall needed changes.

Conclusion

To effectively lead change, you must recognize that the "change" itself does not need managing as much as do the people involved with it. In order to successfully manage and lead people through any size change, it helps to be aware of the different ways people prefer to deal with change; and to realize that your perceptions of the change styles of others are colored by your own.

When everyone in the organization becomes more aware of their own and others preferences when dealing with change, understanding and acceptance of differences overall will increase across the entire organization. This resulting acceptance and valuing of differences is what separates dynamic organizations that "live" change from organizations that simply react to change to try and stay competitive.

*The Change Styles Survey, conducted by Discovery Learning between 1996 and 2001 on over 5,000 mid-to-upper managers, placed respondents on a continuum between "Conserver" and "Originator," with "Pragmatist" in between. Not surprisingly, most individuals are a blend of Conserver-Pragmatist or Pragmatist-Originator. Of the entire population surveyed, 51 percent of managers (57 percent were men and 43 percent were women) scored in the pragmatist range, 26 percent in the originator range and 23 percent in the conserver range.

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