

Leading Your Organization Through Change: 5 Rules for Success

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The term “change management” means different things to different people. Technology professionals are likely to view it as a formal process for tracking and documenting changes to systems and code. Human Resource professionals may argue that it is an intangible process that deals with how organizations view opportunities associated with change. At an organizational level, change management means defining and implementing the best strategic and tactical plans to deal with changes in the business environment and to profit from those opportunities. Depending on the situation, any one of these answers can be correct; however, for the purpose of this article, we will focus on managing organizational change.

Change can be threatening to individuals and organizations. Yet successful adaptation to change is crucial to the success of any organization. It is common for leadership teams to focus their attention on creating the best strategic and tactical plans, failing to consider the human side of change management. Failing to address the human side of change can be costly. Studies show that employee resistance and a lack of proper training are key hindrances to organizational change. While no single change management methodology fits every organization, there is a set of best practices that can be adapted to a variety of situations. Here are five best practices you can implement to create a solid foundation for successful change.

1. **Involvement**. Change is inherently unsettling for people at all levels of an organization. All eyes are on the leadership team for guidance and support when organizational change occurs. For change to be successful, the key stakeholders must model the way. The senior leadership team must visibly embrace the new approaches to motivate and challenge the rest of the organization. Change is aborted when leaders do not demonstrate the same commitment they expect from others. Equally important is the need for the change efforts to include plans for involving leaders throughout the company in order to create a sense of ownership. Pushing responsibility for design and implementation down so that change “cascades” through the organization helps to ensure that all concerned feel they have a stake in the plan’s success.
2. **Communicate**. Senior leaders must focus on creating a communication plan that clearly articulates the vision of where they want to go and the benefits of doing so. Too often, leaders make the mistake of believing that others understand their vision as clearly as they do. Even when employees understand the vision and need for change, they often resist because change involves loss (loss of control, predictability, and often jobs). Leaders need to listen and acknowledge these feelings in order to reduce the level of employees’ anxiousness. The best change programs reinforce core messages through regular, timely communications that are both practical and inspirational. When creating a communication strategy, leaders should ensure that it is:
 - **Timely** - Prepare employees well in advance of possible merger, acquisition, downsizing or layoffs. Employees are better able to deal with negative information personally from their managers than from the news media.
 - **Clearly Written** - Communicate clearly and honestly with employees throughout the change process. Always keep the target audience in mind when communicating change

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information. Messages directed at investors should be significantly different than those targeted for first-line managers.

- **Business Necessity** – It is critical that employees understand why the organization needs to make the change(s). In order for employees to buy into the organization’s change effort, they must understand why the organization is facing a period of change and potential benefits to them.
3. **Training.** Over-train whenever possible prior to start-up (using the new technology and work processes in simulations). Training early allows employees to build greater skills and confidence which in turn reduces stress and resistance. In addition to understanding the new technology or process, managers need to be trained on the skills that will help them manage resistance to the change initiatives. Skills that can help managers “manage change” include: team building, coaching, feedback, setting priorities, negotiating priorities, stress management, dealing with conflict, systematic problem-solving and effective delegation.
 4. **Feedback & Recognition.** While it is always important to “inspect what you expect,” it is equally important to set up the change effort so that people in the organization experience some early wins. These early wins increase individual support for change while also having the benefit of helping to sway the attitudes of change-skeptical employees. It is also important to communicate how the employees’ work will change and how they will be measured during and after the change effort. Setting clear expectations and providing frequent informal feedback will help to build employee confidence and shape the key behaviors needed for positive results. Lastly, it is important to keep in mind that for recognition to be most effective, it needs to be personal, immediate, sincere and specific. Highly visible rewards are a great way to reinforce the organization’s commitment to the change. Likewise, disciplining people who stand in the way of change will reinforce the organization’s commitment to the change effort.
 5. **Stay the Course.** We have found that any new process left unmanaged or improperly measured deteriorates over time -- there are no exceptions. If leaders wish to institutionalize change, the change must become part of the organization’s culture. Change cannot be viewed by employees as the “flavor of the month.” Leaders will need to recognize that change is viewed by many as risky and scary. These emotions make it easy for employees to slip back into their comfort zones and return to familiar habits and processes. Leaders must make sure they are hypervigilant to what employees are doing to ensure that follow-through is timely.

Study after study has shown that successful change demands more than plans and processes; it requires an understanding of the human side. Plans and processes themselves do not create the change. Organizational change occurs only through the sustained, collective actions of the employees who are responsible for designing, executing and living the change. Therefore it is essential that leaders model the way and communicate with exceptional clarity. Leaders must provide training to build new skills and they must pay greater attention than usual to what employees are doing.

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