



A Manager's Guide to Supporting Organizational Change: 10 Lessons Learned[©]

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Change has become a constant in organizations – whether through choice or changes in the external environment. Change is seldom easy, but managers can make a difference by communicating reasons, respecting values, attending to emotions, and providing as much information as possible.

By now, most of us have heard the phrase, “The only constant is change.” Markets change, technology changes, new economies emerge. The expectations of the workforce shift, demand wanes or grows. Our ability to respond successfully to change – as individuals and organizations – marks the ability to stay vibrant and competitive or fall by the wayside.

Whether the change involves an entire enterprise, reorganization, or the adoption of new software development methods, there is one constant in any change: People need and crave information, time, and support. When those factors are absent, transitions flounder, and hoped-for changes fail.

Managers at all levels can contribute to successful transitions. In this article, I will draw on my experience observing, leading, and participating in organizational change to distill practical ways that managers can support intentional change.

But first, here is a little tale.

A Cautionary Tale

Not long ago I visited a large, well-established, multi-national company. After spending a day talking with developers and project managers about software development methods, I had a chance to talk to the chief information officer (CIO).

The CIO spoke about his vision for transforming the organization. He bounced with enthusiasm as he strode back and forth across the room and spoke about reorganizing his 800-person software development department within the next three weeks and shipping a vast new product – Galileo – in six months.

“I’m bringing in training so 11 teams can hit the ground running next month,” he enthused. “I’ve announced the reorganization and appointed a steering committee. Of course, we still have to finish the Green River project and deliver that on time.” He frowned for a moment, and then resumed his energetic bouncing.

“We’ve been working on this product for three years, but with this new organization, we’ll finish Green River and ship Galileo by the end of the year!”

As the CIO began to wind down, I asked if he was interested in hearing what I had learned from the people actually building software. “They love it, right?” he asked, pumping his fist.

But when I reported that most of the people I had spoken to did not understand the reason for the change, the CIO became annoyed. “Over two-thirds of the people I talked to feel like senior management is ramming this change down their throats,” I said. “They don’t see the urgency, and they do not see how it’s going to help.”

“What do they mean ramming!?” the CIO demanded. “They’ve had plenty of time to get onboard. And they say they don’t know about this!” he was nearly shouting. “I talked about it at our annual meeting last quarter!”

I am sure this executive had a clear vision and goal for transforming his organization. I am sure he considered the need and urgency to change. I know he considered many options before deciding on how to reorganize the department and adopt a new way of working.

Like most CIOs, this man is bright and cares about the success of his organization. And he fell into a common mistake: He assumed that since *he* had thought through the implications of the change, announced the change in an important setting, and established an aggressive goal, he had done his job. Sure, he has gotten a steering committee (made up of people who do not actually write the software, and who had so far produced a PowerPoint presentation). And, he funded some training.

Given the financial reserves of the company, they may survive for a while. But this CIO’s hopes for transformation are doomed. What could he have done, and what can other managers do to succeed at transitions in organizations?

Communicate a Compelling Reason to Change

Most people want to know the *why* behind a change, the reason they should do things differently. Announcements are not enough. For example, “Starting in April, we will be using a new method!” does not convey a compelling reason to change. Without an understanding of the reason for a change, any proposed change seems arbitrary – the latest management whim.

Though the end goal may be wonderful, the process of change brings disruption, discomfort, and loss. Most people will endure the downside of change to achieve a compelling goal or save something they value – but not to provide a prerequisite to someone who seems disconnected and capricious.

One manager announced an aggressive change agenda with the following rationale: “I need you to be up and running the new development platform by June. My birthday is in June and this will be my birthday present.” It is hard to imagine an announcement that would have done more damage to motivation and goodwill.

In contrast, another executive stood in front of his department and laid out the facts: “We’ve been very successful in the past. Perhaps we’ve been too successful, and we’ve lost our edge. We are losing market share. Our competitors are building better products and building them faster. The way we have done our work has served us well in the past, but it is no longer serving us. I know we can regain our place in the market. And to do that, we have to change.” He went on to describe his vision for how the department needed to reinvent the way they worked.

People did not leave the department meeting “pumped up;” they did leave with a sense of purpose and a clear understanding that their leader was asking for shared sacrifice to save the company they all cared about.

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Communicate Formally and Informally

Formal communications – meetings and memos – are necessary, but they are not sufficient in times of change and transition. People need to know how the new direction relates to their day-to-day work. Managers at all levels need to talk about how the change relates to day-to-day decisions, actions, and events [1].

Look for opportunities to discuss differences and similarities with new methods or structures during team meetings and one-on-one meetings. Look for water-cooler moments and other informal opportunities to tie the new regime to current concerns.

One group I worked with was moving from a waterfall life cycle to iterative, incremental development. Soon after the first announcement, a group manager set up a special forum to answer questions and hear concerns about the transition to iterative, incremental development. During the forum, the group manager led the discussion to help people start thinking about how their work would change, and what they would need to do differently to deliver software incrementally.

Most people need to hear a new idea many times before they absorb and integrate the new information. This is especially true when the new way of doing things is significantly different from current practices. As people hear about a change and talk through how it supports company goals, they mentally rehearse how they will accomplish work using different means or different methods. For a significant change, this will not happen in a day or a week. Significant transformation requires time.

Personalize the Message: What Does This Mean for Me?

People want answers to questions about how a change will affect them, and how *his* or *her* job will change.

In one workshop on agile methods, it dawned on a vice president that transitioning to agile development did not just involve developers and testers. He had to change the way he did his job, too. As this sunk in, his demeanor changed, and his participation in the workshop trailed off.

During a break, I talked to him. “Am I even going to have a job once our teams are using agile methods?” he asked.

Until people know what part they will play, and how the change will impact them directly, people withdraw into worry. Their energy is not available to work on change or on the business of the organization.

Someone on the executive level can only answer questions like this in generalities; people will look to their supervisors to gain information. The more preparation and information direct supervisors have, the better equipped they will be to answer questions.

And, it is impossible to have all the answers. Draw the picture of what you do know and the boundaries of what is unknown.

Acknowledge the Unknowns

The maxim, “I’ll communicate something when I know something,” does not work in change situations. In times of change, people fill in the blanks with their worst fears. Every bit of factual information helps.

The statement, “I don’t know,” is more helpful than no communication at all. When you do not know an answer, tell people when you will report on progress finding answers.

Most people do not expect their managers to be perfect and all-knowing. They will accept when you are not able to find answers. Be sure, though, not to let questions fall into a black hole. Reporting that you have no new information is better than silence.

Surface Rumors and Fill in the Blanks

At Q-Factor, a software company, I observed a large staff meeting where a project team was discussing an upcoming management transition. One fellow leaned over to the person next to him and joked that the new management team was going to lock the team down for weekend overtime. By the next day, the rumor had spread to the entire team. People latched onto the original joking statement as fact. Team members were incensed. Already distracted by news of the change, their productivity plummeted. The team spent the day grumbling and planning their (angry) response to the anticipated demand for overtime.

Rumors thrive on lack of credible information. One simple thing managers can do is regularly ask, “What’s the scuttlebutt? What are the latest rumors and gossip?” Bringing rumors out into the open deprives them of their power and provides a chance to replace rumors with solid facts, or at least informed denials.

While it is important to quash rumors, they can also be a source of information. Rumors also provide a clue about what people are worried about, and where they are having trouble finding information.

Look for patterns and fill in with factual information and frank discussion of unknowns.

Practice What You Preach

When management actions do not match the changes they are asking others to make, people grow cynical. One director extolled the virtues of self-organizing teams to the technical staff, but continued to dictate the details of team membership and assignments. He even stopped by developers’ desks to give them advice on how to write code. He talked the talk but his actions showed he did not walk the walk of self-organization.

Another executive introduced a major cost-cutting initiative to his organization. He directed middle managers to cut training budgets and cancel orders for replacement equipment. Most managers understood the reasons for reducing costs, but felt resentful when they saw the executive redecorating his office. “Why should we scrimp while he’s looking at carpet samples and fabric swatches for his new digs?” one asked. “He’s making it harder for me to get work done and to retain staff.”

Successful change requires changes from everyone, not just the lower levels of the organization. Wise managers do not ask other people to make changes they are not willing to make themselves.

Sometimes it only looks like there is a contradiction between what the executives say and what the executives do. For example, the corporate jet may look like an unnecessary expense, but careful financial analysis reveals that the jet actually saves money. Explain the apparent inconsistencies to avoid the appearance of hypocrisy and the resultant cynicism.

On a smaller scale, one manager in a change effort attended a local conference during a period of budget cutting. He was careful to explain to his peers and staff that the period for a full refund had passed by the time the cost reduction edict came down, and he felt it was wiser to attend.

Acknowledge and Build on What People Value

In periods of change, people struggle hardest to keep what they value most. People do not change based on logic; they change to keep something that is valuable to them.

Unfortunately, it is not always easy for people to articulate what they value about the way they do their work. I find that asking the question a different way helps surface the information. As people work out the details of how the new ways will work, ask, “What were the strengths of the way

we have been doing things? How do those strengths map to the new way?"

Acknowledge that the old way was not stupid or bad – it worked well at one time, but it does not fit the current context.

Reframe Resistance

When people resist, the natural tendency is to push harder, give more reasons, or even threaten. But exploring the *response* to change can be a source of important information.

According to Dale Emery [2], people's response to change involves four main factors:

- Expectations.
- How the change has been communicated.
- Relationships with the person requesting change.
- Other factors in the environment.

When faced with a change, some people are afraid they will not be able – or will not have time – to learn the new skills, methods, or procedures to be successful with the change. People who do not believe they can be successful are reluctant to try a new way.

Sometimes people are not interested in learning new skills; that is worth discovering, too.

How a person feels about his or her direct manager and *management* colors what they hear. Even if people have never spoken to the senior executive, they have a relationship with him based on their good or ill regard for him. Communication from a well-respected executive will garner more attention than communication from one they regard as inept or irrelevant. And people are less likely to want to go through the disruption of a change for someone with whom they have a negative relationship.

Past experience with change will affect how people greet the current change initiative. When past change efforts have failed, fizzled, or flopped, people will be understandably skeptical. When you hear someone say, "It won't work here," or "We've tried that before," it is a clue that people have been burned in the past. Arguing will not help, but curiosity may. Probe to find out what is behind the categorical statements. You may uncover useful information that will help you avoid pitfalls with the current change. Or you may be able to point out what has changed since the last time that makes the change more likely to succeed this time.

Resistance is a label that cuts off a conduit for information. Resistance is when someone is not doing what you want them to or expect them to. Listen and probe to find out why.

People Do Not Resist Change, They Resist Coercion

I used to agree with people who said, "People hate change." In reality, people choose change all the time – big changes. People choose to marry, to have children or adopt children, to divorce, to move in with mom, or to join the military. These are all life-altering changes. Yet people choose them freely. Most of the time, people buck up and muddle through when change is thrust upon them by circumstances. Most people manage to find their way through to the other side of that change event. Clearly, people do not hate all change, nor do they resist all change. I have come to realize that they do not resist change itself; they resist coercion.

People will reject even insignificant changes when they feel coerced. One team was willing to try agile methods. They were willing to move into a shared workspace and try pair programming. But when the facilities manager informed them they had to give up the coffee pot one of the team members had brought from home, they balked – even though the facilities manager was willing to allow an industrial coffee maker provided by the company cafeteria.

The reality is, it is impossible to make someone else change. Lay out the reasons, acknowledge the emotions, provide support, and give people a chance to choose change.

Not everyone will change at the same pace, and some people may choose not to change at all. If there is another place in the organization where they can be valuable, support them to find that place, and if there is not, support them to move on.

Empathize

Every so often, I run into a manager who is not very patient with people going through change. Stan was one such manager. "Move on or move out," he declared at a staff meeting. "We're not paying you to moan about the way things used to be." Another manager listened to his team grieve about the changes they were experiencing and stated, "I've thought about it, and there's no reason for you to feel that way."

In reality, change involves loss: loss of routines, relationships, turf, expertise, and status [3]. It is normal for people to experience intense emotions during times of change. Pretending those emotions do not exist will not make them go away; failing to acknowledge emotional responses may actually prolong and amplify them.

This does not mean managers need to play psychologist; they do need to listen,

empathize, and acknowledge that feelings are real and valid.

Real change takes time. The CIO I talked about at the beginning of this article expected to complete a major transformation in a matter of weeks. Transitions that involve significant changes – new methods or reorganizations – are measured in *months* and *years*, not days and weeks.

Expect that the world around you will shift during the transition and be prepared to adapt to new opportunities and circumstances. Be willing to refine goals and plans based on new information from both inside and outside the organization. Plan for small wins and celebrate those wins.

Start change communication with a compelling reason for the change, then communicate, communicate, communicate until the people begin to forget they ever did things a different way. ♦

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