

10 TIPS FOR LEADING CHANGE

1. Define and understand your own reaction to change in order to compare it to the reactions of others. Even the happiest of changes may cause a feeling of loss for what existed before. As a leader, perhaps you see that the change will save the company, enhance the product, diminish costs, or make the organization more competitive. But what will occur that is outside your own comfort zone? To be a leader of change, you must identify how the change will impact your own personal situation. What stresses will you experience that you will either consciously or unconsciously pass on to others? Will you also fear for the future of your job or your department? Will you survive, but see many of your colleagues go? Will you have to learn a new skill or move to a new location? Only if you take the time to specifically define your own reaction to change can you put yourself in the shoes of those you lead who will have their own reactions, fears, and behavioral fallout.

2. Involve those people who will be affected by change in both the planning and implementation process. When change is dictated, resistance is the automatic response to the stimulus. Leaders are able to gain much more cooperation when they invite others to join the plan. Include them in figuring out how to implement change, even when they are obvious in their opposition. Co-opting the opposition is the best way to get their buy-in. Leaders may even end up with some better ideas for making the change work.

3. Communicate the vision so others can understand and buy in to the change. The benefit of the end state must become the driving force to persuade employees to work through the agony of change. There must be something better waiting, and it must be visible throughout the pain. Often leaders have a vision that makes great sense. However, this bright future may not be shared beyond the inner circle. Failing to understand, employees feel uncertain as to why they must change and where they are going. Uncertainty itself can be more painful than change.

4. Share all possible information about change with the widest audience possible. When you think you have spread the word, start over. In the midst of change, the best advice is, "Communicate, communicate, communicate." Unless information is proprietary or may be helpful to the competition and harmful to the organization's success, it should be shared widely. If employees understand why actions are taken, what is expected, and how the change will lead through the steps toward the vision, they are much more likely to come along on the journey. When employees do not have information, they are more likely to resist or even sabotage change efforts that appear to threaten their stability and security. When Lockheed and Martin Marietta began the merger process, the leaders of both organizations traveled to every major site and talked directly to employees. The message was carried in videotapes, written documents, and personally by leaders at all levels.

5. Explain the impact of change on individuals more than on the organization. When the status of one's job is in danger, an employee really doesn't care about organizational success. At a time when GE was downsizing, employees were attending training programs at the same time that they were wondering whether their desks would still be there when they returned to their offices. Corporate leadership was talking about the need to slim down for future financial success, but employees were used to a culture in which they were GE employees for life.

Productivity was significantly degraded while employees wondered about the personal impact, not the organizational impact, of the change.

6. Be honest about both the benefits and the pain of change. Leaders are honest with their people about the pain of the change. Always painting a rosy picture simply arouses suspicion, because employees are feeling the pain. A small firm that lands a huge worldwide contract will see the great benefit of increased revenue and increased profit. The change, however, will also result in increased work, increased travel, tight deadlines, and more stress for employees. The hiring of more people will change the small family atmosphere of the company. Only if the pain is faced will the benefits be enjoyed to their fullest.

7. Ask for and listen to lots of advice in change situations. When people offer their two cents' worth, leaders listen. If employees don't make suggestions, leaders solicit their thoughts. When leaders listen to those affected by change they get valuable information about what is working and what is not; about what should survive and what should change. By encouraging people to talk, leaders allow employees to air their complaints and vent their frustrations. Sometimes that is all that is needed to move folks along in the change process. At ARCO Alaska, in the midst of a large reorganization in the oil field operations, managers held frequent town meetings where advice was solicited and questions were answered without any fear of retribution to the employees. This leadership act showed the humanness of the leaders and encouraged a team atmosphere in facing the change.

8. Encourage people to talk about their feelings and what they believe they will lose as a result of the change. Often people have trouble articulating the feeling of loss in their hearts and minds. In some organizations, it might not be considered acceptable to talk about feelings. The articulation of feelings is a cathartic process. As William Bridges describes, one must end before a new beginning can commence. Leaders encourage their employees to articulate their losses so they can move on.

9. Celebrate milestones and small wins in the process. In today's organizational environment, change is a constant. Even though the vision may be communicated clearly, it is still "out there." If one waits until the vision is achieved before celebrating, then the recognition of success may always be just out of reach. Leaders celebrate small wins and steps in the right direction. This recognition shows that the change is worth the effort and motivates employees to continue striving toward the vision.

10. Grieve the losses as situations change and people are affected. Leaders are the first to show their sadness and concern for loss, allowing others to express their sorrows in order to move past them. Ignoring the bad news and sad feelings will only create an underground culture that perpetuates "the way we've always done things around here."