

Change management

A talk by Kamran Rizvi, Director, Navitus

"There is no more delicate matter to take in hand, nor more dangerous to conduct, nor more doubtful in its success, than to be a leader in the introduction of changes. For he who innovates will have for enemies all those who are well off under the old order of things, and only lukewarm supporters in those who might be better off under the new."

N. Machiavelli

"In times of change, learners inherit the Earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists."

Eric Hoffer

When embarking on any change effort, be prepared for some resistance that you will inevitably encounter. While this is true, the degree of turmoil and personal heartache can be minimized. Why invite lightning and thunder, when a light rain and cool winds is all you need to face! One of the ways by which you can reduce the drag and conserve energy in planning and executing change is to enlist supporters to the envisioned change early on.

Creating a momentum and support for change by mobilizing key stakeholders is in essence very much like lobbying. This mostly happens behind the scenes, through phone conversations, one-on-one interactions and small group discussions over coffee, in informal settings. The effort is designed to get the main players on the same page about your planned change initiative. By consulting with them you gain their buy-in. Once you have sufficient advocates around you, you can move forward with greater confidence.

Having the blessings of your key stakeholders of the business will ensure swift achievement of desired goals. Building such an alliance is perhaps one of your most important challenges. Managing and executing change demands a high order of interpersonal and influencing skills and political savvy; not only in the leader, but also in all the supporters he/she enlists.

You need to mobilize just the right number of people. The question remains exactly who are these people going to be and what would be the right number from whom help is required by you?

Your intuitive acuity will play a big part in selecting your allies. A sound understanding of the political dynamics at play will further help you in making timely interventions with the right people, at the right time and in the right way. To this end, having the balance of power in your favor through allies who are for the change, helps. You will be able to successfully pre-empt and mitigate any resistance you are inevitably going to face in the process.

Therefore, induct people in your alliance who enjoy considerable credibility and exert influence within and outside your organization – these are people who have a known following. Look for such people within your company (internal stakeholders), and outside (external stakeholders), particularly in areas that will be affected by the planned change. They could include key decision-makers, functional heads, workers representatives, community leaders, grass-roots activists, government officials, bankers, customers, suppliers, and contractors etc. Also ensure that no one that needs to be included is left out.

The next question is how many of such supporters should you assemble? Apply the Pareto Principle (The 80:20). Select the few who influence the many. Make sure you create a sound relationship with each member of your alliance by becoming fully acquainted with their specific fears and aspirations. Take these into account as you unfold the change program with their help and involvement (direct or indirect) at every stage.

Having the right number of people by your side, supporting you in the change effort, will ensure efficiency and effectiveness in the entire process. Of course, it will not be smooth-sailing all the way. There are bound to be resistors, who will need to be dealt with patiently (your EQ) and intelligently (your IQ).

For managing change effectively, you will need to constantly nurture your individual relationships in this informal network (coalition of key stakeholders) by including them in all relevant communication channels. In a sense, you will be orchestrating a change strategy.

As communication is a two-way process, decide what information about the change program you will share with them and what they need to do with this information to influence others to support the change; and agree with your allies the type, form and frequency of feedback you will be need from them.

All this simply means that you are, in a way, delegating some tasks to your allies. As such, individual roles, responsibilities and expectations in the change process must be clearly understood and agreed by all concerned.

But the process of managing your coalition must be kept pretty informal. For example, instead of holding formal meetings in the boardroom, it would be better for you to meet casually with your allies regularly, say over dinner or a game of

golf, to review progress and gain new insights on what people are feeling and perceiving about the changes underway.

Since your allies are already in the 'system' and loosely connected, they will have their fingers on the pulse of the organization, as they go about their daily business.

Just by them informally observing behavior of people in the corridors and with each other will provide valuable clues on the how receptive the climate for change really is, thus helping you adapt your strategy as the process unfolds. Listening to the grapevine is yet another source of practical insights. This requires a high degree of receptivity and alertness to verbal and visual cues, which are normally missed out.

By having a better sense of the real feelings and perceptions of people on the ground, navigating your way forward will be easier.

Mobilizing people for change can also mean dealing with those who are hindering the change process. Rather than taking on all those who resist the planned initiatives, it is better to identify a few critical influencer/s amongst the resisters, and make time to communicate with them. Listening to their concerns sincerely and with an open mind will be necessary. You may, at times, have to facilitate a shift in their thinking by offering a face-saving device, so that any climb-down by them is not perceived by his/her constituents as a defeat. Instead the compromise or understanding reached should be viewed as a win for all.

People have pride, and this must be recognized. When people play games with each other, one always loses. Managing change is not a game, but a business, which is driven by negotiations and dialogues and where fairness in the process to achieve outcomes must be visible to all concerned.

Face-to-face interactions are still seen as the best way to resolve conflicts. Such an approach, often, if not always, builds trust and in the end serves to neutralize resistance, or even gets commitment to change.

For managing change effectively, certain conditions need to be met. Make sure:

1. There is a general dissatisfaction amongst all employees with status quo and the case for change is sufficiently strong and clearly understood by all constituents.
2. A vision for change is clearly known and appealing to all concerned, and
3. A transparent, simple and comprehensive process is in place to manage the change

If people are not unhappy with the current state and see no clear rationale for change, they will not support it wholeheartedly; If there is sufficient dissatisfaction and the process to manage the change is in place, but vision and direction are missing, then confusion and anxiety will ensue; If conditions 1) and 2) above are met, but condition 3) is missing, expect plenty of frustration and resistance!

What helps in leading and managing change is mobilizing people for change and then having processes in place that include: frequent vertical and horizontal; 2-way communications and feedback – open and timely; cross-functional participation; town hall meetings; e-conferences on change issues; benchmarking studies; balanced score cards; tracking and monitoring; and appropriate reward and recognition mechanisms to celebrate individual and team successes as each milestone is achieved along the way.

Change need not be a dramatic struggle after all!
