Dealing with resistance to change

In the first of two articles on change, Valerie Nichols explains how HR practitioners can support managers in helping their teams overcome the fear of change.
Dealing with resistance to change

Here’s a key challenge for HR. Imagine a manager in your organisation has had their budget for next year cut significantly and they’ve spent a considerable amount of time and effort restructuring their department and the work flow to ensure that none of their employees have to be let go. They’re very proud of the way they’ve met their organisational demands while protecting their team. But they are then shocked when employee reactions to their changes are extremely negative. What on earth happened?

Welcome to the reality of employee responses to change. Usually, the most common response begins with resistance, which often has a basis in fear. The fear can be related to perceptions or uncertainties about adverse impacts on the employee’s work (“Do I have to learn something new and, if so, what if I can’t?”; “Will I have to stop doing something I enjoy — or at least am comfortable doing?”). It might be about the employee’s employment status (“Will I be laid off?”; “Will I be placed in a position that’s less important?”). It might be related to relationships with others at work (“I really like working with Bill and Heather — am I going to be reassigned to another branch?”). It might simply be rooted in not knowing the answers to these questions.

It’s important to recognise that whether the fear is reality-based or not is of little importance. All that matters is that the employee is experiencing the fear. Morale, motivation and productivity can be seriously impaired if these fears are not addressed and mitigated. The good news is that HR teams can work with managers to help employees move in the desired direction.

First, managers need to understand that the goal is NOT to eradicate resistance. Some resistance is desirable, if change is to be effective. Organisations need employees who will question the assumptions on which the change is based, and who will serve as thinking partners to help refine and improve the plans. Do not confuse employees who raise these challenges with those who show the unhealthy kind of resistance, which may take the form of sabotage, malicious compliance, or simple obstructionism.

Next, since every change, every workplace and every employee is different, managers must recognise that there is no ‘one size fits all’ solution. Ask them:

- Are people aware of all of the reasons why you are making this change (and do they agree)? Any change should be implemented in consultation with employees, rather than simply being imposed on them. They’re the ones who are going to have to function in the new world, so they should contribute to the vision and take ownership of the outcome.

- Does your team believe that this is a ‘flavour of the month’ change? Do you have the backing of upper management and the support of your stakeholders? Have similar changes been announced, possibly even implemented, but then nothing different has actually happened? The response to this question may take you back to the ‘why’ of the change. What is it that creates an imperative for change? If the manager can’t articulate that imperative, they need to step back and think things through again.

- Does each member of your team believe that he or she has the skills required by the change? Examine whether training is required and ensure that it’s available. Keep in mind that a high performing employee who is uncertain of his or her ability to do something new at the same level of proficiency as their current work may actually find it more acceptable to fail by not trying, than to try and be seen to fail. Training can also help you standardise processes and terminology. Work with the manager to assess competencies and fit these to the needs.

- Does your team see that there’s something in the change that will work to their advantage (WIIFM — what’s in it for me) or will this just mean more work for them? Make sure that they not only see a reward at the end of the change, but that they understand that you’re willing to adjust productivity expectations, if that’s appropriate, to facilitate their engagement.

Finally, keep in mind that not all employees have the same comfort level with change. In a follow-up article, we’ll look at how HR can help individuals to cope with change. After all, this is a partnership — you’re all working toward a common goal.
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