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As organizations go through change, the simple view is that we start with our existing activities, behaviors and beliefs; define a new set of activities, behaviors and beliefs; and then replace the old with the new.

While it sounds straightforward, this transition is anything but linear.

In working with organizations going through significant change, the most successful ones acknowledge, appreciate and plan for the emotional side of it. These organizations accept the fact that change puts people under stress, creates confusion and fear and can bring out overt defensive behaviors that can be very stressful for the entire organization.

Four major stages

When facing change, there are four major stages wherein emotions are more prominent than logic. Enlightened leaders know that at these stages, more time will need to be spent communicating information, checking for understanding, honestly listening and encouraging/coaching.

#1. Communicate a compelling reason for the change. No matter how large or small the change is, the people affected by it want to know why we are doing it. The first step in moving forward begins with letting go of the old way— *and this is difficult*. Providing them with a clear reason for making the change makes the letting-go process easier.

#2. Create a shared vision of the future. The future is very personal, and for people to support a move, it is important for them to see how they fit into the future. Many leaders place too much faith in the future vision being self-evident and fail to turn their personal vision into a shared vision. Helping people turn THE future into THEIR future makes the transition much more appealing.

#3. Create a plan of action. This is the opportunity to accomplish two things. The first is obvious: taking the sequential steps to implement the change so people can see what is coming. The second is less obvious, but more critical— *involving the people who will have to execute the new processes in the planning and design stages*. This is a common mistake made by new leaders who bring approaches, methodologies and systems from their "old" jobs (i.e., different company, different location, different department) and, in the name of efficiency, skip the socialization step and move straight to implementation. Few things rally the emotional pushback of an organization more than the phrase "At my old company…"

#4. Reinforce the new behavior. The fourth emotional stage is where leaders tend to prematurely "declare victory" and move on. This is when the change is complete— *whether it is "go-live" with the software, the redesigned processes have been implemented or the reorganization is executed*. Everyone has been trained and the "change" is complete, but the transition is far from over. People may understand the new processes and even be using them, but they will still refer to the old ways— *especially when the new way becomes frustrating*. Ensuring that an effective help-chain exists to quickly resolve problems and a focus on what is going right provides the emotional support needed.

The value of adaptability

To paraphrase Charles Darwin, "It is not the strongest that survives, nor is it the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change." Organizational change is a complex endeavor and is much easier to do wrong than right. Planning for the emotional side of change is crucial to helping people make the transition from the old behaviors to new ones. These four steps are easy to understand and, although significant work is required to accomplish each of them effectively, they can form the foundation for successful organizational change. MT

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