High-Involvement Change Leadership

Building commitment to change • BY KEN BLANCHARD

It's an understatement to say that organizational change creates stress for everyone involved — we've all heard the dismal statistic about how 70 percent of change initiatives fail. So how do you take the reality of change and make it more likely to be successful — *and* bearable?

It helps to think about it from the perspective of people who work in your organization. Having a high-involvement leadership strategy is the best way to build people's commitment to change.

Many change efforts derail when top executives believe announcing the change is the same as implementing it. People hearing such an announcement can immediately feel resistance — not so much to the change itself but to the feeling of being controlled. They need their concerns and questions to be addressed.

We have found that when learning about an organizational change, people usually experience five predictable, sequential stages of concern.

Stage 1: information concerns. First, people want to understand exactly what is being proposed. They don't want to be *sold* on the upcoming change; they want to be *told* about it. Common questions include, "What is the change? What do we hope to accomplish? Why do we need to do this now? What's wrong with the way things are?"

People need to know what the change is about, why it's important, what success looks like and whether it will be worth the effort. Allow them to voice their concerns and have their questions answered. Why? Because in the absence of factual communication, people often create their own reality — and speculation becomes fact.

Stage 2: personal concerns. Once they have been given basic information about the change, people tend to turn inward and think about personal concerns. They may be focused on what they will lose, not what they will gain. They may be thinking, "How will I be affected by this change? Will I benefit from it? Will I be able to learn what I need to know?"

People with personal concerns need to be assured they will have a voice in planning and decision-making. Listen to their personal concerns in a way that lets them know they have been heard. Help them feel inspired and excited about the future and their role in the change.

Stage 3: implementation concerns. At this stage, people begin to think about the process of implementing the change. They are wondering, "How are we going to do this? Is the plan realistic? How important is this change compared with other priorities? How will we measure success?"

People with implementation concerns are focused on details. They need to know that challenges and obstacles will be addressed and that they will have the time, support and resources they need to do their part. Help them develop confidence in the organization's ability — and their own — to successfully implement the change.

Stage 4: impact concerns. When the change goes live and anxiety has somewhat calmed, impact concerns arise. Folks want to know, "Is the change working for the organization? For my team? For me? Is the effort worth it? How do we get undecided people on board?"

People with impact concerns need to see proof that the change is reducing the gap between what is and what could be. They also need to hear and learn from colleagues who are already having success with the change. At this stage, people sell themselves on the value of the change and can be a positive influence on those who are still undecided.

Stage 5: refinement concerns. After most people are on board and experiencing success with the change, fine-tuning gets underway. People begin to ask, "How can we do this better or faster? What have we learned? Do you trust us to lead this change going forward?"

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People with refinement concerns want to be entrusted with the process. They need to believe their involvement in continuous improvement of the change is valued and that they can be counted on to manage the change in the future. In fact, people at this stage are often already formulating the next change.

The more you include people in looking at options and alternative ideas, the easier it will be to build the business case for the next round of change. Resolving concerns as change evolves builds trust, surfaces challenges, gives people opportunities to influence the process and allows them to refocus energies on the change.

When leading through change, what you are changing is important — but involving people in the change can be the difference between failure and success. CLO

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