Riding the Tides of Change:
Engaging Employees in Charting a New Course

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

One of the toughest things organizations have faced over the last 3-4 years is the roller coaster of change occurring day in and day out. This is not the historical “change” that we’ve become accustomed to – changing to meet the needs of the customer, adapting to faster-than-the-speed-of-light technology changes, redesigning work systems to capitalize on efficiencies. This is much tougher. This is about keeping companies afloat and viable when everything around us is not just uncertain but downright unpredictable. This is about dealing with daily fluctuations in stock markets, depressed consumer demand, employees that quite frankly, have had enough of the bad news. Organizations and the employees within them (from leadership to the ranks) have had to find ways to do more with less for quite a while now. At the end of the day, everyone is walking around with a whole lot of question marks in their heads. When will this be over? When will I get a raise? When can we go back to the way things were?

The first thing we all need to do is come to terms with the reality that things are not going back to the way they were. We are in a different economy now. Organizations need to reframe how they will go about their business (from nuts and bolts, to leadership talent) in order to not just keep afloat, but be successful in this new world.

Here are common distress complaints we hear:

• Change comes so fast we don’t make it through one before we have to make a different change
• Decisions are made in a snap, no time to be strategic, make a plan, or execute them well
• I don’t hear anything till I’m already supposed to be using a new system/process and then I’m already failing

It’s no new adage that out of every crisis comes some good. There is almost always a silver lining that can be found to any challenging situation. This is the case with our current workplace. Employees are hungry for leadership. They want to see the roadmap and have some “answers” to their questions. They want to be inspired to make things work and a path laid out to a brighter future. This is an opportunity to chart a new course, inspire followership, and as they say, get the train moving.

“A smooth sea never made a skilled sailor.”

English Proverb
Steps to engage the workforce in making change for the better

1. First, take a step back
Take a look at where you were three years ago. What is different now? What changes have been made that now define the organization?
   - Layoffs
   - Diminished revenues or profits
   - New customer base
   - New product line
Meet with employees. Get an idea of what their challenges are. Where do things seem to be stuck? How can things be better? How can customer needs be better met?

   "Take advantage of the ambiguity in the world. Look at something and think about what else it might be."
   
   Roger von Oech

2. Make a Plan, be clear on direction
Where is the organization going? What needs to change to get there?
It is important to be honest with employees. Let them in on as much information as possible about the organization’s financial status, the strengths, and the areas of opportunity. Then, be clear on the end goal. What targets need to be hit in order to meet the end goal? Create a picture and a compelling reason to support the needs of the organization. This is an important time to create trust with employees – so they can support the organization even during the slim times we are finding ourselves in right now. If they don’t have a compelling reason to commit to the organization, their time is spent looking for a new job, undermining changes, standing in the way of where you are trying to go.

3. Involve your people
This is a great time to re-engage and find ways to reinvigorate the workplace. So many organizations, specifically in the public sector, education sector, non-profit and retail arenas are not able to increase any benefits for their employees. While we know that money isn’t the best motivator, we also know there are plenty of de-motivators that are present in the workplace. One way to clear out the de-motivators is to give employees a feeling of control of their work situation. While they may not have much say about the economy, the state of the organization, or even their paycheck, they most certainly can contribute to how work gets done, efficiencies and productivity, and ultimately, the success of the organization. Enlist them in creating the plans for how to change the organization to get to the “future state.”

   "We have to get everybody in the organization involved. If we do that, the best ideas rise to the top."
   
   Jack Welch
4. **Plan your communications**
Once a clear and compelling direction has been determined and employees have participated in charting out the plans to get there, take the time to plan out who, what, how and when communication will occur. The follow-through is often where any change implementation efforts are left standing still. It’s important to chart plans for feedback, plans for committee inputs, plans for ongoing success stories.

**What not to do:**
It’s not a good idea to make quick, snap decisions without spending the time to strategically think through them. Knee jerk reactions become commonplace when trying to quickly make changes in order to deal with rapidly changing situations. Those who take the time to become more clear about long term impacts of proposed changes are much more likely to make decisions that have positive lasting impacts. And when the workforce is included in how those decisions are made, the impact will be even greater.

We see this daily in the organizations we serve. Those who take more time to make decisions and are more planful about moving forward with any changes are more successful over the long term. While it’s often thought that taking too much time to make a change can result in missed opportunities, the opposite is usually the case – opportunities abound when more people and perspectives have been considered and included in charting the course.

“**Change is inevitable. Progress is optional.”**
*Unknown*

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