

Leading a Team Through Workplace Change

Being a manager can be a tough job, especially when an organization is going through significant change. Workplace change can affect employee morale and work performance. Following are tips on how to lead with a steady hand during times of change.

How change makes us feel

While some people embrace change and the challenges and opportunities it brings, others feel worried or stressed when the organization they're working for is expanding, merging, or changing.

Here is what experts know about workplace change:

Even many positive and resilient people find workplace change challenging. We tend to find comfort in the familiar—in co-workers and supervisors we know, in work routines we've mastered. When we're faced with change and need to adjust to a new manager or work routines or when we simply don't yet know how a change will affect us personally, it's natural to worry.

All change involves loss and feelings of sadness. If you and your employees feel sad and distracted because valued colleagues are gone following a reorganization, it's important to take the time to acknowledge people's feelings.

Change can be physically, mentally, and emotionally stressful, perhaps involving job insecurity or the challenge of learning new routines. While some people thrive on change and new challenges, most people worry. Over time, though, they adapt and come to see the benefits of change. As a rule, the bigger the change, the more stress people may experience, but big for one person may not be so big for another. Introducing major new information systems, for example, may be exciting to people who love technology, but daunting to others. Understand and respect each individual's response, including your own.

Often, a rapidly changing workplace results in stress and overload. Staffing and organizational changes, as well as cost-cutting measures, may have affected everyone's workload. Many employees today are doing more with less. Feeling overworked may result in more mistakes at work, higher levels of stress and depression, and feelings of resentment toward one's employer and co-workers.

Some people find it extremely scary and overwhelming to cope with change. They may have negative reactions to the news. Or they may think, "It isn't fair," "I'll never be able to handle this," or "I'm too old to learn a new way of doing things."

Talking often helps. Turning feelings into words and talking about the changes people are undergoing can help them with the transition and give them a better perspective on events. Your organization's assistance program (or EAP) can assist you and your employees with resources and support.

Stages of change

Members of your team may need your support and patience during a period of uncertainty. It might help you to be aware of a range of reactions that people typically go through when dealing with important work or life changes.

Adapted from the widely accepted “5 Stages of Grief” by Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, the reactions people may experience throughout a significant period of change can include:

Denial. Employees in denial refuse to recognize that a change has occurred and continue to behave as if it hasn't.

Resistance. Employees recognize that the change is real and react with subtle or overt resistance, and at times with hostility and anger.

Depression. Employees feel a sense of sadness and loss as they struggle to let go of familiar ways.

Exploration. Resistance gives way to a tentative acceptance. Employees regain some perspective and begin to look with interest at the change and explore how they will work in the changed environment.

Commitment. Employees accept the change and commit themselves to it. Expect a lot of individual variation in adapting to change. As an overall guide, remember that your job as a manager is to help your group through the process of change and to keep the group motivated and working toward the adjustments that need to be made.

Communicating during change

Because you may not know all the answers, you may be tempted to limit communication to your team or to wait until the situation becomes clear. Resist that temptation. Push yourself to be an active communicator and to be more available than usual.

Tell employees everything you do know and be honest in explaining what you don't. When people hear no news, they tend to assume the worst. Don't wait until you know everything. Mainly, be sure that people have heard the rationale for the changes and what benefits the organization expects to see as a result. If you are uncertain about the rationale, ask your manager to clarify it. Reassure your employees that you will always provide them with updates as soon as they are available.

Sell the change. As a manager, you have a responsibility to offer leadership and a positive viewpoint, to remind your employees of the ultimate goals of the change, and to point out opportunities they may not see. Your organization may be facing external competitive price challenges, or even what Clayton Christensen of Harvard Business School describes as “disruptive innovations.”

Don't shy away from sharing tough news or worrisome developments. It's always better for employees to hear the news from you rather than through the grapevine. Face-to-face (or video conferencing) conversation is far more effective than voicemail or email messages. Employees need a chance to ask questions and to process new information by talking.

Build trust. Loss of trust can be a casualty of organizational change. By acknowledging that uncertainty is difficult and by encouraging your team members to talk about their own concerns, you can help maintain their trust. You might say, "It's tough to have so much up in the air, but let me tell you how I think we can get through all this." Encourage team members to support each other through the ups and downs of the change process and to look for the positive.

Don't make promises you aren't sure you can keep. To maintain trust, don't make statements that you cannot guarantee. For example, avoid promising that no one will lose their job unless you know with certainty that this is true. One broken promise—even a small one—can seriously damage trust and credibility.

Encourage employees to come to you with their questions and also with any rumors they may have heard. Listen carefully, respond honestly, and express a sincere interest in how employees are handling the change.

Set aside time for talking or complaining. If people are especially frustrated or worried, set aside a short time each day or week for them to vent. Venting can provide relief and allow employees to move forward with their work.

Include employees in the process of figuring out what the changes mean for the group. The process of change may be ongoing. Being involved in making and executing plans can bring employees knowledge and a sense of personal control that can help them move forward with more confidence.

Provide clear direction. In times of change people who are upset and anxious may not work as independently as they normally would and may need stronger direction from managers. If goals and work expectations are changing, make that clear. See that employees have the right tools and resources to get the new work done.

Help employees set priorities. During times of change, priorities may shift. Help employees decide which tasks they need to do now, and which ones can wait.

Work with your team to keep customers in the loop. You might want to give employees talking points to refer to when speaking with customers or clients about the transition.

Make an effort to give extra encouragement and appreciation. Thank people promptly for work that is well done. Let people know you understand they're under extra pressure and that you notice and appreciate their efforts. Reach out, too, to people in other groups whose good work supports your group's efforts.

Encourage employees to come to you for ongoing support. Even the most capable employees need additional training and help to meet new job demands and learn new systems and procedures. As a leader, you have a responsibility to offer leadership and positive energy, to

remind your people of the ultimate goals of the change, and to point out opportunities they may not see.

Building resilience and encouraging growth through change

Change can be challenging—just like everything else in life that makes you grow. Use change to your advantage and help employees do the same.

Bring a positive mood and mindset to work. Studies show that moods can have a strong effect on performance. Research has also shown that moods are contagious—people can “catch” moods from each other. One upbeat, enthusiastic person can help energize the whole group. Be that person for your team.

Limit negative thoughts on your team. Encourage employees to focus on questions like, “What would make things better? What can I do today to improve my outlook? What’s my first step?”

Help people stay focused. Encourage employees to focus on the tasks at hand, on the things they can control. The simple act of getting things done will make people feel less overwhelmed.

Encourage employees to see the opportunities. Instead of focusing on what they feel they may be losing, remind employees what they may gain because of the change. For example, if job responsibilities are changing, this may be the ideal opportunity for people to learn new skills or build new work relationships.

Build employee confidence. Help employees reflect on how they successfully handled other changes and challenges.

Build a continuous learning environment in your work area. Prepare employees and build their confidence for current and future changes. Use classes as well as on-site and offsite training programs. Post or send news items they should see. If helpful, encourage them to use social media to keep up with what their peers at other organizations are doing. Assign those who learn some things quickly to help co-workers who need assistance. And when it comes to learning, don’t neglect yourself. The best leaders today are themselves continuous learners.

Encourage employees to take advantage of the programs and benefits your company offers to help reduce stress. And take advantage of them for yourself as well.

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