



Why Leading Change Matters More Than Ever

Four ideas for bringing employees on board

By Randy G. Pennington

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Think of all the articles, books, seminars and speeches you've read, attended or heard on the subject of change. Think of all the experience you've had in your own life, or in your organization, with change.

Assuming most of us have had a respectable amount of experience with change, wouldn't you think we'd all be better at by now?

Instead, we continually struggle—even though relentless competition, advancing technology and increasing demands to remain relevant have made the ability to change a matter of survival for virtually every industry and profession.

The biggest barrier to change in organizations is this: Change tends to be over-managed and under-led.

As a leader, you must make change work in a world that is rapidly evolving. And you can't accomplish that unless you engage people. Here are four ideas that may help:

Change the way you think and talk about change. For most, change is a reactive strategy that takes place when something isn't working as well as we desire. But there's a more proactive approach to change. Change—when it's done well—gives you a competitive advantage by allowing you to become more nimble and relevant in the marketplace.

Companies that can quickly identify and anticipate trends and transformations in their industries, then adapt to them, tend to be winners in a world where the competitive landscape can change overnight. Leaders with the ability to build an agile team that's focused on continually improving will see their opportunities expand.

Action idea: Examine the language you use to describe and promote change. Are new ideas encouraged or ridiculed? Are changes only discussed from the perspective of a crisis to be averted, or do you encourage employees to look for changes that can advance your mission, vision and values? Our language reflects our thinking, and when it comes to leading change, our thinking drives our action.

Connect with people where they are. A report written by Scott Keller and Carolyn Aiken at McKinsey & Company suggested that 80 percent of what leaders care about and talk about when trying to enlist support for change does not matter to 80 percent of the workforce. If buy-in is critical for your success, you must connect with people where they are.

Action idea: People support what they help create. Involve others in crafting and implementing whatever change or solution you're considering. Most importantly, remember that people support change for their reasons, not yours. Do the hard work of communicating the need and opportunity for change based on what is important to those from whom you need support. Compliance can be mandated, but commitment is volunteered.

Use resistance as your friend. Our normal reaction to resistance from employees is emotional: We tend to reason with the resisters, and if that doesn't work, we resort to bargaining, manipulation, using power to mandate compliance, or ignoring the people and the problem. Employees push us, and we want to push back.

Action idea: Make resistance your friend. Ask questions and listen. Be patient and realize that the concerns raised by a few are probably shared by others. Doing so allows you to identify potential barriers to making change work and increases your odds of building support.

Go first. All change creates moments of instability and anxiety. Substantial change can embolden you or make you feel timid. Timid companies don't anticipate the future. Timid people don't invest in themselves or take the actions that enable them to quickly adapt.

Action idea: Those you seek to influence typically want you to be bold and to take the lead. If you focus on how the coming change will add value, then anxiety and fear tend to dissipate.

Randy G. Pennington is the author of Make Change Work: Staying Nimble, Relevant, and Engaged in a World of Constant Change (Wiley, 2013).

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