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5 Dangers of Change and How to Avoid Them Lawrence Polsky

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The research is clear. Fifty to 70 percent of your change efforts will fail: whether it is a layoff, reorganization, merger/acquisition, process improvement, new software implementation or even the appointing of new leaders. Without the strong leadership, your change efforts will fail to meet your desired results.

Here's why:

1. Lack of Urgency

If I asked you to get up at 2 a.m., wake your family, go outside immediately and cross the street, would you? I have asked this question to leaders around the world and 99 percent say no. Why? It is really inconvenient and

they get nothing out of it. That is how employees feel about the changes you are implementing. And that is the reason nothing happens. When I ask the same leaders "Would you do it if your house was on fire?" they all say yes!

Tip: You need to create a reason for change that is so employees will feel as if they don't do it, they will lose all that matters. Here are the most common reasons I have heard leaders express.

- Provide for my family
- Beat the competition
- Be a role model
- Be a better person/professional
- Learn new skills
- Increase income in short term/long term
- Get exposure to new things
- Keep my job
- Prepare for my next job

2. Low Trust

Use the analogy of the picture above: You are driving a busload of employees to an important customer meeting. The road is washed out and you face a rushing river gorge. The only way to the meeting is by leading them across. If your leadership has a track record of unclear direction, not listening and punishing risk taking, you are doomed. No one will follow.

Tip: We have found these eight simple methods work to build trust during the ambiguity if change:

- Provide clear direction
- Take time to ask, "how is it going?"
- Thank people for their hard work and results
- Show trust by delegating important tasks
- Provide and point out opportunities to learn
- Make quick decisions: don't be the roadblock to progress
- Include and Involving people that are impacted by decisions
- Remember to make time for fun

3. Poor Communication

We have consulted companies ranging from four to over 10,000 employees. There are always gaps in understanding during change. People are notorious for making up stories to fill the void. This is particularly a problem when people are scared. During change you need to pay special attention to communication.

Tip: Communicate 10 times more than you think you need to. Employees are overwhelmed with their work and lives. Think of your job as the advertising agency for the change effort. You need to reach the target audience. Does Proctor & Gamble run one ad for Tide when they improve the formula? No. It is in every media, all the time: print, web, TV and in the store. You must use the same holistic, comprehensive approach to get the change message through.

Warning! Many companies interpret this advice as recommending that they have a good change announcement. They spend a lot of time and money on creating a splash with the announcement. What they fail to realize is this: employees are hiding under their desk for the change to pass. You must use the same rigor while implementing the change as you do when announcing it.

Want more tips on handling change? Check these out:

- *The 5 Ways to Lead Change... And One of Them is Personal*
- *Change Doesn't Have to be Difficult... If You Know How*

- [How to Change the Thinking in Your Organization](#)

4. Change Resistance

Leaders do all of the above and still face resistance to change. This is no surprise. Change means loss. No one likes to lose something they have worked hard to know or have.

Tip: Ask employees, “What can kill this change?” Leaders that win the change battle take time to use their employee’s vast experience. Instead of trying to push your case, ask them what needs to be done to succeed. Listening to their ideas, and acting on them, will melt resistance away.

5. Conflict Avoidance

Change and conflict are synonymous. The organizations we have worked with that have failed in change are ripe with political correctness. If no one can raise his or her concerns, then the change is headed to be one of the two-thirds that fail.

Tip: Focus on the future. Employees and leaders alike raise their issues and proceed to go to battle, expressing their pain or fighting for their point. In the heat of conflict, remember that you need to explain why the issue matters to the customer, team or relationship. Explaining your goal for the future and how this issue is interfering will help calmer minds prevail as they work to solve the problem.

So don’t be a statistic of failed change. Your employees and company are counting on you. Use these approaches to ensure change success. And if you want some insurance, get a free copy of our “Change Danger Calculator” to help assess your risk of change failure. Email me lpolsky@peoplenrg.com and I will send it to you right away.

Lawrence helps executive teams, from mid-size and large multi-national firms, navigate change. He is Managing Partner of PeopleNRG, a Princeton, NJ based leadership consulting firm and has traveled the world training and advising leaders since 1999. Lawrence is co-author of Perfect Phrases for Communicating Change (McGraw-Hill), Say YES! to Change: 27 Strategies for Motivating Yourself and Your Team and the soon to be released Perfect Phrases for Conflict Resolution (McGraw-Hill).

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Michael Johnson

Assistant Professor at University of... (18 hours ago)

I'm not sure the research is clear that 50-70% of change efforts fail. I have heard numbers like that before (most commonly, 60%), but have never seen the research backing up that statistic. Do you have a source?



Managing Partner (17 hours ago)

Michael - There are number of write-ups from various consulting firms. Some to check-out on-line are: McKinsey-Irrational Side of Change Management; Larkin - Change Communication; IBM - Making Change Work. Let me know if you need more details (lpolsky@peoplenrg.com)

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