

Leading Non-Stop Change

By Nina Coil



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Three Steps to Leading in a World of Constant Change

BusinessWeek reported that the productivity of the U.S. worker was up more than forecast in the first quarter of 2010, after reaching unprecedented heights in 2009. This quarterly increase was the smallest in a year, showing companies were reaching their limits on efficiency. From my perspective as a change and transition consultant, when I read statistics like these I cringe. While it is true that companies have leveraged technology, by far the biggest reason for the increase in productivity is workers putting in longer, more intense hours to make up for lost staff and to keep their jobs.

Organizations of all kinds—private, nonprofit, educational—are implementing transformational changes to survive and thrive in today's global and uncertain economy. Large-scale strategic changes are being layered on top of the usual necessary upgrades and solutions to problems. And these changes are all impacting a workforce that is near the breaking point. This has profound implications for the success of all these change initiatives.

What can you do as a leader?

You can begin by trying to make the changes your workforce is contending with more manageable by doing all you can to rebuild trust in the organization and yourself as a leader, and by equipping people to succeed in the new environment by attending to their learning needs.

The following approaches can help:

- ◆ Make sure that all of the organizational changes are clustered, prioritized and coordinated
- ◆ Work to rebuild trust in leadership and the organization
- ◆ Actively support learning on the job

Every department in every organization has ideas on how to solve the problems they perceive. In stressful times, people are more eager to demonstrate value by improving things. This desire often translates into change initiatives. Human Resources (HR) wants to streamline performance management processes; Information Technology (IT) wants to upgrade software, the facilities department wants to move people into shared space to reduce overhead costs. These are all worthy goals but if they are all rolled out simultaneously and in a seemingly haphazard way they may distract people from the most critical initiative – the organization's change in strategic direction.

It is helpful to make sure that the C-Suite is aware of and has made conscious decisions about which changes should be implemented, in what priority order, and at what cost. Senior leadership needs to own the portfolio of changes and be attuned to their impact across the organization over time. A simple template with answers to the items below can set the stage for a clear-eyed discussion:

- ◆ Name of initiative
- ◆ Stakeholder
- ◆ Projected implementation date/timing
- ◆ Degree of pressure to act (High, Medium, Low)
- ◆ Resources required (people, equipment)
- ◆ Impact and Benefits
- ◆ Priority (High, Medium, Low)

The last column on the grid—priority—should be completed only once all of the initiatives have been described. This prioritization must be agreed to by all of the senior leaders, which requires a truly open discussion of agendas.

Difficult to do? Time-consuming? Yes, but the alternative—seemingly unconnected, random changes that are allowed to bombard people without a filter—is far more costly in the end.

This discussion can then enable the clustering and coordination of related changes. Being able to explain to people how a number of changes are related to a larger picture can ease stress. Giving people a clear view into the organization’s position in the larger world, and the problems it is facing, can open the way to a discussion of the proposed solutions.

But this must be combined with a willingness to put certain things on hold. Simply clustering the myriad of change initiatives under the “strategic direction” umbrella will not work. Make sure that there is a full list of initiatives, including some that have been explicitly delayed until the more critical ones are dealt with.

Rebuild Trust

Chances are good that the past 18 months have put people’s trust in the organization to the test. If there has been an erosion of trust, or if it was not strong to begin with, now is the time to go to work to rebuild trustworthiness. This means being open and honest in communications, transparent in decision-making processes and timelines, following through on promises, and working to re-establish the connections between people that have been strained.

Being clear about the changes that will be implemented, and why they are high priorities, is a solid first step. But your communication must not stop there. People need regular updates, milestones to reach for, and ways to chart their progress along the way. Just as a long distance driver needs to see the miles to their destination decrease over time, so people in your organization need to see, in ways that are meaningful to them, that they are making progress toward a meaningful goal. When these milestones are not reached, they need to know why, and who is working on the problems that came up. This is especially true for transformational change, which takes far more than one business cycle.

Above all, be willing to take the risk of looking actively for barriers, obstacles, and charged emotions that may indicate challenges during the process. If you can face people without

flinching as they share their concerns you will build their trust in your ability to lead them through the inherent messiness of change.

Support Learning

Once people have let go of the old ways of getting work done, assuming that trust has been enhanced, they will be eager to learn new things. If the way work is being done, or reporting relationships, or processes have been radically changed, you need to plan for and explicitly encourage experimentation. No change initiative worthy of the name can be planned to the smallest detail, no matter how well-intentioned and diligent the planners.

Rather than being defensive, or allowing planners to throw up walls to protect “their” change, proactively search for people encountering issues and ask for their help in solving them. Trying to find solutions may result in less than full success in the short run. Worthy failures are the raw ingredients of real innovation, but people will not share them if they are punished for doing so. So make sure that the experimental mindset focuses on learning as opposed to results.

Making sure that your organization is prioritizing and rolling out changes in a thoughtful way, while rebuilding trust and enabling on-the-job and formal learning will enhance your organization’s change resilience. Building these approaches into the way you approach business will support people as they move toward the “new normal” – the ambiguity and opportunities in the 21st century global workplace.

“If you tell the truth, you don’t have to remember anything.”

—Mark Twain

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