

Coping with Change

DOES YOUR COMPANY COMBAT CHANGE EFFECTIVELY? ARTICLE BY MIKE BLADON

About 2,500 years ago, a Greek philosopher named Heraclitus stated “nothing is more permanent than change” after years of study and examination. History is a record of changes through time. People today, however, think that change-related problems are unique to this era. Beneficial change is easy to take, but we have difficulty accepting changes that are annoying or inconvenient to us. There is evidence that people generally are tired of the indecision brought about by changing times. The World Future Society stated, “People no longer feel certain of anything – spouse, job, church, moral principles – because everything is changing.

For years now, management experts have been putting out the word that the only thing modern organizations can look forward to with absolute assurance is rapid and continual change (Royal Bank Letter, Jan/Feb 1988). Managers tell you that they are very aware of trends in their industry and the marketplace. They know they live in dynamic times, and feel they are coping with change very well. Too regularly, the most they are doing is just coping. Change creates problems, and managers are problem-solvers. We need to be more diligent, and not let change happen and then react. Organizations have to become committed to rejuvenation and renewal to become more energized, focused and agile, and therefore better positioned to compete in an extremely dynamic environment.

Successful transformation requires complete commitment and involvement, everyone has to “walk the talk.” It con-



sists of changing people’s behavior and mind-set as much as strategic direction.

Unfortunately, organizations are prone to hardening of the arteries. They are made up of people and people become set in their ways. Employees tend to cling to fixed rules and fixed methods, and over the years, they develop vested interests. Changes required within the organization to meet external changes threaten their security and self confidence, particularly when they are asked to learn new tasks or to take on a larger work-load. So the tendency, of course, is to hang on to the status quo.

To quote a Buddhist saying, “All suffering of mankind is produced by attachment to a previous condition of existence.” People sometimes mistakenly think there are right or wrong ways of coping and feel they should always seek a positive spin on an event or situation. We do not have to like disruption. Successful people learn to live in it. They find a way to succeed afterwards, and build humour into their lives. Someone said it is not so much that we are afraid of change or so in love with the old ways, it’s the place in

between that we fear. So, how do we cope with change?

Change occurs when something ends and something new or different begins. The period between the two points is called transition. Some of the feelings we have to come to terms with are security, competence, relationships, sense of direction, and territory. The transition involves denial, resistance, exploration, and commitment.

People still harbour the mistaken belief about the changes facing them that things will get back to normal; that they don’t have to understand it; that staying the same is an option. None of these represent reality. The most important process of change is to accept the conversion yourself. You cannot lead change if you do not accept it. So we need to clarify with our staff as to what is being abandoned and why. Deal with what is being changed to, not what is being changed from. Make sure that during the change you are visible, communicative and available.

Some strategies for helping employees renew their energy:

- Celebrate successes. If your organization has been in a state of confusion for a lengthy period, those left have no doubt gone above and beyond the call of duty time after time. Highlight their successes and let them know how well they have done so far. Create a wall of fame with stories and photographs of employees who have done something special.

- Encourage innovation. It is more important than any time during our history to look for new and different approaches to solving problems. Adaptability is the

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law which governs survival in business as in life. The organization that encourages creativity and is able to adapt to shifting conditions is the one that will win the spoils in the marketplace. Ask for their help, implement their ideas, and let them know you respect the information they share.

• Reward initiative. With fewer managers to provide direction, employees can no longer rely on someone else to tell them what they should or should not do. This is an opportunity to teach employees to take the lead now that your department is running lean. Provide them with guidelines and turn them loose. In many companies, this approach has worked very well and the former manager becomes more of a facilitator than supervisor.

• Don't punish the survivors by piling on more work or cutting benefits. Likewise, don't shoot messengers who carry bad news. Welcome truth. Search for evidence that changes aren't working rather than proof they are. Take care of the "me" issues quickly. Every employee looks at change as to how they will be affected. Self-preservation becomes a major concern. (Will I have a new boss? Will I get

to keep my job? How will my pay or benefits be affected?) People are unable to focus on their work until these issues are resolved. They tend to worry, gossip, and trade rumours.

• Provide opportunities for people to ventilate and express themselves. A coping skill is to recognize that people will tend to blame the boss, resist help, or behave in self-destructive ways. You will face all the emotions of trust, self-pity, frustration, bitterness, anger, and depression. Usually you are not the target, you just happen to be in range.

So how do we cope with change? By recognizing that change is inevitable and to some extent predictable. Alvin Toffler in his book *Future Shock* wrote, "By making an imaginative use of change to channel change, we can not only spare ourselves the trauma of future shock, we can reach out and humanize future tomorrows." In closing, a quote from *Possibilities*, the Bank of Montreal newsletter: "The 'business innovation cycle' has compressed from five years to only six months since the mid-eighties. So new products come to market faster. Old products and services become redundant faster.

Technologies are eclipsed faster. And skills must keep pace. The best adapters must now possess not only written and verbal competence, computer proficiency, and customer service know-how, but also "core" skills such as interpersonal, problem-solving, motivational, conceptual, and leadership skills – skills of resilience and character."

Will you prepare yourself for change or will you resist?!?! ♦

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