

## Tips for Making Successful Change Happen

Change is inevitable these days, and HR is often at the forefront. It isn't an easy process for employees and management—and it can be hard for HR professionals to adapt as well.

Fear of the unknown and a perceived loss of control can trigger a visceral response that makes change difficult to handle. This is why data suggest that 70% of all change initiatives fail to meet their expected outcomes, according to Tracy LaLonde, associate development administrator for the law firm of Mayer Brown Rowe & Maw (Chicago).

It's no wonder that HR professionals around the world see change management as a major concern. Forty-eight percent of respondents to a recent survey, *Global HR Challenges: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, conducted by the World Federation of Personnel Management Associations (WFPMA; [www.wfpma.com](http://www.wfpma.com)), of which SHRM is secretariat, named change management as a top challenge. The other leading challenges identified were leadership development (35%) and measuring HR effectiveness (27%).

### WHY CHANGE CAN FAIL

Speaking at an industry meeting, LaLonde identified the issues that can destroy even the best-intentioned change initiatives:

**1. Lack of top management commitment to and support for change initiatives.** In this instance, the C-suite may pay lip service only to ideas for change, or support wanes over time because senior executives become distracted by something else. *The issue:* Keeping key decision makers engaged throughout the entire process.

**2. Employees don't completely embrace the change.** If you don't inculcate into their hearts and minds that change is good, then your efforts won't transform the culture and reverberate for the long haul. *The issue:* Too much focus on the change itself and not enough time devoted to "convert" those affected by the change to the new approach.

**3. Individuals don't receive enough feedback, coaching, or reinforcement.** Even changes that seem rational and logical can instill fear. *The issue:* People are presented with a change and expected to "suck it up." This is yet another area where insufficient communication can wreak havoc with management plans.

## GETTING READY FOR CHANGE

When change is imminent, LaLonde recommends the model created by Kurt Lewin, a German psychologist and one of the pioneers of social psychology. Under Lewin's model, she explains, you "unfreeze what was there before by giving folks a reason to change their beliefs or buy into your beliefs." You must:

1. Mitigate the reasons against change.
2. Move people into the new initiative.
3. "Refreeze" those affected by the change by providing the systems, supports, rationale, incentives, and rewards to keep them where they have been moved.

It's a simple model that goes a long way toward helping you think about the change process, LaLonde adds.

Another model, presented by John Kotter, a Harvard leadership professor and author of *Leading Change* (Harvard Business School Press, 1996), asserts that when hoping to generate support for change, it's necessary to think about it in two ways: individual support and management support.

A comprehensive approach requires that you:

- **Secure management support.** Focus on high-ranking management and middle management. While these leaders can hand down the edict for change, middle management makes the change happen, LaLonde explained. *Here are three suggestions to consider:*

1. Create an advisory board to champion your efforts and position power. In the best-case scenario, she says, you can get a member of top management to sit on your committee along with the middle managers who will be responsible for implementing the change.

2. Aim to include your biggest naysayer on the board, LaLonde recommends, adding that the goal is to field his or her objections in order to win over everyone else.

3. Include those who have the greatest level of expertise in your company, people with an understanding of the systems involved, someone admired for their strong credibility in the company, and other influential leaders who are willing to be involved for the duration.

• **Develop a vision and strategy.** A vision outlines why it's necessary to strive and create your picture of the future. It's the "what" part of the equation.  
*Consider:* What makes your future picture so good?

A vision also serves three important purposes:

1. It shows where you're going and simplifies decision making.
2. It motivates people, even if the steps are painful.
3. It helps coordinate the actions of people in a fast and efficient manner.

In addition, the vision needs to convey a picture and seem reasonable, feasible, realistic, and attainable. A vision of "We want to make more money," for instance, has no direction, whereas "We want to be on the top 10 list of highest revenue companies in our industry" is focused in that it gives people something to work toward. Strategy, on the other hand, relates to the "how," and a number of strategies can support your vision.

According to LaLonde, "Top management leadership for your advisory board often creates the vision and strategies, and middle management picks up with the plans and does the activities."

• **Communicate and keep your vision simple.** This means you should be able to convey the vision in five minutes or less by using metaphors, analogies, and other descriptive examples (e.g., "We want our company to be the hare, instead of the tortoise"). Use multiple forums as well, like e-mail, meetings, flyers, small tokens of appreciation, and any other approach that can help you create buzz and easily reiterate your message.

• **Seek and offer leadership by example** (for more on this point, see the accompanying sidebar), and know that top management acceptance is critical, LaLonde says. If your change imposes hard rules, be sure the managers are willing to make sacrifices as well.

*The point:* Remove all impressions that your changes apply to everyone except your company's upper level.

- **Provide ample opportunities for those who are managing the change to meet and talk with the rank-and-file.**

The pointers below should help you think about how to communicate with individuals on a variety of levels. LaLonde's suggestions:

- **Provide forums for discussion.** Some people will want information in writing so they can think through your proposed changes, while others prefer a step-by-step outline of what will happen now and in the future. Employees will also appreciate understanding the reasons "why."

Consider the individual's motivation, too, by providing insight on personal recognition. And offer milestones so people know when they're advancing.

*The point:* Think about your communication efforts and give enough chances for people to react to your change in a variety of ways.

- **Empower people** so they're able, willing, and ready to go along with the change. According to LaLonde, empowering actions deal with attitude and capability. In an ideal scenario, everyone is eager and open to change, but this happens only 5% of the time, she says. In another scenario, people are able to change—they have the skills, knowledge, systems, etc.—yet they resist. This, she contends, is the most difficult to overcome since attitude is so personal.

In some instances, people are willing to change, but unable to do so. Here, training and systems go a long way. And in the final scenario, people are unwilling and unable to change—the toughest situation to diagnose.

*The point:* Take care and assess the readiness of your audience. In circumstances where people aren't ready, your change may likely not be as successful as you'd like. Full empowerment requires your company to have structures in place to support change.

- **Train regularly and with intensity.** The more training you provide, the more people will feel supported by the company. LaLonde offers the example of organizations that are downsizing, which inevitably leads to defections as people get nervous about their futures and leave for more predictable and stable work environments. In such instances, training can ease fears, stem attrition, and even provide assistance with the transition, says LaLonde.

- **Revisit your company's systems,** including those relating to performance evaluations, bonus structures, and the like to ensure that existing systems support your new approach.

- **Empower supervisors.** Middle managers, like department heads, often get sandwiched. People who work for them wonder why things need to change and company leaders just want to get it done, so the goal is to empower them with information and resources.
- **Show evidence of success and perseverance.** Revel in your short-term wins or milestones; they provide evidence that the changes in behavior and sacrifices are worth it in the long run, says LaLonde. They also provide you with a moment to relax and celebrate. "Milestones are also great because they are so visible, unambiguous, and clearly related to the change effort."
- **Remember, nothing changes unless you transform your culture.** LaLonde recommends thinking of culture like a city sewer system: "You know it's there running under the streets; you sometimes smell it, but often it's invisible. Until you get deep down within the organization and make changes—which takes a long time—changes won't stick."