



Communication is at the Heart of Developing Change Management Leaders

Business leaders at all levels of the organization are expected to have change management skills. Yet, many organizations have not invested in developing the most important skill a change champion needs – being an effective change communicator.

-By Dave Desouza

The guru of management consulting said, "The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence – it is to act with yesterday's logic." Turbulence defines today's business environment – constantly changing technology, talent gaps, globalization, disrupted supply chains, ease of market entry for new competitors, new generation of talent, and on and on it goes. In response, businesses that expect to remain competitive must have skilled leaders who know how to keep people inspired and capable through change and turbulence.

Skilled change champions empower employees to embrace change while increasing productivity and keeping the organization in alignment with its mission and values. Given the complexity of managing constant change, developing the needed leadership skills must be a deliberate strategy that empowers and equips managers throughout the organizations to keep employees inspired. Change management leaders are high performing change communicators.

Thriving Through CORPORATE Change

Realistically speaking, most people are uncomfortable with change because it forces them to leave the "way things have always been done" behind and embrace new approaches, strategies, policies and procedures, and business models. An organization's people are its greatest asset, but they often fear change because it is human nature to do so – think of "fight or flight" response – and especially when people are worried about keeping their jobs, increasing productivity, mastering new skills, and adaptability. Change can take innumerable forms, impacting systems and structures, and employees depend on leadership to manage the transition in a way that reduces fear.

There are many reasons organizational change initiatives fail or an organization is unable to maintain its competitive status during periods of disruption. On the employee side of the equation, they include employee resistance, communication breakdowns, and lack of training. On the leadership side, it is factors like not recognizing what employees are feeling and fearing, failing to garner employee support, not communicating the vision to staff, getting bogged down in new policies and procedures, losing sight of the mission, and failing to advocate for change.

When leaders fail to manage change, employee trust is eroded, and from there it is inevitable that engagement and productivity will erode.

Leveraging change as a strategy for ongoing competitive success requires leadership able to champion change. Leaders who champion change are enthusiastic advocates for change, developing organizational resiliency and becoming active contributors to change agendas. Volatility in the



business environment is viewed as an opportunity and a challenge to overcome and not a barrier to progress. It takes well developed emotional intelligence, expertise in effective delegation, skillful communication, the ability to equip staff with the necessary capabilities and skills, and a steadfast supportive attitude.

It is a major leadership challenge to develop all the skills required for successful management, but at the heart of successful change management is effective communication.

Transforming Fear to Commitment

Change champions are not change agents. The word "champion" implies proactive advocacy for change, keeping the organization aligned to its mission. One of the main gaps in leadership skills is the ability to transform employee fear into commitment to change. Effective change leaders stay focused in the most disruptive of environments and can communicate that focus to managers and employees. Developing effective and engaging communication skills is a process in itself. It involves more than just telling people about change.

Leaders must listen to employees on the front lines – the people who convert disruption into productivity. They get buy-in from front-line managers and employees through two-way dialogue. They have well-developed emotional intelligence which enables them to keep managers inspired and to empathetically engage stakeholders on an intellectual and emotional basis. Senior-level change leaders are advocates committed to the strategic vision and understand what does not work – racing ahead with change without considering people's feelings, not developing the right people, relying on budgets to guide behaviors, ignoring resistance, asking people to assume responsibilities they are not equipped to manage, and not addressing barriers created by the organizational culture.

The emphasis on developing leadership communication skills is purposeful. Leadership development approaches should be experiential so that managers learn through solving actual workplace problems – like communicating a change initiative in a non-threatening manner. Lower-level managers who are trained in change management need access to senior-level leadership who are willing to have open and honest dialogue.

The organization must also invest in training and resources for employees rather than expecting them to adapt without the right tools. This is one element in the process of empowering employees. High performing leaders measure progress and take frequent surveys, and develop transparent reporting processes so that employees know what is going right and wrong. They also promote collaboration among organizational managers across functions. There is no better engagement process than giving people at all levels ownership of success.

Changing the Conversation

Change management is challenging but success is built up from a foundation of effective communication. Senior leaders on down can be good at strategizing, but without shared ownership within the organization and among stakeholders, strategies can fail.



One of the important steps an organization should take is preparing mid-level managers to assume higher-level and more complex responsibilities, becoming the links between employees and management and serving as role models for managing the impacts of change.

Investing in developing leaders who are change champions is important. Change management requires a special set of skills that are often not mastered when there is less disruption. The traditional hierarchal systems in which people remained in their jobs for years doing the same things are gone. Work is more like a habit in those circumstances, and there is no room for habit in a disruptive business environment. Leaders need employees who embrace and are committed to making change work.

Being able to hold engaging conversations is critical to managing change, and that includes asking the right questions to elicit solutions, helping employees understand how their new roles will enable them to better utilize their skills, and developing a two-way dialogue and feedback system. Change management is mostly about changing the conversation.