

Change Management, a.k.a. Great Leadership

by Jeff Turner

All change is a miracle to contemplate; but it is a miracle which is taking place every instant.
Henry David Thoreau

Hundreds of brilliant minds have given our society quotes about change, many of them eloquently conveying the same messages: change is inevitable, change is scary, and change is good. Similarly, hundreds of gurus and organizational consultants have hitched their wagons onto the concept of “change management,” with hundreds of books written and seminars designed to convince leaders that they must become “Change Managers” if they want to keep their organizations competitive and profitable.

But great leaders know that by definition, they already are change managers. They know that whether they head a small business, a university, a local non-profit or a multi-national corporation, they must seek out change, every day, every hour. They know that their job is to keep adjusting processes and approaches; it’s the only way to anticipate and meet their customers’ evolving needs.

What separates good change leaders from great ones? It’s not that they are so much better at recognizing where adjustments need to be made or knowing how to implement them. It’s that they know how to make changes in a way that encourages employees to suggest them, embrace them, champion them, and make them happen efficiently and happily.

To do that, effective change leaders practice the following principles:

The Power of Relationships

Many leaders charge their ideas through the system without buy in from the people that have to do the actual work. Before taking action, it’s critical to assess the mood of the workforce, to gauge how they’ll react to change. Will they roll with the punches, or will they question every decision? Will they think, “it’s about time,” or “here we go again?”

Inevitably, some people may feel threatened by “idea cowboys” who don’t ask the expertise of team members, so it’s important to cultivate trust by showing respect for each individual’s knowledge and empathy for the pain that change can bring.

The Accountability Factor

When people feel that their leader has been working hard to adjust to changes too, they tend to be more open to it and feel more committed to the process. Even when a change process seems to be on-track, great leaders never let it go on autopilot. They constantly check on its progress, measuring the results against the original goals. To do this, they communicate with employees, analyze data, solicit feedback from customers, or note competitive activity.

The Importance of Creativity in the Change Process

In his book, *Leading Change*, John P. Kotter says, “Without credible communication, and a lot of it, employee hearts and minds are never captured.” Taking that one step further, not only do leaders need to communicate a lot, but they need to do it in a creative way, to ensure employees are hearing and understanding. For example, a company-wide e-mail is an efficient way to spread an employee “thank you” message, but to hit it home, perhaps baseball tickets mailed to the employees’ home with a note about the organization’s progress would make a greater impact.

The Need to Show Appreciation and Support

When staff responds positively to change, leaders must support an ongoing change habit by praising good attitudes and consistently providing tools and resources needed to accomplish the various goals. They also need to create a sense of safety and support so that if a new approach isn’t working, employees feel they can be honest and upfront about the challenges they’re facing.

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