Managing Change: A Perspective from the Trenches

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When we hear the word "change", we often cringe. It's not always because we don't necessarily want a change, or recognize the need for a change – it's usually because we know that change is work!

Just as with a personal change, we know there needs to be new ways of doing things to see the results we want. We know that we have to be conscious of the new process and make sure we are adopting different strategies to get those results. Think of a diet, or quitting smoking. To get results you have to do things differently, and it might hurt a little (or a lot) before you can see or feel the change.

There are many change models out there and you will find books, podcasts, TED talks, and all kinds of resources to manage and lead change. The reality, I have found after over 30 years of working within organizations, is that the models are cumbersome when change is needed immediately. Sure, an 8 -step change model can be great when you have months or longer to implement the change, but that is not always the reality.

There is proactive change, those changes that match our mission, vision and strategy and then there is reactive change, those things that happen unexpectedly that require us to quickly regroup and figure things out immediately. I'm directly speaking about the latter.

What do I mean by "trenches"? Quite often leaders are at the helm guiding a change process and they are not the direct recipients of the work that is going to shift. They may actually be a couple steps removed from the work on the organizational chart. When the change impacts your own day to day oversight of an operation, that is what I mean by trenches. Your own work and *how* you work is going to impacted, not just those who work for you.

So, what are some of the survival strategies that can be offered from this trench perspective? Here are 7 things to consider when working on change from the trenches.

1. Involve the right people

Change impacts many. When looking at what must be done, consider who is being impacted and make sure you are engaging those whose work may be shifting. People get nervous about change, even those who are highly adaptive by nature. By involving those impacted, you are building a group of people who are fully vested in assuring things go well. You are also establishing trust and making sure the details that come with new processes don't get missed.

2. Put negativity into perspective

Have conversations with those who may be feeling negative or are frustrated. Find out first-hand, what might be causing their anxiety. Quite often it's about their inability to adapt and they want details that might not be figured out quite yet. Provide them with the rationale as to WHY the change must happen and give them an opportunity to voice any concerns, but put it in context and don't let that negativity fester. At some point, if they have not come around, they need to know that the change will happen

with or without them and that you'd really rather hear their concerns and take their thoughts into consideration.

3. Over-communicate

Provide regular updates and consider putting those updates in an electronic location. Many like to track progress, and providing a timeline with milestones that are met as well as meeting minutes and other artifacts related to the change process, can alleviate a lot of guessing as to where things are going.

4. Play it out!

This is something many do not consider prior to pulling the plug on something or implementing a new initiative. Behave as if the process is in place…what are the impacts to other areas, departments, divisions, individuals' work? Does the change make sense once we put ourselves through this exercise? Does this change meet the need of the customer but doubles the amount of work for the employee? Playing it out means you are looking at the change from various perspectives. This gets back to number 1, involving the right people!

5. Don't forget to get rid of something

If you are changing something to the point of adding more work, or processes, consider what you can stop doing. It's not unusual to add more to the proverbial plate and not remove something. We often cling to processes and procedures that are antiquated, but because we "have always done it", we may find ourselves overwhelmed with work that may no longer be meaningful. At the same time, maybe the task is still important, but by automating it or doing it differently, you can decrease the amount of time it takes. Challenge the work that is challenging you!

6. Accountability counts

Making sure things are on track means keeping people accountable. Provide a structure where everyone knows what their role is in the change process so that they can be an active part of the implementation and sustainability of the new practices. People like to know what they have control over. For those individuals who prefer to organize over adapt, this will be very helpful. (Refer back to #2)

7. Don't forget to celebrate

Although sustainable change doesn't always happen with fanfare, it is a good practice to take some time to celebrate the wins along the way. If there is a change that does have a specific demarcation point, then a more robust celebration can take place. People like to be appreciated for their hard work and they will remember the gratitude that can be displayed during such a celebration. So, celebrate the small accomplishments along the way, and the point at which the change is implemented. Don't forget to also celebrate once things are well established and you have positive metrics around the success the collaborative effort has yielded.

Change is hard, but it can also be fun and engaging. The view from the trenches of change can be exhausting as well, but once you have conquered the challenge, climb out of that trench and look over the great new landscape you have created – together!