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all ears

Organizations need to constantly evolve to meet new challenges, but there is one key component that gets lost in the upheaval—listening. Without an open culture which encourages and responds to feedback—in all its positive and negative forms—a company-wide transformation will fail before it has even begun.

Resistance is a fact of nature. Newton’s First Law of Motion says inertia is the response of any physical object to any change in its velocity—the tendency to do nothing or remain unchanged unless some force causes a change in its speed or direction. Employee resistance to an organization’s change plan may look like inertia, with a refusal to participate or provide support. The change implementation, however, puts people face-to-face with the need to adjust work habits and interactions. Their resistance may be unpleasant—perhaps undermining the process—contributing to delays and a festering ill will.

designing an organizational change

Successful organizational change unfolds in three general phases. First is defining the goal, purpose, and value of the change. This usually starts at the top, with executives and senior managers working together to clarify the specifics of what will change and why it is important. This involves identifying the operations and processes to be changed as well as the internal and external transactions involved. Change-definers also articulate the benefits of the change for various participants in those transactional relationships.

The second phase is planning for implementation of the change, often bringing in mid-level managers or

consultants, or both. Change planners get specific about timing and sequences for implementing changes in various operational components as well as the related infrastructure of less obvious elements such as policies, systems, and procedures that may require updates or other adjustments. They also estimate overall timelines and budgetary requirements, and the extent to which any internal group will be a direct subject of the change or a peripheral player in it.

The final phase of organizational change is implementing the plan to accomplish the changes in operations, processes, and transactions with respect to their planned timing, sequencing, and budgets. Here, the human aspect becomes visible, as the changes touch people's jobs, roles, and interactions. Any previously unaddressed expectations of employees, or assumptions regarding skills, tasks, or communications within or between departments or groups may provoke resistance, which could become a costly surprise.

Leadership: support engagement at every level

Every employee in every organization knows about their personal location in the structure, ie, their position with respect to the organization's 'vertical altitudes' and its 'horizontal silos'. The knowledge and perspective employees bring to participating in the change depends on that location. People working at high, medium, and low levels in the hierarchy see very different worlds of work, relationships, and responsibilities. The three horizontal



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silos of engineering, customer service, and human resources, for example, also have their own vocabularies, kinds of work, and people they interact with.

The primary role of leadership in organizational change is to facilitate employee engagement at every level, across all departments and units that will be directly or indirectly touched by the change. The idea is to obtain as much insight as possible for defining, planning, and implementing a successful change.

When top-level executives and managers define the change and identify which units will be most affected, they are likely to get an education when they bring in mid-level managers and supervisors to review the change plans. Engaging even lower-level workers is a deeper preparation for change, in part because it reveals more information about the way organizational processes are actually performed and who is involved in them. It also allows workers to see the places where their daily tasks and assignments will be interrupted, changed, or displaced by the implementation of proposed changes.

Planning an organizational change, therefore, requires using a strategy of progressive inclusion. Formulate the goal and the value of the change at the top. Then take it to the next level down and get people's input and use it to improve the framework for the change. Next, pull together a representative change-planning team to draft a plan for the change. Then take that draft down another level to get a new perspective on that plan and use that feedback to revise the plan. Finally, assemble a representative group of lower-level workers to talk about implementing the change and what it would mean for them and their jobs. What will not work? Why not? What would work?

A city's division of water was faced with a substantial change: the mayor's insistence on cost reductions and improvements in service times for all maintenance projects. The change had a clear goal and a plan for implementation timelines and budgets. Conrad, the manager of water distribution maintenance, invited his three shift supervisors to join him in a meeting with the division executive and division managers responsible for the change plan. Each manager presented a summary



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of what they were contributing to organizational change to make it more effective and acceptable. The three distribution maintenance supervisors listened carefully.

When the human resources manager got up to present her ideas, she announced, “We are going to do a needs assessment of the distribution maintenance section to see what cuts can be made in staffing, waterline repairs, and equipment.” One maintenance supervisor leaped to his feet. “We don’t need your needs analysis, whatever that is,” he said. “What we need from HR is better training for our people so they can use the equipment properly and do repairs right without breaking things.”

The HR manager was caught off guard, but responded by saying, “Let’s get together after this meeting and talk about training. I’ll invite my training team and we’ll see what we can do.” The result of that meeting was the cancellation of the needs analysis. A new training program was developed and implemented with the guidance of distribution maintenance supervisors.

your leadership strategy: engage the resistance

Dialogue and discussion are the tools of good leadership to formulate and prepare for a change, and to see the change through to a successful conclusion. People’s daily work and interactions are important to them; they would not resist change if they did not want a voice in shaping that change. Even objections, worries, and fears are likely to contain valuable information that can be used to accelerate and smooth the process. Resistance is an opportunity to get a plan strengthened to make implementation go more smoothly.

In the water division, resistance was a valuable element in producing workable plans for changes. Resistance is what you want to find. Where is it strongest? In which department, and at what level? That is where you will find the people who will have the most advice. But talking with people who are upset about changes in their jobs or teams can be stressful if conversations are too negative: complaints, distress, resentment, etc. How do we support a conversation for problem-solving, rather than a show of anger or impatience?

One change consultant held small-group meetings with people in each unit of the organization. The meeting room included a whiteboard, and the consultant made a list of each objection to parts of the change plan. This was a visual demonstration showing employees they were being heard. They responded well to the consultant’s questions for each item: What would fix this? Who could you work with to handle this? Who else do you think sees this?

Another change-planning leader posted a large-scale diagram of the organization chart, showing every division and department down to the smallest sub-unit. She asked one question: “How will our new computer system touch on what the finance department does? Or research and development?” Her change planning team promptly scheduled meetings with each group on the chart to discuss the proposed changes and the reasons for doing them, asking each group’s managers, supervisors, and key personnel what they thought needed special attention. One change planner said, after those meetings, “We hadn’t seen the specifics of how the new system would be used by some groups, or what changes they wanted, or worried about possible difficulties. Those discussions prevented some costly mistakes.”

Resistance is a signal to open a dialogue about the realities of the organization with respect to the purpose, planning, and implementation of a proposed change. Building participation and engagement to clarify employee concerns is a strategy for improving the success of change initiatives. Leaders speak the future, and they create trust and respect by including others in developing and accomplishing that future. Leaders can use their own listening to turn resisters into their partners in change. ■