

MANAGING CHANGE – EXPECT RESISTANCE

By Gary Pennington, CRSP, CHSC

Unless you have been sleeping for the last two or three months, you will likely realize that significant changes are happening in our economy. Some companies have closed; some have had to lay off workers; some are just hanging on; some are re-structuring; some are merging; some are buying other organizations and some are actually increasing their business. No matter where your business is at this particular time, change is happening “big time”.

When change happens, risk increases. It could be risk to product or service; it could be risk to the environment; it could be risk to health and safety of workers. Whatever the change, it needs to be managed.

The first thing to understand about change is that people are resistant to change. We like to stay in our “comfort zone”. If you are the person responsible for making changes to your organization then expect resistance. Strong resistance to change could possibly result in the organization’s cancelling the project or plan. Resistance could also seriously affect the ability of the organization to implement changes that are really needed. You will be able to view a good example of resistance to change in the automotive industry as the big three move to become viable and competitive operations. Observe senior management and unions. Both will resist change. You will also see it in health care as hospitals deal with a reduction in funding. Observe administrative management and practitioners. Resistance can also be an

indicator of the impact of change but not of the benefits generated by the change. For those responsible for managing change, expect resistance and prepare to handle it.

When change is initiated, there will be approximately 20% of your personnel who will embrace change, 50% who will sit on the fence and the remaining 30% will resist the change. The 30% will make the most noise and take up the most time and energy. They will deliberately try to make the change plan fail. By spending time and energy on this group, you are likely reinforcing their behavior. Rather than taking time to address the roadblocks this group is presenting, spend time on the 50% group to win them over and also spend time on the 20% who are helping you drive the change. Not everyone will “buy into” the change. Remember, “expect resistance” but continue on with the change.

Resisters can be recognized. Some are loud and outspoken and like to stir things up. They will let themselves be known right away. Others will be less obvious so they won’t stand out. These resisters will try to stay and safe and secure in their original jobs and will try to appear politically correct. Then there are the underground resisters. They will try behind the scenes to undermine the movement to change. Examples of this might be procrastination, failure to carry out tasks or meet deadlines. The best approach is to talk to people and try to determine the root cause of the resistance. As always treat people with respect; even the resisters.

Generally, the resistance to change is a result of a lack of understanding as to why the change is necessary. Provide people with the reason behind the

change. In order for change to happen, you must “unstick” people from their comfort zones. Often a crisis situation will do this. In health and safety or environment, often a significant event will cause people to move out of their comfort zone. In quality, often a loss of a major contract or a huge drop in sales will do this. If possible, portray the current status as a crisis so people will conclude that change is necessary.

Provide personnel with the information needed to be able to make the decision that change is necessary. You will need to ensure that everyone understands completely why the change is required. Remember “expect resistance”. Some of your personnel will still not “buy into” your logic. Some will accept the logic but will still resist because they are not sure how they will be affected by the change. Some will need the whole process explained to them more than once for whatever reason (e.g. slow learners, not paying attention, need more convincing). In the end, make sure everyone knows why the change is needed and what the change will be.

When you approach the need to change, don't try to be subtle as the resistance will happen very quickly. Similarly, don't take the approach to gradual change as the resisters will “dig in” for the long haul and the change will get stalled. Be bold. Shock the organization. Remember, you need to “unstick” the organization. It is like pushing a car to start it. It takes a lot of initial effort to get the wheels rolling but once they have started moving, the inertia of the vehicle will help you move it forward. Being bold and moving fast will help you to put the resisters off stride and gain the advantage. It also will demonstrate the commitment to change. Plan how you will initiate the

change carefully as this is an important move.

When you make a change, it is important that your personnel know where they are expected to head. Provide clear direction on where the organization is headed. Provide goals and time lines and assign responsibilities. Make the goal something that people will want to achieve.

When you ask for change from people, each individual will need to know how the change will affect them individually. Will they be laid off, re-assigned, or cut back on their hours? Will their pay and benefits be affected? Will their workload increase? You get the picture. Not knowing causes the most fear. Expect resistance if people are left in the dark about how the change will affect them personally. Even if the news is bad, let them know and then they can start to deal with their situation. It is like dealing with an unknown disease. People want to know what it is even if the news is bad.

Change requires involvement by everyone. Find opportunities to involve as many of the employees as you can. Involvement gives them a chance to become part of the team again. Involvement will help them to gain a better understanding of the obstacles to the change. More persons involved could lead to more ideas for improvement. From a negative perspective, the more persons involved, the more likely the change will move slower. Try to find the balance that keeps the organization moving forward at the pace required.

Once you implement the change process, problems will arise (don't they

always?). It is important to let your personnel know ahead of time that change will not occur without problems. So, the balancing act will need to happen between providing persons with good news while at the same time letting them know there will be problems to overcome.

When change is happening, the biggest complaint will be “no one tells me anything!” Communication will be critical to the change process. Too much communication is better than too little. Encourage people who are feeling down; provide the benefits to change for those who complain. Remember communication is a two-way street of “speak” and “listen”. You have two ears and only one mouth so listen twice as much as you speak. You may need to create new communication channels so people can easily provide feedback.

The biggest resister to change is the organization’s bureaucracy. It doesn’t matter whether you are a small or large company, whether you are profit or charitable, whether you are product or service, or whether you are private enterprise or public, you will have an internal “establishment”. You will recognize these individuals from comments such as “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” or “We have always done it this way” or “If we stall long enough, management will change and we won’t have to do this” or “This is just another flavor of the month” or “We tried this back in the seventies. They will passively resist change. They will recommend we go slowly to avoid mistakes. They will want a committee established to study the issue. They will work behind the scenes to spread doubt and dissension. They will protect their domain with all their resources. Speed is the cure for this. Keep the change

moving at a fast pace. Remember, expect resistance. These are the 30% that do not want change. Move ahead anyway.

Leadership is one of the keys to successful change. The leaders will need to demonstrate their commitment to the change. If the “boss” wants the change and is providing the resources, change will inevitably happen. The resisters will test you to determine how serious you are about the change. Then they will test you again to the point of challenge. You may even need to make an example out of someone who resists so personnel will know that change is inevitable and that they need to embrace it. Remember 70% of your personnel will go along with the change. The 30% that make the choice to resist change should realize there will be consequences to that decision.

When personnel do their regular tasks, what is the expectation? They expect to be rewarded, right? It might be just a “good show” or it might be a bonus or a promotion. If you ask for a change, then for those that embrace the change, support it or get involved, there should be reward for this behavior. While the change is happening in the organization, people may be working harder or having to learn new tasks or accepting more risk. There will likely be more stress in the workplace. It is necessary to provide a new reward system for their efforts. To provide the same old reward system is telling them to maintain the status quo. Examples for new rewards might be restructuring the compensation package; tying pay, raises, promotions and bonuses to the changes required. Always provide lots of praise for those embracing the change. The opposite side of the coin is

penalizing the resisters (i.e. the negative consequences of poor performance).

Guess what? You want to make a change; however, some of your personnel are not getting the idea. Well here is the next point. Some of them will need training, experience or new skill sets. If you want them to change, then you will need to provide the tools to do this. If the change involves implementing a quality management system such as ISO9001, ISO14001 or OHSAS18001 for example, you would contact The Business Resource Centre for assistance. Always marketing, aren't we?

When change is made in a quality management system, it is always monitored and measured to ensure the change has a positive impact on the management system. So, the next point is to measure. If you don't measure, how will you know the change was effective?

Finally, acknowledge the success. You asked for a behavior change in the organization and it was done. Now is the time to thank everyone involved for a successful change.



www.SHEQ.ca