

It's Not the Changes That Do You In

BY RANDY G. PENNINGTON

Mention change in your organization, and images of new programs, initiatives and restructurings come to mind. For many, seeing their leader returning from a conference with a new book in hand is a sure bet that change is coming, yet again.

The author and consultant, William Bridges put things into perspective when he said, "It's not the changes that do you in. It's the transitions."

Life – both business and professional – is about constantly adapting to meet and leverage changing circumstances and opportunities. There is little argument about the need for change. The leader's challenge is to accomplish it with the least amount of disruption and the greatest opportunity for success.

As a leader, your role is to help others through the painful process of moving from the current reality to the desired future state. The new programs and initiatives that are introduced are simply the tools we use to facilitate the journey.

Here are five key strategies to use as you lead your team through change.

Explain what is and what isn't over.

Unless the change is to cease to exist, there are things that will continue no matter how drastic your latest initiative. Don't allow disruption to be misconstrued as total destruction. You will continue to serve customers, complete projects and fulfill your responsibilities. Clearly define and explain what is and isn't over as the result of the change you are leading.

How about closings and layoffs? The principle still applies. There are things that are not over for those who remain,

as well as for those who leave the organization. Your job is to help them identify what is and is not over in order to make the transition less painful.

"The only organization that never changes is the one that ceases to exist."

Respect the past.

The practice that frustrates you beyond words today was at one point someone's innovative solution. Don't criticize a past practice that has outlived its usefulness. Instead, accept and respect it as right for that time, while recognizing that times change.

It is the same with people-related changes. Staffing decisions and levels of the past served an important role at the time they occurred. However, recognize that respecting the past isn't the same as holding on to it.

Ensure the "important stuff" continues.

What is the important stuff in your organization? Customer service? Producing a product? Serving citizens? Maintaining an ethical environment? Whatever it is, it must continue after the change has been implemented. Involve others in defining the "important stuff," and use them to help you ensure that the change being implemented does not disregard them. Doing so increases support for the change and makes it more effective.



Set the stage for the future.

The change you implement today can open your eyes to new challenges and opportunities as it solves a current problem. It is another step in a continuous process of evolution and adaptation. Set measurable goals for what you want to achieve. Measure and evaluate progress toward those goals. More importantly, show others how the change will move them toward a positive future.

Recognize its day will end.

Leaders fail themselves and their organizations when they assume — and even worse, communicate — that the change they are making today will eliminate the need for more change in the future. And yet, we hear messages such as, "If we successfully navigate this change, we won't have to do so again."

The only organization that never changes is the one that ceases to exist. Do not assume that today's solution will work forever. More important, do not be guilty of allowing others to believe that this will be the last change that is required.

The long-term success of your organization depends, in large degree, on the ability of its people to anticipate and respond to change. As most of us have seen, it is not the changes that do us in. It is our ability to make the transition while helping others do the same.

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