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BUSINESS ADVANCEMENT INC.®

The Harper Report:

Gaining And Maintaining Commitment In The Face Of Change

An old German proverb, roughly translated, states "to change and to change for the better are two different things." Over our years of helping organizations of all sizes deal with a vast array of changes, we've seen that the skepticism embodied in this proverb runs wide and deep. Resistance to change can emerge even when the advantages may seem obvious, such as in the case of a move to new, improved facilities. The skepticism and resistance can be especially strong when the change is viewed as one being imposed by an external "them," whether "they" are management, regulatory bodies, or even peer groups.

Business leaders can accelerate progress and achieve better results during change by gaining others' commitment rather than mere compliance.

Focus On Commitment Over Compliance

Whether you're dealing with restructuring, new regulations, new customer requirements such as quality certifications, or even a hostile takeover, changes based upon compliance are the most challenging ones to implement because of the natural resistance we tend to have to situations

we didn't initiate. While people will usually comply with new dictates and regulations, we've seen that business leaders can accelerate progress and achieve better results by gaining others' commitment to successfully implementing the changes.

Here are three tips that can increase the likelihood of a successful outcome:

1. Reframe the Situation

Research has shown that the more you expect something to be painful, the more painful it becomes. In this case, you already know the downsides of the situation, but what are the potential benefits? For example, one of our client companies that had just been acquired by a competitor in another part of the US was dealing with the challenge of keeping their employees committed to their jobs as the company was going through integration and the site was being closed. Initially, employees were extremely upset when they received the news. However, once we helped them look at their situation from the broader perspective of "gaining new opportunities," and provided them with career and job search coaching, their stress decreased. Ultimately, most of the employees committed to adapting to new policies and staying productive until the facility was shut down nine months later. As this case illustrates, taking a broader view of a situation

by looking at both the positive aspects as well as the negative aspects keeps it in perspective so that it's possible to find hidden opportunities.

2. Communicate credibly: As challenging as unwelcome changes may be for you as the change leader to accept, it's ten times as bad for stakeholders (employees, customers, suppliers, strategic partners, etc.). They can observe what's happening but usually don't have enough information to fully understand it and make informed decisions. Left unchecked, we've seen this lead to rumors that end up causing extra challenges. Instead, communicate credibly by providing your stakeholders with facts in a variety of ways on a frequent enough basis so they can reconcile what they observe happening with the reasons behind it. Will there be reorganization and layoffs? Will relationships with suppliers change? How are priorities shifting? Even if you don't know the answers yet or can't disclose certain information, you can discuss what you do know and are able to share at this time. The more that people perceive they are being treated with respect, the more likely they are to support even the most difficult changes.

3. Prepare in advance: The only thing worse than an unwelcome change is one that someone expects us to make instantly. More often than not, taking a just-in-time approach to changes – especially changes due to new rules and regulations - results in a great deal of firefighting, confusion, and even more resistance. The best way to avoid this problem is to prepare your organization as soon as you have a strong sense

that changes will need to happen. Remember that changing established policies, procedures, and systems will trigger the need for employees to gain new knowledge, skills, and abilities in order to continue to perform in their jobs. Clearly stating the reasons and purpose of the change, and the outcomes that are needed, as opposed to mere activities, will enable the stakeholders to more effectively make decisions and focus on the priorities that are most critical to success. It's also important to plan for a shift in priorities while everything is in flux. Starting the transition process with lead time makes it easier to accommodate all of these issues by the deadline.

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The Bottom line: Commitment is always more powerful than compliance. The better you foster a broader perspective of the situation and instill trust and belief in the course you're advocating, the more you can help others prepare in advance for what lies ahead. This will make it more likely that you'll gain the commitment of all stakeholders and increase the chance of a successful outcome.



About the authors:

Pamela S. Harper is Founding Partner & CEO of Business Advancement Inc (BAI). She specializes in catalyzing fresh thinking to enable executives to uncover and take advantage of unexpected opportunities for top and bottom line growth. She is an internationally known business performance advisor, author, and professional speaker.

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Since 1991, BAI has enabled companies to dramatically accelerate innovation leadership, growth, and profitability. Contact the authors at <http://www.businessadvance.com>.