Dealing with resistance to change

In the first of two articles on change, Valerie Nichols explains what managers can do to help their teams overcome the fear of change.
Dealing with resistance to change

Here’s a key challenge. Imagine as a manager in your organisation, you have had your budget for next year cut significantly and spent a considerable amount of time and effort restructuring the department and workflow to ensure that none of your employees have to be let go. You are very proud of the way you’ve met the organisational demands while protecting your team. But you are then shocked when employee reactions to your changes are extremely negative. What on earth happened?

Welcome to the reality of employee responses to change. Usually, the most common response begins with resistance, which often has a basis in fear. The fear can be related to perceptions or uncertainties about adverse impacts on the employee’s work (“Do I have to learn something new and, if so, what if I can’t?”; “Will I have to stop doing something I enjoy – or at least am comfortable doing?”). It might be about the employee’s employment status (“Will I be laid off?”; “Will I be placed in a position that’s less important?”). It might be related to relationships with others at work (“I really like working with Bill and Heather – am I going to be reassigned to another branch?”). It might simply be rooted in not knowing the answers to these questions.

It’s important to recognise that whether the fear is reality-based or not is of little importance. All that matters is that the employee is experiencing the fear. Morale, motivation and productivity can be seriously impaired if these fears are not addressed and mitigated.

The good news is there are some key things you can work on to help employees move in the desired direction.

First, managers need to understand that the goal is NOT to eradicate resistance. Some resistance is desirable, if change is to be effective. Organisations need employees who will question the assumptions on which the change is based, and who will serve as thinking partners to help refine and improve the plans. Do not confuse employees who raise these challenges with those who show the unhealthy kind of resistance, which may take the form of sabotage, malicious compliance, or simple obstructionism.

Next, since every change, every workplace and every employee is different, managers must recognise that there is no ‘one size fits all’ solution.

Do your staff even know that there is a change taking place? You may have been thinking about this issue for some time, exploring different options. There may have been articles in the company newsletter and numerous email messages but don’t assume that employees have read, heard or understood any of this. The first step should be to ensure that everyone knows that a specific change is coming.

Are people aware of all of the reasons why you are making this change (and do they agree)? Any change should be implemented in consultation with employees, rather than simply being imposed on them. They’re the ones who are going to have to function in the new world, so they should contribute to the vision and take ownership of the outcome.

Does your team believe that this is a ‘flavour of the month’ change? Do you have the backing of upper management and the support of your stakeholders? Have similar changes been announced, possibly even implemented, but then nothing different has actually happened? The response to this question may take you back to the ‘why’ of the change. What is it that creates an imperative for change? If you struggle to articulate that imperative, then step back and think things through again.

Does each member of your team believe that he or she has the skills required by the change? Examine whether training is required and ensure that it’s available. Keep in mind that a high performing employee who is uncertain of his or her ability to do something new at the same level of proficiency as their current work may actually find it more acceptable to fail by not trying, than to try and be seen to fail. Training can also help you standardise processes and terminology. Work with HR to assess competencies and fit these to the needs.

Finally, keep in mind that not all employees have the same comfort level with change.
Valerie Nichols is an Executive Consultant with Hemsley Fraser, the learning and development company.

**Calling from the UK?**

**T:** 0845 071 2806  **W:** www.hemsleyfraser.co.uk  
**E:** enquiries@hemsleyfraser.co.uk

**Calling from the US?**

**T:** 888-559-0074  **W:** www.hemsleyfraser.com  
**E:** info@hemsleyfraser.com