

The role of managers when change needs incorporating

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Managers have crossed the chasm, moving to the other side. They are no longer employees “doing the work”. Yet the chasm is wider than they think as they find they are not considered leaders either. When the workplace is going through a transformation, the manager quite often feels the pinch, finding it tough to keep productivity going while convincing everyone to accept a new way of working. He or she really does become the meat in the sandwich. So where should a manager start with transformation? What needs to be done to successfully contribute and from where will the additional time come to execute this managerial function?

First and foremost, a manager needs to believe in the message sent from leadership. For example, if cutbacks are supposedly for the sake of survival yet waste and excess are observed, if restructuring is preparation for innovation yet no evidence of new methodologies exist, or if new technology is to be introduced yet market share is dwindling, commitment from the manager will not be possible.

Believing the “what” and the “why” of the change is actually an essential component of moving forward and taking teams along for the journey. It will be impossible to convince and assist others to adopt new work practices without understanding, agreeing and being able to enunciate the new direction. Depending on a manager’s natural behavioural style, this can be achieved rather quickly, or take some much-needed reflection time and discussion with leadership.

Once the manager is on board with new processes, policies, products or practices, the next challenge will be to encourage others to come on board. According to Prosci research in change management, this will involve a manager holding five dedicated roles:

1. Communicator

Sending the message of a new future is key, as well as checking for understanding in the recipient. What could storytelling add to this process with a complex change? With active listening and a channel for feedback, two-way communication will thrive.

2. Advocate

An advocate influences others to move to the future. This can be achieved by personifying the new state at every chance, getting people excited about the possibilities that lie ahead. An advocate is in effect actively campaigning for more support.

3. Coach

A coach defines where we are now and where we will be in the future.

Throughout a change journey, there will be times where individuals will require certain refinement and redirection. For example, new skills or knowledge may be required to work differently, yet some may struggle to adopt for emotional, psychological, physiological or socio-economic reasons. A coach will need to work with each person in their individual world, disabling fears and concerns and enabling willingness and ability.

4. Resistance manager

Resistance is the normal human reaction to change. It is why things cannot work and can strike anyone at any time. Resistance dissipates when it is given what it needs, with “attention” the most predominant initially. Anticipating it is a great way to deal with resistance, reducing its capacity to distort.

5. Liaison officer

Within any common business structure, a manager must liaise both up and down in the organisation. Liaising up may involve sending messages back to those who own the dream, keeping them informed of the reality on the ground. Liaising down will involve sending the dream as clearly, transparently and proactively as possible.

The above roles will indeed be time-consuming. So while engaging with these roles, here are some tips and tricks to spread the load:

- Embed the language and new concept into everything you do, say and feel. Repetition is a great contributor to rewiring habits, so when a team member cannot escape exposure to a reality, it will give them no choice but to either join the rest or address the barriers that yield their own resistance.
- Encourage the early adopters to help spread the word, reasons and consequences of not supporting the new direction. Early adopters on the team clearly can see greater hope in the future and are willing to take a chance. They tend to live in a place where advantages outweigh disadvantages.
- Celebrate small wins along the way; while this may seem to take even more time, it will highlight the necessity of progress and self-leadership through times of resistance. This will emerge as a form of marketing which itself will reinforce positive behaviour. Just like marketing works on a consumer’s subconscious, so too does internal marketing within a team.
- Share the workload and responsibility – leaders are the ambassadors who need to be active, visible and consistent during periods of change. Why not request they visit your department and answer some questions, praise the progress and help with ambiguity. People will feel they are “on the radar” with an increased level of importance.

The journey from management to leadership can be long and complex, ambiguous and demanding, yet finding ways to commit time and effort will breed success.

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