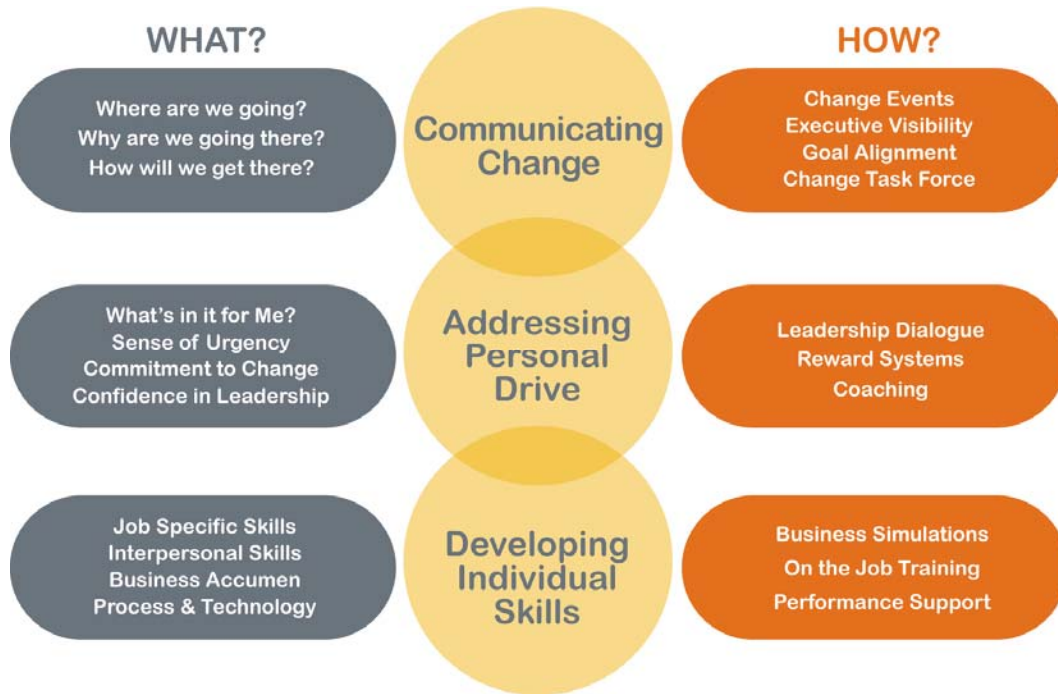


When it's time to change, open up the communication pipeline



If change is afoot, people want to know about it. In fact, as the winds of change begin to swirl, employees want as much information and “face time” as they can get.

Oddly, just when information demand rises, more often than not, leaders fail miserably on the supply side. They might, for example, believe sending out an email will suffice. Or, even worse, they may defensively respond to requests for more, in-depth information.

With that context, we frequently are astonished by leaders who believe they can simply mandate change. Whether it's a re-organization, a new ERP implementation or a changing business strategy, you can only achieve results when people are energized and committed to change. Simply stated, the less the commitment, the more the resistance.

Energizing employee commitment won't result from e-mails or town hall meetings. People need information to quickly move past their initial disbelief that the change is really going to happen. They need one-on-one discussions, to bring up potential problems with the changes. They need time to digest and integrate the changes.

You can only get there via leader-driven dialogue, discussion and a good amount of, for lack of a better term, salesmanship.

We have found over the years that if leaders focus on communicating three simple factors – **the what, they why and the how** – and do it in an intelligent, thoughtful manner, they can more quickly and easily build commitment...and results.

The What

Of course, the first step is to clearly detail the structures, process and/or rules that are about to change. Even if the changes may be complicated and take months to implement, leaders must find a way to simplify the “what.”

We tell our clients that means being able to communicate it in 30 seconds, just like in a movie or TV show pitch. Example: “We are changing from being organized by region to being organized by product lines.” Another might be, “We are moving to a common computer system to easily share information across our business units.” Or, “We are moving from providing customers with everything they need to specializing in a few product lines.”

The Why

Once organizational change is inevitable, people still have many reasons to resist. Of course, people need motivation to change. And the larger the change, the bigger and more compelling the reasons to resist. People do things the same way unless there is a compelling reason, be it reward or punishment, to change. Leaders alone can make the compelling case directly and simply.

We call this the WHY statement. A compelling WHY statement includes both the positive reason for change, as well as the “cost” of not changing. Again, we advise clients to explain the reason in 30 seconds. Example: “We are changing so we may reduce costs and prepare for an economic slowdown. If we don’t do this now, we may have to reduce head count later.” Another possibility? “We want to stay ahead of the competition. The top two competitors have been outperforming us by selling at lower prices. We have seen success by selling on quality, and want to expand that approach across product lines.”

The old parental approach, “Because I said so,” may work in the short term. If leaders want people committed to make things happen, however, they need to give people a rationale, to show it’s a logical, sensible strategy.

The How

As employees request more information after an announced change, leaders’ first reaction often is defensive. “We sent out an email, we had an article in the newsletter, and we had an all-hands meeting ... what’s their problem? What do they want? This is not too hard to understand.”

Leaders: do not be defensive. Just repeat this phrase... Communicate, communicate and communicate some more.

While you can immediately program a computer with new instructions, you can not with people. People take time to transition from the old to the new. Change evokes emotion in people. When people are concerned about their job, or even concerned about change they will affect how they get their job done, emotional reactions result.

So while leadership is busy explaining the What and the Why, people are processing varying degrees of fear and anxiety. This, in turn, clouds their ability to hear what is being said.

As a result, leaders need to repeat their messages many times (research says from 7 to 10 times more than they think they need to). Consider it to be a mantra, not just a one-time message.

Dialogues, not monologues

People naturally have questions and concerns during times of change. Yet changes are often announced and reiterated via one-way communication modes. Emails, newsletters and large group meetings can be effective communication methods, but they are “top down.” They offer little room for questions, clarification and discussion. People can’t be energized to change when they believe they are not being heard. A solution? Communication vehicles for change must provide the opportunity for dialogue.



We recommend “change events” to discuss the changes and their impact. We’ve found that when these events are done in interactive way, effectiveness goes way up. Away from their desk, people get to raise and discuss issues, both during the event and at breaks and meals.

Team meetings are also effective places for on-going dialogues about the changes.

Whatever the forum, making the upcoming change an ongoing agenda item will give leaders an effective forum to update people, as well as give leaders’ direct reports the chance to raise questions and issues.

Another good idea? Be visible. The “managing by walking around” strategy is even more important during times of change. Sometimes, the most important questions and concerns come up in informal discussions. If you aren’t around to have those informal discussions, you won’t be able to hear and address issues.

Finally, set goals that quickly reinforce the change.

A major zapper of change energy is foot dragging. Set simple goals that are achievable quickly. Direct reports will be involved in the change and see what it really means. For example, if collaboration with new departments is part of the change, set a goal for your direct reports to have lunch with key peers. If the change concerns implementing a new ERP, set a goal of reading three articles on ERP implementations, and reporting what you have learned at the next team meeting.

The good news for leaders

People have a seemingly insatiable need for communication and information during change. This is actually good news for leaders. Rather than being defensive at requests for communication, leaders can use this need as an opportunity to build a robust case for change. As a result, your teams will be more committed,

About the Authors

Lawrence Polsky & Antoine Gerschel are Managing Partners at PeopleNRG. Over the past 20 years, Managing Partners Antoine Gerschel and Lawrence Polsky have lived strategy implementation challenges in many shapes and forms, with first-hand experience in the U.S., Europe and Asia. **PeopleNRG** is a change & team consultancy that specializes in optimizing people energy through high impact tools, programs and ideas. PeopleNRG’s innovative and practical services enable leaders to overcome challenges they face all too often when leading a team, division, or company into new directions.