Harnessing positive attitudes to organizational change

Major organizational change disrupts the fabric of organizational life in terms of interpersonal relationships, reporting lines, group boundaries, employee and work unit status and the social identities associated with group memberships.

Even though change is implemented for positive reasons, employees often respond negatively toward change and resist change efforts.

This negative reaction is largely because change brings with it increased pressure, stress and uncertainty for employees. One of the main reasons why change efforts fail is employee resistance to change; the significance of resistance is compounded by the high rate of change failure. Thus, building positive employee beliefs, perceptions and attitudes is critical for successful change interventions.

Employee concerns during organizational change

There are a number of issues that concern staff during organizational change. Leader behaviour is crucial during organizational change, as leaders provide a vision of the change, give direct support to employees and model appropriate behaviour. These actions help to build stability during change and enhance employees’ commitment to it. Uncertainty about careers and roles, fear or anxiety, communication, and new roles, relationships and skills are also important issues for employees.

During change some employees may also have trouble disengaging from the old organization, as they feel a sense of loss with having to “let go” of the old and highly-valued structures, methods and rules. This is especially so if people have been socialized to appreciate the values, norms and organizational history, and if beliefs and values are shared throughout the organization. Inevitably, there are positive aspects of the organizational culture that are lost with any change. There may be a loss of organizational history through relocation from an old building or a change in service values. Employees may perceive these changes as a loss to the organization’s status or prestige.

Group-based differences in perceptions

Organizations provide members with multiple group memberships (e.g. work units, professional groups, divisions and the organization as a whole). By examining the way different groups of employees talk about the change, one can take account of voice.

Social identity theory (SIT) can help to explain how individuals in the workplace may react to others in terms of professional and work unit identities rather than as individuals. During organizational change these social identities may be more salient, particularly when the change is appraised as threatening.

When a company embarks on restructuring or downsizing, the result may be removal or amalgamation of a work unit. Employees may find themselves losing a familiar point of reference for where they belong in the organization, and may construe this loss of role identity as a threat to their self esteem and work validation. SIT provides a valuable framework to understand the resultant employee responses to the change.
Change poses special challenges at different levels of the organizational hierarchy, as different aspects of the change process may be salient to employees and may be evaluated quite differently.

There has been some research on how change strategists, managers and recipients differ in their perceptions of change. For example, interviews with external and internal consultants, researchers and managers have revealed differences across groups in terms of comments about the importance of management support, change preparation, negative leadership actions, employee participation and communication, and understanding of the purpose of the change. Specifically, researchers were more concerned than managers about issues related to the preparation period of change (e.g. establishing a clear purpose for the change). The lack of interest in preparatory issues was attributed to managers being more concerned with implementation issues. External consultants were more tuned in to employee participation and justifying the need for change, but less concerned about keeping staff informed. Internal consultants were more concerned about the impact of inconsistent management actions. Change managers referred more frequently to the initiation period of planning and decision-making, rather than to the absorption period of the change than did non-supervisory staff.

Other research focusing on the effects of organizational change has shown that non-supervisors, as change recipients, report higher levels of role ambiguity and overload, lower levels of satisfaction with and support from their supervisory relationships, lower job satisfaction and commitment, lower perceptions of job security and lower acceptance of organizational change. Furthermore, over time job satisfaction and mental and physical health declined more among manual workers than white-collar and managerial staff.

In contrast, managers and supervisors, whose roles are more like those of change strategists and change managers, perceive higher levels of organizational (both supervisor and informational) support, and more opportunity and access to information during change.

Different attitudes between managers and staff arise because managers are more involved in the change process. Moreover, managers reported more control over decisions concerning the future of their jobs than did non-supervisory employees. Supervisors were more likely to engage in control-oriented coping compared to non-supervisors, who typically employed avoidance coping. As a consequence, the latter were less likely to make use of available informational and organizational support.

Not all change implementation efforts are experienced more negatively by non-supervisors. Employees may feel more positive about changes that do not involve staff reductions, but rather offer skill development or opportunities to develop innovative work methods. Furthermore, executives and middle managers may also differ in their responses to change.

**Change-based differences in perceptions**

Employees’ perceptions of change may be affected by the type of change being implemented. Various models of change take into account the timing of and reasons for change. For example, incremental change occurs over time in small, orderly steps and with democratic leadership that includes employee consultation. As this type of change involves employee participation in the change, employees should have more positive attitudes about the change.

In contrast, radical change involves sudden, substantial changes to organizational processes and. The vision, identity, strategies and values of the organization are redefined, resulting in significant and permanent changes to the organization's structure. Top management typically drive this type of change, and it often demands directive or coercive leadership. A relative lack of employee participation in such change is likely to lead to more negative attitudes about the change.
Communication is key

Communication about the change and participation in it are central concerns for employees, as are uncertainty about jobs and the planning challenges of change. Thus, change agents need to pay special attention to staff consultation and involvement. Staff members feel more positive and reassured when they know that their input and involvement have an impact on decisions, and when they are kept up to date with changes that affect them personally. Furthermore, change agents should set priorities and send a consistent message about job-related decisions. They can also offer substantial, immediate career counselling support, so that employees know what to expect and feel supported as they experience job-related changes. It is important for change agents to identify, encourage and harness positive feelings in an effort to enhance the ease of making changes.

There is also a need for change agents to understand the different needs of various groups. Executives may be more concerned with broader organization-wide issues, supervisors with intra-organization and departmental issues, and non-supervisors may focus on their own job. Thus, change agents can form tailor-made change management strategies to meet the needs of employees at different levels and with varying responsibilities, and in consideration of the inter-group nature of change. As a start, change strategists must be aware of the extent to which their own perceptions of the change differ from those of change managers and change recipients, and change communication should address and acknowledge the personal concerns of people at different levels.

In complex diverse organizations like hospitals, it is important to make use of communication and knowledge brokers who can bridge inter-group boundaries in communicating the positive aspects of change.

Finally, one must consider the inter-group nature of organizational change. Group memberships overlap and cross-cut, but they are also the source of conflict and divergent feelings and actions around the change. Change strategists can use these perceptions to devise ways of highlighting inter-group similarities, taking advantage of overlapping group memberships and harnessing positive attitudes to change.

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