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Engage employees to overcome resistance to change

Recent statistics demonstrate that over one-third of all mergers and acquisitions fail. Current estimates suggest that over one-half of quality-process improvement efforts result in either short-lived successes or total failures. The single most cited reason for these failures — employee resistance.

No matter how good the merger looks on paper, or how advanced the new software application promises to be, it seems that the human factor often gets in the way. These failures are not inexpensive, nor are they relegated to a certain industry or business sector. It seems to me that whenever people are involved in change, failure is a real possibility. It also seems to me that trying to better understand why change is so troublesome is worth thinking about.

MANAGING CHANGE

Will Sparks

The term "resistance to change," which was introduced in a classic business management article in the late 1940s, is often used to explain why change initiatives are unsuccessful. Resistance to change has been the culprit of many past and present corporate change failures. The term describes the subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle actions taken on the part of those labeled "change resisters." But is this portrayal accurate or fair?

To answer such questions, a better understanding of the emotional dynamics of change is needed. First, I strongly believe that people do not resist change. We change all the time. We change cars, houses, jobs, golf clubs, opinions, perceptions and on and on. We do, however, resist being changed. This distinction, although subtle, is crucial for understanding resistance. When we think of change in this way, we begin to accept a greater responsibility for making the change successful. Specifically, we must

stop thinking about the easiest way to change others. Rather, we have to think about the emotional dynamics at play and how to leverage them for transforming resistance into both acceptance and endorsement. This requires thoughtful reflection and a lot of patience.

To better appreciate the dynamics of change, we must rethink what constitutes resistance. Research demonstrates that arguments, criticism and conflict often lead to better decisions. Although we are quick to label these unpleasant aspects of organizational behavior resistance, they actually demonstrate engagement.

To argue and vent, you have to care on some level. On the other hand, a lack of these behaviors, which is manifested in silence, is misconstrued as acceptance or even endorsement. In fact, this is not the case. When it comes to organizational change, silence is not golden — it's trouble. Silence in groups manifests from anger and apathy, and it will often lead to subtle resistance and sabotage that can be much more difficult to manage than open criticism and conflict.

A silent work group with team members staring out of windows or avoiding eye contact is a telltale sign that real resistance lies ahead.

Often when I talk with business leaders about managing change, they will respond that involving people up front is not a luxury that their tight schedules or budgets can afford. I am intrigued by this response because time is a function of our priorities. That bears repeating — time is a function of our priorities.

When we tell someone we don't have enough time to do something, we are really saying that it isn't high enough on our list of priorities. If you doubt this, think about your own life. I consider myself to be a pretty busy person, but truth be told, *Frasier* is a priority in my life. No matter how busy I am, I will usually find myself in front of the television set at 10 p.m. to watch reruns of a program that, based on my actions, is a priority in my life. This analogy holds an

important business lesson for us when it comes to managing change.

When we tell people that we would have liked to have had their input but there just wasn't enough time, what we are really saying is that they are not high enough on our priorities list — their thoughts and ideas aren't important enough to really matter. When you send this subtle message to a group of employees, it should come as no surprise that resistance is around the corner.

When it comes to leading change, you have options. And I am not talking about creating a strategic vision or transforming corporate culture. You have a choice. You can spend some time and money on the front end talking with the employees who will be affected by the change and incorporate their input into the new process, procedure or structure. Or you can spend time, and a lot more money, on the back end dealing with anger, resentment and even sabotage. And if you choose the latter option, you will have the opportunity to engage is some glamorous management activity — you can start strategically envisioning how you are going to overcome employee resistance. But even if you are successful in overcoming this resistance, it is a far cry from a change process that is endorsed and supported by your team. And it has been my experience that the best way to facilitate employees' support is to engage them in the change process from the beginning and to always remember that people support what they help create.

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