



Leading Change

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Leadership and Change in today's organizations: Examining the necessary qualities for leading change in today's organizations

Abstract

With the current economic downturn and needed adjustments by most sectors of the economy, the subject of change has become a significant topic within organizations. From restructuring to reengineering, layoffs to hiring freezes, leaders are called upon to lead in a way that will enhance the success of their organizations despite overpowering obstacles. This article defines change and submits practical and realistic leadership qualities and strategies leaders can adopt in today's organizations during a change process.

Key Words: *Change, corporation, communication, economy, organizations, people, followers, restructuring, reengineering, vision, strategy.*

Introduction

Change cannot be undervalued in today's organizations. The issue of change emerges at a point in time within the life of every organization. Therefore, the need for today's leaders to equip themselves with the needed information, skills, and strategies has become more important than ever before. Most organizations today rely solely on their leadership to provide effective and smooth transitions through a change process. Eighty percent of change is leadership and 20 percent is administration, according to John Kotter (2008). The author suggests the leadership of an organization is expected to provide a course for the change process, line up the organization's mission and vision with follower expectations, encourage and motivate followers, take responsibility of scheduling activities and financial resources needed to implement the change process, and assist with finding solutions to obstacles prohibiting the change process. Unfortunately, according to Merry Lee Olson (2008), almost 70 percent of all change endeavors fail. This reinforces the need for organizations and their leaders to understand how to handle and deal with change (Appelbaum, Berke, Taylor, Vazquez, 2008). This article defines change and provides practical and relevant strategies, characteristics and qualities that leaders can adopt to deal with change.

Leadership and Change

According to Appelbaum, et al. (2008), change is a multifaceted course of action that has the potential for planned and unintentional occurrences and has the ability to displace the survival and continuation of an organization. Change occurs when things are caused to be different, as written in the American Heritage Dictionary (1983). Wikipedia (2009) defines change as the movement of followers, teams, and an entire organization from its current state to a desired future (Wikipedia, 2009). Therefore, change calls for the leadership of an organization to be equipped with the necessary tools, skills, and expertise to enhance the rate of success during such transitions.

A clear and concise vision is an essential characteristic for a leader to possess in order to lead a successful change effort (Kotter, 2008). Thus, a comprehensible portrait of the future should be made evident to all members of the organization so they are clearly aware of the direction of the organization (Seibold, 2008). It is vital leaders receive buy-in from all stakeholders within the organization. This buy-in can happen successfully when leadership crafts a vision and mission that involves all members of an organization. This also facilitates decision making processes at all levels of the change process. According to Kotter (2008), this process offers followers the needed opportunity to contribute to the change process and also adapt to new circumstances that may arise during the process. Colin Thomas-Coulson (2009) postulates that communicating the developed vision to all members of the organization is a significant piece towards the success of any change effort.

Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze (2008) believe that for leaders in today's organizations to be successful in their change process, they must craft and implement plans and activities that have expected results. According to the authors, these plans and activities should be in line with the expectations of top leaders within the organization. Additionally, they state incentives must be attached to attract support for the change effort. Ultimately, leadership should make an effort to work with the members of the organization because the success of the change effort lies within them (Mirza, 2009). According to the author 15 percent of people accept change, 25 percent oppose change, and 60 percent are unsure about a change process. Mirza (2009) states leaders must prepare their followers for the needed change within their organization. For proper preparation, leaders should assess their followers, be open to modifications if needed, provide consistent messages, offer honesty regarding the gains and losses taking place, propose provisions for trainings and education, and develop practical expectations for all stakeholders in order to facilitate a smooth change effort. Thomas-Coulson (2009) also adds that followers must be adequately prepared for the change process in order for it to be a success.

Why Change Efforts Fail

The subject of change is not new, yet the majority of change efforts fail (Olson, 2008) and most individuals involved in change display fear (Flaum, 2007). There are many explanations given as to why change fails. Kotter (2008) believes change efforts fail because leaders do not develop an environment that calls for the needed change. Likewise, Olson (2008) believes change fails because the leadership does not take into consideration the many conditions that must take place and the direct effect on the follower. Kotter (2008) also states most leaders are unable to communicate the change message to their followers clearly enough to gain support and that most leaders make the mistake of labeling the change a success prior to the end result. Furthermore, he replies leaders may look for excuses for a failed change when, in reality, there is none. Wheatley and Frieze (2008) state most change efforts fail because they are vertical; arranged by top leaders. Similarly, Mirza (2009) states change initiatives fail because they are initiated by top executives lacking the buy-in and understanding of lower level employees.

How to avoid failure during a change process

Kotter (2008) suggests three solutions leaders should implement to avoid failure during a change transition. First, leaders can avoid failure by creating an organizational environment that recognizes small wins. Though real change is recognized over the course of time, leaders must take the necessary steps to appreciate each victory along the way no matter how insignificant it may seem. Second, leadership must build the needed support for the change process by engaging all stakeholders within the organization such as employees, fellow managers, and shareholders. It is also important for leadership to involve the right individuals with the appropriate skills and talent for the change process. Each individual must have a voice during decision-making. Third, a leader must be able to communicate the change vision openly and honestly to all stakeholders of the organization in order to avoid failure.

Five strategies for successful change implementation

Herein provides practical points for the effective implementation of change by leaders in today's organizations.

1. Create the right environment

Leaders must work to create an environment that necessitates the needed change within their organization. In other words, each stakeholder of the organization must feel the need for the coming change to actively participate in the process and to ensure success. Leaders must spend time with their colleagues within the organization to ensure they gain buy-in. They must work with individuals who may not be ready for the change process by meeting with them individually and in teams. Leaders must guarantee that consistent information is made available to all stakeholders of the organization including those who may be resistant to the change process.

2. Get the right people on board

'It takes a village to raise a child.' This is a common saying in Africa and literally it means that it takes more than two individuals to raise a child. In the same manner, it takes more than 'one' leader to effect a successful change transition within an organization. The leader must work tirelessly to recruit the right people to join his team for the change process, as proposed by Jim Collins (2001) and Tom Peters (2008). The individuals must possess the needed skills and talent for the successful implementation of the change process. These individuals must represent each sector of the organization and have a strong buy-in into the leader's vision.

3. Formulate a vision

Individuals within organizations like to know the path and track they are headed towards prior to agreeing to participate in the journey. Thus, leaders must work with members of their team to create a vision for change. A clear and strategic vision becomes the stage on which the change process thrives (Brenner, 2008). This deliberate vision produces support for the change effort and provides less resistance from internal and external stakeholders of the organization. A clear and precise vision creates a mental picture of the desired change (Steven, 2008) and, in turn, builds a sense of security by reducing the level of uncertainty. This vision allows leaders and individuals to relay consistent and vital information regarding the change effort to all members of the organization (Woodward, 2009).

4. Communicate the vision

At this point, the leader and the organization's members must communicate the change vision to all stakeholders of the organizations. The message must be consistent and available. According to Brenner (2008), this communication of the vision and values of an organization facilitates a foundation for preparing and inspiring the entire organization for change. Leadership must provide workshops, training, and educational activities to all individuals regarding the details of the change process. Most individuals who resist change and do not want to participate in the change process do not have ample information in order to make informed decisions. According to Banutu-Gomez and Banutu-Gomez (2007), followers often oppose change as a result of feeling alarmed about the unfamiliar. This presupposes that followers will become receptive to change if they have a clear understanding of what the future holds.

Clear and open communication offers followers motivation to work towards achieving set goals and targets for the change process (Thomas-Coulson, 2009). Leadership must ensure that there is a free flow of relevant information to followers and all stakeholders of the organization at every stage of the process. Additionally, leadership must ensure followers are involved in each stage of the decision-making process throughout the change transition. According to Kotter (2008), this involvement should begin at the initial stages of the process.

5. Set realistic expectations for followers

In order to maintain momentum during a change effort, leadership must set clear and precise expectations for the organization's followers (Friedman and Sebenius, 2009). Setting such goals and objectives enables each member to have a comprehensible understanding of the change taking place. Goals and objectives facilitate the creation of a new way of doing things within the organization and provide support to ensure success for the change process (Rogers and Meehan, 2007). It also creates grounds for the celebration of achievement. Leadership must provide rewards and recognition for those individuals who actively participate and help to facilitate the change process. These rewards and recognition serve as a source of motivation to all organizational members to work towards the realization of the change vision (McManus, 2007).

Conclusion

Change does not take place in a vacuum. Neither does it happen within a short span of time. Change is work. Change is deliberate and takes time. Change enlists both individuals and organizations to develop certain characteristics and adopt new ways of doing things within an organizational setting. With 70 percent of all change efforts failing, there is more to be done in today's organizations. Since most individuals are hesitant towards change, leaders should adequately prepare individuals within their organizations towards a level of change and work to ensure a high level of confidence among their followers (Guttman, 2008). The role of a follower during times of change should never be misjudged. It is imperative for leaders to work patiently and methodically with each member of their organization from the initial stages of the change process to the end. The vision for change must be compelling to draw even the most skeptical individual on board with the change process. Members of the organization must be brought up to speed throughout the change process through training, education, and the availability of information. Should leaders work to involve all stakeholders of their organization during a change process, the likelihood of obstacles will be minimized. Positive change can take place.

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