Need a good challenge?

Try to find a business, large or small, that is not in the midst of some kind of change. From globalisation and technology advancements to record breaking increases in industry consolidations, the nature of today’s business world fuels change — and lots of it.

Yet, it is probably change, more than any other single issue, that causes workplace conflict.

Any type of change, when not handled well, can be disruptive to the workplace. It doesn’t matter if the change involves new personnel, equipment, or procedures — for the transition to run smoothly, there must be education for everyone affected by it.

For managers who come from a position belief that says, ‘everyone hates change’, the problems that changes create, are quite acceptable. However, human experience and the advice of psychologists generally do not fit with the ‘everyone hates change’ philosophy.

Imagine that your grandfather suddenly wins a major lottery and offers you a brand new car as a gift. No strings attached. Is this a change that 99.99% of readers could handle?

In real life, change is fine, so long as those affected by the change understand it and see the benefit of it. But strangely, in organisations, these fundamentals of human nature are so often forgotten.

It is even true that where people understand the basis for decision-making, they are far more likely to accept change that does not favour them.

All too often, management strategies are based on identifying and solving problems. For instance, managers generally seek to minimise resistance to change. Yet, by focusing attention on the resistance, the very behaviours they wish to eliminate are highlighted.

When it comes to change in the workplace and ensuring that personnel are ‘onside’, communication is the key. Guidelines that all business managers and owners would do well to follow include:

• Describe in as much detail as necessary, a clear and simple case for change, based on current and anticipated market and customer realities;
• Ensure that all personnel have a clear understanding of the market forces that are relevant for the organisation;
• Develop and communicate as widely as possible a business plan that is flexible and responsive to the major market influences affecting the organisation.
• Ensure all parties are familiar with the consequences of organisational success and failure; and
• Tell and retell the same story consistently at every opportunity.

Of course, in introducing change smoothly, there are times when the clarity of the communication, the intensity with which it is delivered or even the extent that employees understand the message is not the problem.

The problem tends to revolve around the fact that what we say we are going to do and what we actually do are often at odds. For example, it might be that a manager tells employees that they should use the new methods because it will make their work and that of others easier. Sounds fair enough and from the manager’s point of view, this is actually the truth.
However, because workers are used to the old methods - and because the new ones take more time to learn and are more difficult to execute correctly in the early stages - they find excuses to continue to use the old methods.

In other words, the manager said that work would be easier, but the immediate experience of the workers is that it is not. A clear case of inadequate communication causing hassles. And in some cases, these sort of hassles that begin in quite a small way, can become a major and very costly ‘event’.

For communication to be effective every time, trust is perhaps the most important element for a harmonious, synergistic and efficient work environment. In most cases, where organisations have trust among employees they are usually successful.

And how can you build trust in the workforce?

Well, it can only exist if the right example consistently comes from the top. That’s non negotiable. But with integrity in place at the top, trust can be enhanced greatly where managers:

- Treat all employees as partners. Loads of trust can be captured where even a trainee or a first-day cleaner is treated with respect. Where managers manage by walking around, knowing their people and understanding the contribution of back-room players (who very often keep the place ticking) as well as the ‘stars’.
- Focus on shared, rather than personal goals. Like the players in a well oiled sporting team working towards a championship cup. Where employees experience a genuine feeling of being a valued member of a team, then trust invariably grows.

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