



ADAMS ON PVF Supply

■ by Joan Adams

CHANGE

You can't force people to change.

We are creatures of habit. We like predictability. Change means breaking habits. It means a permanent breach with the old routine. It is not obvious at all how one goes about successfully making change. First you have to figure out just what it is you want to change, then you actually have to exercise some discipline to get yourself to change and finally you have to resist all those external pressures, all those temptations that are pushing you constantly to “go back” to the old ways. Individual change is tough.

You don't believe me? Look around. How many folks do you know whose New Year's resolutions have already bit the dust? How many diets, exercise regimes and financial austerity programs go awry in a matter of days? Most of them.

And in the company environment, it's even tougher. Not only do you have to change but you have to “sell” the change, reward the change and reinforce the change to all your employees. You changing isn't enough – they all have to change with you for this to work.

We don't just wake up one day and say, “Today, I think I will change how I run my business.” Unfortunately, most people arrive at the conclusion that it is time to make some changes when disaster is all around them. It is when the pain level gets high enough – then and only then do we see that the status quo is NOT working and change is the order of the day.

We are ill-prepared for this wake-up moment. Change is emotional. Changing your business isn't like reconfiguring your warehouse. You're changing how your people work. Each employee will have a different reaction. Understanding how your employees will respond will help you better navigate through the choppy waters of change.

■ The Leaders

Some employees will be fearless and will plunge right into change. These folks are the forward thinkers – the ones who have been wondering why this didn't happen earlier. Identify them – use them wisely – they are your change leaders.

■ The Wait And See Crowd

The next batch of folks are the “wait and see” people. They aren't completely for change – nor are they against it. They are a more cautious group (and in most companies they make up the bulk of your organization). They want to know what this change means, and they are going to size up your level of commitment. They will be asking themselves, “Is this a temporary initiative borne of recent difficulties? Or is this change for real?” They won't actively torpedo change, at least not up front – but they aren't going to be leaders either. If it looks good and for real, they will probably follow. But if they sense something fishy, they will quietly dig in their heels. They are the followers – and you want to be sure they follow the change leaders.

■ The Refusers

The most dangerous group is the refuser crowd. No matter what the incentives are, no matter how dire the need or urgent the situation, these folks are allergic to change. They are perfectly comfortable where they are – they control their little world, their information, how they do their job. Change makes them vulnerable. No way are they going to give up their comfort zone – certainly not for your change initiative. There are two kinds of “No Way” people. The first kind is your basic refuser. They just won't do it – you can threaten, cajole, even bribe – they aren't going to budge. These people will cause you some problems, but nothing like the vocal, proactive refusers. These folks are dead set against change: yours – mine – anybody's. And they are downright loud about it. They complain, they undermine and they will actively recruit anyone who will listen to join the “No Way” brigade. These folks need to be converted or culled out of the herd quickly or their bad ideas and worse attitude will spread like a virus. These guys were probably not team players to start with – though some may be loyal employees. It may seem heartless – but they have to be isolated or even removed – it doesn't take much of the “refuser virus” to infect and kill your change efforts. The “Wait And See” crowd are the most susceptible. They will watch the refusers closely to see what happens.

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Now that we know who we are dealing with, let's revisit the "Eight Steps To Managing Change" in a little more depth.

1 Start now. Don't wait until you get into serious trouble.

Change is most successful when change is slow. Desperate change is rushed, and people don't respond well to being rushed.

2 Accept that you, your people and your company must change.

A change initiative is not the time to play the blame game. Identify your leaders and go forward.

3 Little changes are good (and will stick), big sweeping changes are disruptive (and tend to fail).

Your company has developed certain behaviors and habits over the years – these are part of the company culture. Be patient – it will take more than a little time to change this.

4 Listen to your employees throughout the process:

You can't force people to change – the best you can do is persuade them that change is in their best interest. Listen to them. This is the only way you can understand their concerns and address their anxieties.

5 Get an outsider to help in the process.

Outsiders aren't involved in office politics. They have no memories of the "good old days," no axes to grind and no favorites. They will be even-handed in guiding the change process.

6 Write down the goals and make them public. Everyone needs to know *why*.

This step is skipped all the time. Big changes are coming, everyone must participate, an outside change facilitator is hired. The rumor mill is running overtime. Everyone has a theory as to why. Write down the real (measurable) reason why you are shaking everyone up with change:

post it, broadcast it and make sure everyone knows why.

7 Mistakes will happen. Learn from them, but don't stop the process.

Face it – you are trying something completely different. Mistakes will happen. Your refusers are counting on it. Don't pull the plug at the first misstep. That sends a bad message to the whole company. "We're not serious about change. At the first stumble we are going to bail out."

8 Reassess your business and goals regularly – continuous change (continuous improvement) is the only way this works.

The market, your customers and competitors are always changing – and so must you. Practice does make perfect. The more change becomes part of your business, part of your company culture – the better you will get at it.

For more thoughts on change – I recommend Rich Reale's book "Making Change Stick," available at www.p-impact.com. <<

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