

*'Change is the law of life,  
and those who look only  
to the past or present are  
certain to miss the future.'*

John F. Kennedy



# Achieving Successful Implementation: The 'Why' is as important as the 'How'

Change is, and has always been, disruptive. But how we go about implementing change has transformed significantly over the last few decades. Today, the 'why' is as important as the 'how.'

By Alexia Chianis and Melissa Wilkinson

CHANGE REQUIRES displacing norms and adopting new and untested policies and practices. In decades past, the process of implementing change was much more directive and top-down. Leaders issued change directives that workers accepted without understanding why the change was necessary, or what outcomes it was expected to bring about. And today, the pace of change is increasing.

This linear approach to implementation is no longer effective. Today's managers and employees not only want to know *how* implementation will occur, *but also why*. When they do, they're more likely to be committed to the change, and as a result, there's a greater chance the implementation will be successful. A survey of over 2,000 executives supports this principle, finding that employee ownership of and commitment to change was the most often cited reason for successful implementation.<sup>1</sup>

So, as an organisational leader, how to go about balancing *the why* of change with the *how*, to increase buy-in and give implementation the greatest chance of success? How can you tell if your employees are ready for change, what's the best way to communicate with them

about it, and what are essential elements of a winning implementation? *Here's the why and the how.*

## Preparing Employees for Implementation

How your employees react to, and commit to implementation is tied strongly to their preparedness for change. Typically, employees need to navigate through two phases before they are prepared to accept change.

### Phase 1. Letting go of the known

Whether it's by recognising the ineffectiveness of a current policy or practice, or by understanding the positive outcomes of the implementation, letting go of 'the way things have always been done' is the first step to preparing for change. You can facilitate the 'letting go' process by:

#### Highlighting gaps in current method

Discussing the gaps or inefficiencies of the current procedure and/or focusing on growth or improvements the organisation may realise as a result of implementing change can help unlock your employees' current state of thinking about the

implementation. As they learn more about why the change is necessary and about the positive outcomes that are expected, resistance diminishes and the groundwork for embracing change is laid.

#### Being prepared to manage resistance

People are creatures of habit that innately feel best doing things the same way time and again. Change forces your team out of their comfort zone, and some employees will resist the move more than others. But resistance, when not addressed, is detrimental to a successful implementation. In fact, according to a large-scale change management survey, 76% of leaders named employee resistance as the number one obstacle to successful implementation.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, part of your implementation plan must include how you'll identify, address and rectify employee opposition. Keep in mind that the way in which you handle resistance will vary from employee to employee and team to team, but in every case it's essential to deal with resistance as soon as it's recognised. Understanding common reasons why employees resist change can help you take a proactive approach to dealing with it.

76% of leaders named employee resistance as the number one obstacle to successful implementation.<sup>2</sup>



## 5 Common Reasons Employees Resist Change

1. They don't understand the need for change.
2. They worry they lack the skills and abilities to be successful once the change occurs.
3. They fear the unknown.
4. They feel the change is being 'forced' and they haven't been consulted or kept in the loop.
5. They don't believe the benefits and rewards of the change are worth the effort.

*Reflection:* In most implementations, many things will NOT change: these are 'zones of stability'. Highlighting what will not change can provide powerful re-assurance.

### Phase 2. Understanding the implementation

During this phase, employees start to familiarise themselves with the change – how it will come about, how change will impact them, and eventually come to understand *why* the implementation is taking place.

#### Choose your messenger carefully

As you plan how to help your employees navigate through this phase, it's important that you give careful consideration to

who your messenger/s of change will be. That's because employees' feelings about the messenger can affect *how they process the message*, and even impact their acceptance or rejection of implementation. For example, when an employee is dedicated to, trusts and respects a particular messenger, they are more likely to have positive feelings about the change plan he or she outlines.

So, although the CEO or another senior leader often takes responsibility for communicating the implementation, the message may be more impactful when backed up or delivered by the employees' direct manager with whom they feel a stronger connection.

### Communicating with Employees about Implementation

Communication, when carried out properly, helps employees understand *the why*, which reassures them that although the transition away from established protocols to new ones may be uncomfortable, it is indeed the right move. This sense of confidence is essential to generating buy-in and commitment – which in-turn increases the likelihood implementation will be successful.

Here are four conversations you can have with your team to help them understand *the why*, and increase their confidence in the implementation process.

#### 1. Initiative conversations: *start people thinking about the issue*

Initiative conversations are meant to 'break the ice' by introducing the implementation in its simplest form.

#### 2. Conversations of understanding: *deeper dives*

This is the time to help your employees make sense of the change, including *why* the change is occurring, its short and long-term implications, and what role they'll play in the implementation. Remember, employees are not going to consider change until they feel there's a problem that needs to be addressed. To that end, leaders at every level must be able to communicate a convincing change story that clearly outlines *the why*.

#### 3. Result focused conversations: *aligning on how to achieve it*

The purpose of a result focused conversation is to lay-out how the employee or team will go about adopting the implementation. Whether it's outlining specific steps you've already decided on, or brainstorming milestones as a group, this conversation should review

or generate a plan of action that leads to successful implementation.

#### 4. Conversations of execution: *ensuring sustainability*

Conversations of execution take place once you've determined the implementation is completed. In addition to addressing any concerns regarding the change itself, this is the ideal time to get feedback on the implementation process, including what went smoothly, what didn't, and how implementation might be executed differently in the future.

### Elements of a Successful Implementation

Every organisation operates under unique conditions, so there's no 'one size fits all' approach to implementation. However, in our experience these are the key elements of a successful implementation.

#### 1. Achieving management buy-in

When management demonstrates support and buy-in to the change, there's a good chance staff members will also. So it's essential that leaders at all levels show support for the change and communicate that support when interacting with employees. Moreover, you want to help your leaders view change as exciting – something that energises them and challenges them in a positive way, as opposed to seeing it as another 'problem' they must deal with.

*Reflection:* Your managers want to know *the why*; and they should. This not only increases their buy-in, it also sets them up for success when the time comes for them to discuss change with their team.

#### 2. Laying out the case for change; shutting down the rumor mill

Remember, when cultivating employee commitment to change *the why* is as important as the how. So it's critical you communicate the case for change in a simple and direct way that gives your employees a clear understanding of why the change is necessary, and if possible 'what's in it for them'. If you don't communicate with your employees, they are left to rely on rumors and assumptions, which can foster anxiety, animosity and resistance.

#### 3. Target your change communication plans to your audience

As we previously touched on, everyone reacts to change differently. For instance, some employees will approach your change plan logically and rationally, while others will approach it with greater



*'Objectives are not fate; they are direction. They are not commands; they are commitments. They do not determine the future; they are means to mobilize the resources and energies of the business for the making of the future.'*

Peter F. Drucker

emotion. Therefore, when you're laying out the case for change, you'll want to use a variety of techniques and channels so every employee hears your message, understands *the why*, and has the chance to voice their concerns. From face to face meetings, to webinars, question and answer sessions, emails and forums, push yourself to be creative when it comes to your method of delivery.

*Reflection:* Organisations that go beyond top-down communication, and support bottom-up and lateral communication (such as between teams and departments) often enjoy more successful implementations.

#### 4. Encouraging employee involvement

We often think of employees as obstacles to change, but they can also be a wealthy resource. Frontline employees are often closest to the process or practice that's being changed, which means they have experiences and insights that may be helpful during change planning and implementation.

*Reflection:* Whether they contribute or not, asking employees for their thoughts and offering opportunities for them to participate in the change process not only generates feelings of inclusion and buy-in, it also helps them gain a better understanding of *why* the change is needed.

#### 5. Removing obstacles

Whether it's due to lack of co-operation from other parts of the organisation and co-workers, inadequate training, insufficient or improper supplies or

something else, your managers and employees are bound to be faced with some sort of obstacle when implementing change. Of course you can't anticipate every hurdle, but proper planning and open communication can go a long way toward removing potential roadblocks before they derail a successful implementation. As you look at your implementation strategy, consider whether your managers and employees have the level of competence needed to support the change. If they don't, what specific steps can be taken to increase staff competency? And involve them in the planning and analysis; it provides broader insights and builds ownership of resolving problems.

*Reflection:* A powerful symbol of change – and its importance to the organisation – is your ability to rapidly remove roadblocks. This demonstrates your commitment AND that change can be made to happen.

#### 6. Celebrating small victories & acknowledging contributions

A key, yet often overlooked element of a successful implementation is celebrating small wins – and acknowledging who helped deliver them. Establish achievable and authentic milestones, communicate them to your team, and celebrate once they've been achieved.

*Reflection:* Observing small victories has a compound effect. Not only does it reaffirm that the change is a positive and achievable, it also creates momentum that enhances employee buy-in, which in turn leads to even greater accomplishments.

Developing an implementation strategy that incorporates *the why* in addition to *the how* requires a significant investment of time and resources, but it's essential for success. If you'd like to learn more about developing a winning implementation strategy, or want help communicating change to your employees, we encourage you to look at our results page.

#### Sources

- 1 <http://www.hrvoice.org/preparing-your-workforce-for-change-a-strategy-for-success/>
- 2 <http://www.shrm.org/research/surveyfindings/documents/2007%20change%20management%20survey%20report.pdf>

Learn more about how the business improvement services offered by Coxswain Alliance can help you improve implementation with your team.

**CoxswainAlliance**  
Navigate change®