Leading Through Change

A Primer for Managers

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**Introduction**

Leading through an organizational change is critical for managerial success. Managers face various changes in the workplace. They may range from a transition in the manager’s personal work role to a complete restructuring of a corporation. Along the way there are changes to procedures, technologies, governmental regulations, machinery, and a host of other elements. As managers, we must face not only the specific changes themselves, but the implications of those changes for the people as well. The people side of change is the impetus for this primer.

When managing any change, unless the people involved are aware of the change taking place, understand why it is being made, become engaged with the change process, adopt new behaviors, and eventually achieve a point of internalization where they own the change, many organizational changes or improvements can fail.

Research and published findings suggest that project leadership is a differentiating factor for project success. Therefore, leadership is a significant success factor for any change to be inculcated into an organization. Many times changes are attempted while ignoring that organization change cannot occur unless there is at the same time personal change – one employee, one person at a time.

In this primer, I will share my own experiences and scenarios to assist you, the manager, to effectively lead through change.

**Leading Through Change – On a Personal Level**

As a leader, I find it difficult to focus on leading others to make changes if I am not personally aware of where I am in the transition and aware of my behaviors.

As an individual faced with change, regardless of the type of change, we must consider the following 5 steps:

1. Be aware of the change - recognize that a normal reaction is resistance during the initial stage. To better understand your own initial resistance, take personal time and ask yourself the following:

   a. What do you consider is best about the change?

   b. Do you feel you may be experiencing some form of Fear? Could the fear be associated with:

      - What you will have to do differently?
      - What you have to ask others to do differently?
For any change a person faces, the clarifying questions are critical!

After spending time to identify your own internal points of resistance, begin to look for ways to eliminate that resistance and move into more of a transition state.

2. **Understand** the change to reduce resistance.
   a. Gain more information about the change. Ask clarifying questions
      - What led to this change?
      - What problem or opportunity is this change addressing?
      - Is there a measure of success for this change?
   b. Confirm what you hear. Do you actually hear what the person advancing the change is saying or do you filter the message to take away what you had hoped to hear?
      - What problem or opportunity led to the change? State what you believe to be the case and finish with a question as to the level of correctness.
      - Determine what and who will be impacted and gain insights as to the size of the change by determining who and what are included in the change.
      - Determine the business imperative behind the change. Better understand the business problem or opportunity; find out what is expected in terms of impact to the bottom line.

3. **Be involved** in the change.
   a. Define your role in the change. Are you being asked to play a specific role? One of the key levers for change is communication. A critical role you can play is to be clear on the message and help to deliver it. Positive messaging helps change take place.
   b. Do you have specific deliverables associated with the change? Are there actions that must be taken to enable or assist the implementation of the change? How will the change be incorporated into your or your staff’s day to day work activities? What can be removed from your or your staff’s plate to focus on this effort? What more can you personally do to make the change work best for you and your staff?
      On a personal level and as a manager, consider incorporating the deliverables, outcomes or metrics associated with the change into
your and others’ employee performance plans such as team goals, major milestones for the group, or other forms of documentation that create focus, responsibility and accountability for the change.

4. **Own (adopt) the change.**

   *This aspect of the change initiative is truly personal. Take on some responsibility for the success of the change. Be willing to test the effectiveness of the change initiative. As a leader, request that your group serve as the pilot or testing ground for the change.*

5. **Internalize the change, make it yours.**

   *This is the point in the change process where you must truly become an advocate for the change. When discussing the change exhibit your affinity for and acceptance of it. Make the change yours. Take action, engage, and crusade with hands on experience with the change. Exhibit a full confidence that this change will positively impact me and the company. As a leader, communicate genuine enthusiasm about the change across your direct reports and personally coach them to so that they can internalize the change, too. Be poised to lead by example with behaviors that support and enable the change as well as effectively communicate and set expectations for the change across the organization.*

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**The Commitment Curve**

The commitment curve can visually demonstrate the movement from awareness to internalization of the change that is being made. By taking these steps as an individual you increase your level of commitment to the change. These are the same levels you will coach others through as a manager.
After working through the five (5) steps above and shown in the graph, you are prepared as an individual to transition to the new way of working. As you make your personal transition, begin to focus on your role of leading others through change.

**Leading through Change – As a Manager**

As you make your personal journey through the commitment levels, your role as a manager requires that you take on additional responsibilities. You need to bring others along with you through coaching and engagement.

As a manager and a leader, there are certain difficulties associated with change that you must address:

- **“Toe the company line.”** Take responsibility to understand and communicate the decided direction of the company and actively support achievement of the defined goals (using the 5-step approach from your personal journey).
- **Effectively manage people.** Every person is different and unique and will adapt to change at different paces and in different ways. What are you to do as a leader? How can you achieve the needed change in the organization you lead?

Using some of the questions above that helped you personally deal with resistance to the change you were experiencing, will provide you with key information that will enable you clearly communicate the change. Based on your work to own, adopt, and internalize the change, you are prepared as a manager to move forward with helping others, and to best manage the work that must be done to accomplish business goals.

To help move your staff up the commitment curve, use your 5-step journey to develop a plan for the team that will address the change and the business goals. That plan could include, but is not limited to the following:

- clear objectives,
- action plans,
- communication plans,
- team meetings, and
- status reviews.

To effectively manage the people aspect of the change management plan and take into account the differences and uniqueness of each individual. It is important to remember what you as an individual experienced when you learned of the impending change.
My Personal Change Experience: Example 1

During a corporate restructuring, I was a coach to the company Vice-President of Business Services. We were discussing implementation of an improvement plan for accounting processes. The VP was reluctant to engage in the discussion because, in his words, “I am not certain what my role is going to be. Without knowing this, I am not ready to talk about improving our accounting processes. Once I have my feet on the ground, we can talk.” Two weeks later in our regular coaching session, the VP disclosed he was now aware of his new role and was moving up the commitment curve. In the course of our discussion, he was wondering why his direct reports could not get behind the restructuring change. What a great moment of truth this became! As his coach this put me in the position to remind him that his direct reports were in the same place he was two weeks prior. Also, it is very difficult on people of all levels in an organization if change leadership is not evident. It is incumbent on all of us to remember our experiences with change and bring those into our change leadership opportunities.

A useful approach to consider as a manager for working with your employees comes from the work of William Bridges, Ph.D. [http://www.wmbridges.com/](http://www.wmbridges.com/). Dr. Bridges extensively discusses the individual transition a person goes through with change. The transition is made up of three phases: Endings, The Neutral Zone, and New Beginnings. The chart below can be used with your team. You could post and maintain the chart in a team room or share it as a PowerPoint slide that could be referred to during team meetings to indicate progress and movement of the team and its members.

The Transition Chart:

![The Transition Chart](image-url)
To use the chart:

- Determine the frequency needed to discuss the transition with the team based on the scope of the change.
- Clearly define what each of the zones mean.
  - **The ending, losing, letting go**: What is coming to an end? What is being lost? What needs to be released?
  - **The neutral zone**: The period of unknown when you realize something is coming to an end, but are unclear what is ahead.
  - **New beginning**: This is the new way of working, the “new thing.”
- Describe the meaning of the Y and X axes.
  - The Y axis runs from denial to acceptance
  - The X axis is the change time period from current to future.
- Have each person put a dot/mark of some type where they fall on the picture / graph.
- Hold a brief discussion.
  - Each expresses their position on the chart – why they see themselves at that place, what they need to move to the next stage, what is inhibiting their move, etc.
- Develop and communicate any actions that can help each individual make the transition.

As a leader, having clarity about what each employee is thinking and feeling in relationship to the change can enable you to better coach people individually and collectively. As a leader you need to be aware of what you can communicate that will help ease the transition. Consider relaying how the work your staff does impacts the overall change in direction of the company. Explain how they are vital to the success of the company’s and department’s goals. Ask and consider what is needed to help each employee view this change as a personal win.

These questions may be useful in better understanding your employee concerns:

- Is the gain or loss of responsibility positive to the employee? Does she want less or more?
- Will their day to day work be impacted?
- Is increased or decreased exposure to senior management positive or negative?
- Is fear that work/life balance will become unbalanced a concern?
- Is the opportunity for advancement or reward desired?
- Is the direction clear? What have they heard?
As a Manager and a Leader:

- **LISTEN**
  - This is difficult, takes time, and many times you may find it frustrating.
  - While listening to employees, actively seek their ideas. How can they contribute during the change? Uncertainty is greatest during the period of the **Neutral Zone**: Many times creativity is at its highest during times of uncertainty. Try to help employees capitalize on this latent creativity. Feed this creativity back into the change initiative.
  - Share with your team the benefits of volunteering for the pilot or the testing of the change. Explain that being the first out of the gate can help your employees to engage and be an important part of the change and its success. This approach can bring them a sense of increased control over their destiny. Plus it is a way for their ideas to be heard, and any opportunity for tweaking or improvement to be advanced.
  - Hold interim performance reviews with your employees and update and enhance their deliverables to include aspects of the change. This helps each person to begin to take ownership and to internalize the change in order to meet their performance objectives.

- **SET AN EXAMPLE**
  - Personal demonstration is one of the most effective ways to influence and coach employees through the transition into the new way.
  - Define and exhibit the desired behaviors, begin to work the new way, and encourage and recognize others for doing the same.

Through the above actions a manager can lead through change and demonstrate the flexibility, commitment, and strategic intent to support the business imperatives.

**My Personal Change Experience: Example 2**

Having spent my entire worklife in corporations, I have experienced many change processes, both successful and unsuccessful. Perhaps the most difficult of these was a restructuring in which three operating companies decided to consolidate all of their internal services into a single unit. The services, which resided in each company, were moved into a shared services organization. The immediate response to this kind of change is usually a fear of losing authority, losing control, and losing the necessary resources to do one’s job properly. This anxiety was
exacerbated in a very personal way by the fact that, at the outset, no one knew what their new position was going to be, or if there even was going to be a new position. The only member of our group who did know was our vice president. This was fortunate as it facilitated his ability to lead.

Perhaps the most important thing I did with my group was to meet with them each week and use the Bridges chart that appears on page 5. Each member positioned herself on the chart and discussed her point of view at that time. This strongly reduced anxiety and enabled people to function better in their jobs, with less of the rumor mill driving behaviors. The complete change process took a long time, over six months, but because of the reduction in staff anxiety and the improvement in job functionality, the change was ultimately successful.

I have continued to successfully use this process at any time change is indicated.

**Leading Through Change – Managerial Choices**

Let’s consider three approaches to one situation. On looking at these ask yourself the following questions:

- Which one do you find personally more appealing?
- Have you ever experienced one or all three of these?
- As a leader, which one would you prefer to emulate?

**APPROACH ONE:** A leader announces that we are going to a new HR system instead of our current one going forward and everyone in the organization said, “Yea! What do you need me to do? I can’t wait to get started.”? Think about that for a few minutes. Would that be great?

**APPROACH TWO:** A leader announces, we are going to a new HR system instead of our current one going forward and the primary reaction is resistance, fear, stress, etc. The management expectation is that everyone will begin using the new system as the way of working on completion of the transition. Although the new system is put in place on time and on budget, employees continue working as was required by the old system. The result is that the implementation of the new system fails.

**APPROACH THREE:** A leader announces and puts in place a cascaded communication that the organization is moving to a new HR System. The communication includes the background on the change, the expected results, and how this supports the overall direction of the company. It also includes recognition that our current system has been successful and most everyone is comfortable with it. Because of that, plans are being developed to help employees make the transition to the new system. Also during this time, ideas are welcome and updates are provided on a regular basis through various media, including high level announcements, newsletters, and town halls. Direct managers / supervisors will hold team sessions with more specifics. Employees can also submit Questions for Answers to a website.
Making managerial choices is critical to the effectiveness of leading through change. As a manager you make decisions as to the approach you believe will work best with any defined change. Some changes may be welcomed as indicated with Approach One above. Other changes may meet more resistance and if you do not put in place some type of transition plan to enable employees to work through what is changing for them and the way they work, the change may fail as noted in Approach Two. However, by engaging employees and helping to build commitment to the change then the change can become the new way of working and achieve the desired business results.

**My Personal Change Experience: Example 3**

I experienced a complete failure of a change process that did not operate by the guidelines for success above. This was a software change that was not well planned. The users were not engaged in the design process. Consequently, the new system did not meet the needs of all the users, leaving them little choice but to go back to the old system. In such circumstances, leadership methods that might induce the employees to go through with a change are really not appropriate. However, your judgment as to whether users were properly engaged and the software properly tested to ensure it meets user needs must be clear. The conclusion that the new software would not work has to be based on clear evidence, and not the result of your own anxiety about the change when communicating it.

**Leading Through Change – a Complete Scenario**

The context:

Two companies are merging. Within the merged company, a new organization is formed bringing together persons from over 20 different organizational units across the two companies into one team that will be responsible for the back office processes supporting the commercial markets for the products. An executive has been named as the Vice-President for the new organization.

The Vice-President’s Personal Transition:

The VP is notified of her assignment in the new organizational structure. She must go through the personal transition of endings, the neutral zone, and new beginnings. Additionally she must quickly build her commitment to the new organization and prepare for meeting business goals.

What does she do?
Takes some personal time: Works through endings and to be fully aware of the change that is coming

Is there a sense of fear?

She works through some key questions asking, “Am I anxious about what will have to be done differently?”

No, she doesn’t believe that what she does is going to be that different in the new organization.

“Am I anxious about what I may have to ask others to do differently?”

To some extent, yes. A few roles that cross functional lines will need to be more specifically defined and those persons will need to be placed into one function or the other to advance their careers. Some of her folks are not sure which would be best for them. She asks, “How do I coach them?” It is a large responsibility.

“Am I anxious about how I will have to make some tough decisions?”

Yes. There are various trade-offs to consider in terms of meeting customer requirements and meeting internal goals, and how to most effectively achieve both. Is there a way to find a win-win situation. How much time do I spend looking for the balance?

She draws on previous experience.

In one instance, the timeline was very short – a matter of weeks and she had to find “homes” for 4 of 6 employees, provide one a severance, and keep one to work for her. As a manager new to the corporation she had to build effective relationships quickly and depend on the employees to help “sell” themselves to potential new positions within the organization. Selecting whom to place, whom to sever, and whom to include as a part of her new team, was a very difficult decision. As one may imagine, that initiated fear. She did not want to make those decisions only 6 months into her new role in a new corporation.

She reflects on how this helps prepare her to make any tough decisions.

“Am I anxious about how I will have to deal with conflict?”

Not as much. She, like most, does not like conflict, but she is not conflict adverse. Conflict can be healthy and many times produces a greater result.
Although, one change effort early in her career did initiate fear, when she realized the process change being implemented could have a negative business impact. This meant she needed to address the process change owner, who was also her manager. She experienced fear on recognizing the conflict this would create. It was a dilemma to work through and address in an effective manner.

“Am I anxious that I will lose power or position?”

Yes and no. Not so sure it is the power or position but the perceived respect and consideration. One of the fears she faced during one organizational change was she would no longer be in a position of access to the most senior leaders. She learned from this experience the importance of influence verses position to shape behaviors and decisions. She realized regardless of her position, the power of influence was more critical to change success.

She seeks understanding through discussions and research

To help align with the change, she must paraphrase back what is heard in terms of: What is the change?

She summarizes her thinking, ‘Based on the work conducted to merge the organizations, it was decided to form a new organization that would focus solely on the commercial market support processes, is that correct?’

What is she not hearing?

She also hears implied in this announcement that the rebate and incentive programs for the commercial markets are being brought together into one organization.

Others confirm their understanding of the same message:

A colleague’s perspective is that the incentive programs, along with the distribution and the partner support services are to be combined in this new organization.

The corporate reality is that the truth was a blend of both her perspective and the colleague’s perspective, plus a few things she had not considered. This is why it is so very important to understand what is changing.
She begins to formulate how best to communicate with current direct reports and develops a clear plan of communication, building her involvement.

She thinks through how to best engage current employees. Just because she knows her position in the organization, does not mean her direct reports are in the same place she is with respect to their personal transition.

She meets with her direct reports to talk about the uncertainty, present important facts, and provide information to be shared with their teams. This demonstrates how as a leader it is important to meet with one’s own team.

She requests that her direct reports, in preparation for their session with their teams, to complete a walk-through of the steps in their own personal transition.

She formulates the key messages, specifies her role and the role of the newly formed organization. This demonstrates her adoption of the merger and the new organization.

She develops a message to share: During the analysis, it was determined that a focus in commercial markets area would increase our partner’s satisfaction and enhance their ability to do business with us among our numerous product lines. Plus there would be a real opportunity to realize needed cost savings.

She engages direct reports to confirm their understanding of their role. For example, one direct report sets the tone for other team members by asking ”Do I understand that I am being placed in this organization to develop its strategy, help create service level agreements with internal product line business units, and address aspects of quality?”

She clarifies the facts and their specific impact to her current team. She drafts the key facts so that she can effectively prepare and coach her direct reports through their own personal endings, neutral zone, and new beginnings.

Fact 1: Early retirement is being offered at this time and one well respected team member has elected to take advantage of the opportunity.

Fact 2: Two of the members are better suited as managers in another part of the organization and will be moving to lead teams in the consumer space.
Fact 3: Outsourcing is a part of the new business model and has an impact on the service aspect of the team. Two managers are finding themselves in a position similar to that of the VP in her example above, where they are scrambling to find “homes” for their direct reports. Plus they are unsure if they will have a role in the new merged company.

Through her involvement, the VP begins to consider the future. She reviews and identifies those of interest to her as members of her new team. She develops a plan to speak with each of the potential managers and to learn more about them and how they can effectively contribute toward the goals of the new team.

The VP begins to internalize the changes that are taking place, realizing she will no longer have certain individuals to work with her and that she will have new staff with whom she will soon meet for the first time. They are taking on key leader roles in her new organization. She is gaining enthusiasm for putting together a new team to face exciting challenges.

The above scenario has briefly taken you through the phases of transition and shown you movement along the commitment curve from awareness to internalization for one person. This works the same for each individual regardless of position in an organization. The managers have a difficult role because it requires not only addressing personal change, but that of direct reports, adjunct team members and other stakeholders.

Leading through Change – Tips from a Large Company Change
The primary purpose of this primer is to share with you how as a manager you can effectively lead and adapt to change. Secondarily, there are lessons that can be taken from large company changes and applied locally. Following are a few examples.

- Symbolism can play a key role to assist ending, losing, letting go of the way things are.

As a leader, discuss with employees ways to end the organization of which they were currently a part. Results of this discussion could include: holding a mock burial, writing down what was going away on pieces of paper and ceremoniously throwing into a trash basket or into a safe bonfire, or putting items in a suitcase and sending them away. Although symbolic, this helps some better cope with the end to the organization they had been a part of for 15+ years.
• Communicate, communicate, communicate during the Neutral Zone

Before the new structure is finalized throughout the organization, enable creativity and maintain open communication. Leaders established weekly Q&A sessions held in large designated conference rooms and any employee at the location could attend. A health fair was organized to assist with stress in numerous locations. Informative meetings were held at the team level. A specific exercise on building trust was facilitated with teams and there was a process put in place to feed ideas into the planning teams as they worked out the specifics of the new organization.

• Kick off the new structure with some fanfare to start the New Beginning.

Consider some of the following successes: 1) develop a cascade of teaming sessions. After a manager goes through a session with his peers and his manager, he would conduct a similar session with his direct reports. This would be cascaded throughout the organization over the first few weeks of the new structure being put in place, 2) Hold integration sessions. If there is a new manager or new team members, hold an expectations session to define how the team will work together. 3) Utilize Myers-Briggs, DISC, Birkman, or some type of preference analysis to build teams. 4) If there is a new graphic or logo use that to provide some item or items to all employees, e.g., recyclable cups, t-shirts, pens, etc.

Leading through change is about orchestrating people to manage things. As organizations face change, leaders are expected to be nimble and quick to transition from the current to the future state of operations. This document can provide information, strategies, and tactics to assist you as a leader to first make the change yourself, then to help those around you to make that change in a manner that will not disrupt the ongoing business.
Leading through Change – Conclusion

Leading through Change is about you personally making the transition, going through endings, the neutral zone, and new beginning, and then leading your staff and others through their transition. By taking this approach, you are positioned to be that leader who is nimble and quick to move to the future state of the organization.

Leading through Change requires that you first build your own commitment to the change. Commitment includes becoming fully aware of the change, understanding the change, seeking involvement in the change, adopting the change and finally, internalizing the change. On reaching the point of internalization, commitment is realized and a person is fully engaged in the new beginning.

Only as each person in your organization transitions and builds commitment to the change, can the organization effectively change to the new. This is true whether the change is the new technology, a new team, or a whole new organizational structure. With personal commitment, the organizational change is realized one person at a time.

References


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