CHANGE MANAGEMENT

How to Tell Your Team That Organizational Change Is Coming

by Liz Kislik

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From time to time, every leader has to deliver news that is hard for employees to hear. Even when businesses are doing well, organizational and structural change is to be expected, and acquisitions, reorganizations, or policy changes can affect people's jobs in

ways that create feelings of fear, anger, or sorrow. Each employee wonders, “How will this change affect me?” or assumes, “Oh, this won’t be good! How am I going to get my work done?”

Announcements like these can be daunting. And they go awry if they’re insufficiently planned or poorly delivered. But by attending to the following crucial components, leaders can be ready to communicate the news in ways that will help recipients adjust well and recover as quickly as possible.

Plan more time than you ever thought necessary to prepare the content, the delivery, and the necessary follow-up. Typically, you should expect to hold not just one initial “all hands” meeting or videoconference, but also a series of smaller team and individual conversations as follow-ups. As one of my clients was going through a series of organizational changes, a valued middle manager reacted negatively in each town hall, asking inappropriately detailed questions as if it was a game of “gotcha,” to show that the ramifications hadn’t been fully considered. Once his boss made clear that he would have the opportunity for continuing formal and informal discussions, the manager kept himself in check and was able to offer specific suggestions to improve implementation.

Also, take pains to coordinate announcements so that no one is caught flat-footed if the news is being released at different intervals by individual managers and organization-wide outlets. It may feel like you’re overinvesting in planning, but it will save you time and pain in the long run. Giving people multiple opportunities to take in and process the announcement is essential for thorough understanding; receiving the information from the right sources in the right sequence is crucial for credibility.

Equip all levels of management to explain the context. Provide training and rehearsal or role-play time to everyone who will need to communicate the message; don’t assume they’ll have the right instincts. Otherwise, to escape their own discomfort, they may dump the news or blame management, either directly or indirectly.

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One client's executive team had to do significant repair when frontline managers announced to their teams that there would be a cutback in bonuses because "they said you didn't do enough," rather than explaining the reasons for the results and the plans already under way to improve those results for the future. Employees who had worked as hard as they could were frustrated and resentful, and were untrusting of senior management for some time thereafter.

Describe the organizational pain, and how the new solution alleviates it. Instead of just announcing a disruptive change, give the background of what's not working today and why the new plan is the best way to get to the desired outcome. Focus on how customers have been hurt, how the business is incurring extra expense, the negative brand impact – and how the change will help mitigate those problems. When one client had to consolidate multiple operations to increase efficiency and reduce time to market, it was clear that there wouldn't be room for all the incumbent leaders. It helped to review the shared history and the acknowledged pain points.

Personalize both the impact and the resolution. If you don't, employees may not understand which specifics apply to them, or even how the company is providing support or services to help them cope. For example, in the small group or individual meetings, come prepared with all the necessary details to be able to answer personal questions immediately, rather than creating even more anxiety and aggravation while you assign someone to work out the specifics you didn't research in advance. When one client changed its health plans to keep costs down, it helped covered employees research

their doctors' eligibility and find new practitioners when necessary. The employees were grateful for the individual attention and support, and were subsequently less resentful even though items such as deductibles and co-pays had gotten more expensive.

Give the affected people as many options and as much participation as you can. When they have choices – and the necessary information or support to make them – employees feel more respected and maintain more pride and autonomy. The closer people are to the work, the more likely it is that they'll generate practical ideas. At one organization that was having some financial difficulties, we facilitated a series of meetings about cost-cutting measures that let everyone look for ways to help out – even though they were adversely affected by some of the very measures they proposed.

And don't assume you know what's best for each individual or what they might choose. When a client company was absorbed into a larger operating unit, some deeply committed HR executives stayed till the bitter end, providing outplacement for their colleagues despite knowing that by the time they looked for jobs themselves, the best opportunities would already have been filled.

Demonstrate humility and responsibility, not just authority. Many leaders mistakenly believe that they'll be given a pass for shaking up people's lives if they say they're suffering over the decision or the disruption themselves. Even treating the problem as a shared responsibility can backfire and feel manipulative to employees. Instead, say things like, "I'm sorry I didn't anticipate…" or, "I was too enthusiastic about x…" to show that you take seriously the impact of the situation on others. You can't prepare for every curveball, so if you don't have the answer to a question, say something like, "Wow, that's a question we didn't think about, but it's a good one. We'll get back to everyone with an answer early next week." Don't try to fake your way through.

You can use this kind of planned approach to get the most mileage out of your organization's good news, recognizing that everyone won't necessarily perceive the good news as being good for them personally. It can feel unnecessarily painstaking to take the

time to plan and then work through all the details with your employees. But knowing you've done everything you could to help them withstand challenges and move ahead will make it much more satisfying when you finally achieve the desired results.

Liz Kislik helps organizations from the Fortune 500 to national nonprofits and family-run businesses solve their thorniest problems. She has taught at NYU and Hofstra University, and recently spoke at TEDxBaylorSchool. You can receive her free guide, How to Resolve Interpersonal Conflicts in the Workplace, on her website.

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