Dealing with Change Resistance

Resistance to change has many causes. When it comes from technical issues, like a lack of skills or resources, addressing those sources (for instance by training) can eliminate much resistance. When the problem is rooted in political and cultural issues, however, it is harder to deal with. These problems grow out of people's social and emotional bonds and their well-entrenched habits of thought and behavior. The underlying issues may be hard to discern, particularly if the individuals in question are articulate and able to screen their real concerns with plausible-seeming excuses and distracters.

- Threats to people's established work relationships, and to their customary habits and interactions on the job can create intractable resistance, both active and passive. Interactions that sustain the customary social relationships, on the other hand, tend to lower resistance and promote greater readiness for change.
- Distrust and cynicism on the part of employees about management frequently make them leap at the most unfavorable interpretation of any proposed change. Such resistance based on misunderstandings and rumors can catch the initiators by surprise.
  - It is important to air and clarify misunderstandings as quickly as possible!
  - Direct, face-to-face meetings are essential. When employees are distrusting of management, they tend to regard newsletters and other house publications, mission statements, and video presentations as inherently unreliable, and they discount any information delivered by such means.
  - Some people simply have a low tolerance for change in general. They find change inherently more stressful & anxiety-producing than others do. They may fear they cannot develop the necessary new skills & behaviors, despite assurances to the contrary. They will resist even if they understand objectively the change is a good thing.

Some helpful approaches

- Don't get tunnel vision. If you focus too narrowly on a change project, particularly on the technical aspects, you may be oblivious to the other issues that trouble people.
- Recognize that people in different positions within the organization are going to view change from different perspectives. While upper management may regard change as an opportunity to strengthen the business by aligning operations with strategy, to take on new professional challenges, and to advance their careers, people lower down are more likely to view it as disruptive, intrusive, unsought, and unwelcome.
  - Be alert to this potential gap of perception and its implications for people's readiness to accept change.
  - Practice empathy: understand the situation from other people's point of view.
- Accept that the prospect of change can arouse intense feelings among other people in the organization. Anger, fear, anxiety, and cynicism are common.
  - Many people who are used to restraining the public expression of their own emotions get annoyed or uncomfortable when other people act in strongly emotional ways, which can set up a vicious feedback.
  - However, just because people may not show their emotions openly, that does not mean they don't have them. Recognize that strong emotions lie behind many behaviors and attitudes even of people who appear tranquil.

Focus on Behavior, Not Feelings

- It is impossible to "legislate" people's emotions.
  - Attempts to do this by setting new rules and trying to get "buy-in" early in a change initiative frequently backfire. Rather than supporting the change, people may feel manipulated, or suspect that management has something unpleasant planned for the future.
- Accept that managers have more control over employees' behavior than over their emotions.
  - To set a positive cycle of change in motion, focus on helping workers fine-tune their behavior first.
  - Rather than suppressing the fear, cynicism, or anxiety that change often arouses, let people voice these feelings in productive ways.

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