

CHANGE A LEADER'S CHALLENGE

BY DAVID COLMAN



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"I'm a strong advocate for change, but I wish it would just slow down for a few months so I could get caught up." If I've heard this said to me once by business leaders, I've heard it a thousand times. The reality of it, of course, is that change is not going to slow down and, if anything, it's going to increase in intensity.

We've all heard the phrase "Change is constant." If only it was. True, change is ever present and in that context could be considered constant. But its frequency is exponential, not constant. And therein lies the rub. As leaders, if we knew when and how change was going to impact us, we could at least manage it better. As it stands, so many leaders are often only reacting to change.

But as leaders of change, what are we managing? Quite often it is the reactions of our workforce towards imposed change. These reactions can often include tardiness, absenteeism, doing the minimum, and, in severe cases, sabotage of both a subtle and not so subtle nature.

What is causing these reactions in both our employees and sometimes us? The answers are legion if Amazon.com is to be believed. Currently there are 23,699 books listed at Amazon that deal with personal and business change. To save you the effort of filtering through all these, I'll share my perspective on the things that frighten employees and leaders alike about change. The causes fall into two categories.

First, there is the obvious economic fear related to change. Change often means that jobs are lost, responsibilities are often increased or diminished, and processes are automated. The question of "where will I get lunch money from" becomes very real for many people when companies cut back. Some years ago, I was invited to work with a group of highly skilled hospital professionals in Vancouver who were facing massive change. Just before my session with them, they were told that half of them would be let go within a month. As qualified and marketable as these people were,

the big fear they expressed was economic. Mortgage payments, vacations, kids' university tuitions, and so on were top of their lists.

The second reason for fear of change is just as significant. Failure by leaders to fully involve employees in the change process causes the negative reactions that I mentioned earlier. I genuinely believe, given the same information and parameters that you have as a leader, many employees will make as good a decision as you, if not better. After much 'improvement' to facilities at Dorval Airport some time ago, an Air Canada ticket agent angrily shared with me the fact that the improvements were in no way ideal, and that the company never once asked her or her co-workers how things could best be done. This issue seriously impacted her commitment to her work and her support of the changes.

So what can we do as leaders to deal with the impact of change on our employees? Here are five tips:

- Rather than just react to change, work proactively with your employees to be innovative in your approach to everything your organization does
- Explain fully to everyone what changes are needed and why
- Seek the employees' ideas and their concerns
- Answer their questions thoroughly – be open and honest
- Monitor the changes closely and keep everyone informed at all times

Your role as a leader of change is clear. Together with your employees, you must lead change and innovation. You must own your leadership. These five tips will go a long way to help you achieve that goal.

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