

How to Avoid 8 Common Mistakes of Managing Change

Apprehension is a common side effect of dealing with the prospect of change. Change is scary, no one questions that. But how you manage fear is a strong indicator of how you will manage change. Whether you're a leader charged with creating and implementing change or an employee who will feel the affects, doing something new, different, and out-of-the-ordinary takes hard work, determination and a little bit of faith.

All too often, however, great leaders buckle under this pressure. Managers climb the corporate ladder seeking more responsibility and, yes, more compensation, but have never actually been trained or schooled in navigating the challenges faced by a manager or leader. So all of a sudden, hard-working, smart people are at the top rung saying, "Now what?" In walks their boss and says, "We're going to start doing things a bit differently around here and I want you to implement it." Talk about instilling fear! So naturally, there are mistakes that are made along the way. Your chances of dissipating fear before it arises increases dramatically if you become aware of these pitfalls before you embark on your new strategy or plan with your group.

Author and extraordinary thinker John Kotter wrote a book called "Leading Change." He points out that while we strive to focus on the positives and the "what you should do" tactics, it's also important to look at the potential mistakes that can take place as well. Kotter suggests that while there are many different types of missteps that people can make, there are eight critical ones. If you could reduce the error rate right out of the gate, it just might make the process of change a bit less painful - perhaps even invigorating.

Let's take a look at those situations that Kotter believes are the biggest mistakes, and then think about how you can avoid making them.

1. Forgetting that the change must happen quickly. If you don't spark that fire in your employees or customers, they won't be motivated to chip in and your efforts will fall flat. Make sure you create a sense of urgency for the need for change. Showcase what could happen if the change didn't happen now so that your team will fully understand the consequences.
2. Not building a team that will guide the change. Creating change is hard work but many companies assume the opposite. If you don't have a guiding coalition that will institute the vision, you will fail. This team must believe in the vision and keep moving forward to create the necessary changes.
3. Lacking clear vision or foresight. How are you going to get people on board and believe in what's taking place if you don't have a clear vision of what's needed? And worse, what if you have a fantastic vision but don't communicate it? Your employees and customers don't really know what's happening. Without clear vision, your tactics and strategies for change will become confusing and your efforts will lack direction. Be clear with what you want to happen so that others understand as well.
4. Forgetting to communicate the vision. As eluded to above, if you have a great vision but don't communicate it to your team, your efforts will fall short. Unless you have everyone on board helping - even if it requires pointing out short-term sacrifices for long-term gains - you will never create change; you will only create the fear of the unknown. People want leaders to guide them and communication is essential to successfully doing so.
5. Letting obstacles get in the way of the vision. Negative attributes in any circumstance will mitigate positive movement so don't be married to trying to fulfill a new vision using old structures and standards. Whether it's a middle manager who isn't buying in to the plan for change or an organizational structure where current jobs don't encompass enough responsibility to make change, you must remove any obstacles (potential or real) that could stop the process from happening.
6. Failing to make plans. Notice I didn't say "plan." You need to have short-term and long-term plans about how you're going to reach your goals. If you plan to meet short-term goals, chances are, you'll meet them. If you only talk about and hope to meet them, you're taking a passive approach to creating change. Be proactive. Look for ways to establish obtainable goals throughout the year and then put plans and strategies in place that will achieve those goals. Ultimately, all of the small goal wins should contribute to the larger, long-term plan.
7. Prematurely celebrating victory. Of course, this is very easy to do, but make sure that even though you should praise achievement of short-term goals, the game really isn't over until you've solved your bigger problems.
8. Not establishing the new way of doing things into the company's culture. It's one thing to successfully solve and meet your goals. It's another thing to live by the new mantra. Change has not truly been successful until you've engrained it into the culture of those you do business with.

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