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Reconnecting after Change

“The effects of change on people in an organisation can be significant performance dips and disengagement, and it can take an agonisingly long time for the whole organisation to pick up again.”

After working with many organisations and their leaders during change, there are some distinct lessons to learn. There has been so much written about managing change, that you would be forgiven for thinking that it is by now second nature. However, the lessons are worth emphasising, even if you have heard them before, since there is little evidence that leaders of change are fully taking on board their implications.

Even though changes within organisations make rational sense, there is frequently what might be described as a sort of ‘lostness’ reported by many employees as they make their way through the process of change.

We often hear employees say “we knew what the organisation stood for before all this happened, we are not sure now,” and “I think I can see what they are trying to do, but it is not the organisation I joined”. It is no wonder then that often a change initiative does not deliver what was expected, that good people leave, and many people feel disenfranchised and unhappy.

This is the unintended and undesirable aftermath of change. Too often, leaders declare victory much too soon.

What is really needed is a listening and responsive period, where the critical role of the leader of change is to provide a safe area where people can report how they are honestly feeling. It is only then that the leader can work with both the positive and the negative emotions of the transition.

The emotional life of an organisation is often undernourished during the process of change. This frequently boils down to managerial fear. For some managers, part of their fear is that if they open a Pandora’s box of emotions, all that they will hear is negative criticism with no positive comments. Yet, what the people in the organisation need is a period where their leaders of change provide opportunities for people to open up and really report how they are feeling, with the leader ready, willing and able to work with both the positive and the negative emotions that emerge.

This takes a degree of honesty, integrity and skill on the part of the leader. It is not for the leader to say: “So how are you feeling about this change? Trust me; that is not going to bring about the right response. All that will bring about is a fairly mediocre “well, it is not really going anywhere” kind of response.

People need to be allowed to speak out, without being judged or condemned as being negative and against change. What is needed is for the leaders to begin to provide some kind of modelling of openness and receptivity. This might involve the kind of forthright opening statement along the lines of “OK, I understand that not all of this is great for you and I have picked up on a lot of unrest over what has happened”. At least that starts the conversation, opens up the process and allows people to say what they really feel as opposed to what they think they should be saying.

Good listening needs to be accompanied by some stimulus. It is important to provide a degree of challenge during change. If you make it nice and safe again too soon then some important negative emotions and valid comment and criticism will be repressed and you will see the consequences coming back to bite you at a later stage.

So be prepared to listen, but also to challenge in order to get things moving again. Adopt a ‘no holds barred’ approach to getting problems and issues on the table and then set short term goals to overcome difficulties. Wise leaders of change will keep the atmosphere a little bit edgy for rather longer than it feels comfortable in order to make sure that issues have been widely debated and discussed. Such openness saves everyone a lot of pain in the long run. **MF**

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Clark, Graham

2010-09-01T00:00:00Z

Graham Clark, Reconnecting after Change, Management Focus, Issue 29, Autumn 2010,
Pages 14-15

<http://dspace.lib.cranfield.ac.uk/handle/1826/6939>

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