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Professional Leadership Results, Inc.

Helping you align your people with your vision



Ch-Ch-Change

In all our day-to-day business experiences, there is nothing that rivals that of change. We attempt to navigate its tumultuous waters, we try to manage its fickle nature, and we sometimes even conquer its battle strategy. But most often we avoid it like the plague. Oddly enough, we rarely talk about change in itself because we're trying so hard to describe what to do about it and why we fear it.

WHY DO WE PERSIST IN THINKING THINGS WON'T CHANGE?

Perhaps it is human nature to believe that when we step out of the bed in the morning, the floor will be there, sturdy as ever, so that we can fumble our way to the kitchen to turn the coffee on. That seems like a pretty safe assumption, doesn't it? Certainly, for many years, we could have assumed that our daily lives would be, for the most part, the same—we'd rise early with the sun, tend to our chores and our plots of land, help our children grow, watch the sun set on the horizon. In fact, prior to the Industrial Revolution, our lives—in terms of economic, social or occupational status—did not change significantly from year to year or even generation to generation.

By Libby Wagner, Founder of Professional Leadership Results

But, all this changed, of course. And, if we're honest, it was always changing; no matter the almanac considered, there was always the weather we couldn't perfectly predict! It is the pace of change in current times that has us spooked. It is in our ability to respond to the new day beyond the trek to the kitchen coffee pot that has us cranky. In fact, we really don't hate change at all, we just don't like feeling as if we have no say in it. Think about it: if you wanted to change something, like your hairstyle, the color of your living room walls, or your city of residence, you'd just do it. You'd change in a snap and be happy about it! Our challenge is that some changes require strategy and contingency planning. But mostly, if we think the change is going to be for the better, we're all about moving forward with it. It's when we feel like we are *being* changed; we are the passive receptors or victims of change, which makes us unhappy.

IT CAN BE HELPFUL TO GAIN A LITTLE PERSPECTIVE ON CHANGE

Here are some suggestions for why we resist it:

- 1. Fear.** This is number one for a reason. Primarily, *fear of the unknown and fear of loss* are some of the first indications of resistance. Even if the change is for the better, it's going to be different, and we don't know how to deal with different yet, so we'd rather have this old thing we know about. At least we know about it! Or, we fear losing status, routines, co-workers, responsibilities, etc. We become attached to people and routines and we create our perceptions of the way things are around their consistency. We lose those familiar things and now what do we do?

- 2. Resentment.** This could be a close cousin to fear, but it begins to manifest itself in behaviors or attitudes toward the change. It can specifically be directed at the person(s) instituting the change, like a new boss or supervisor, or it can be more globally directed, as in “the government” or “headquarters” or “Administration”. So, instead of responding to whether the change itself is for the better, the resentment is focused specifically on the change agent, i.e. kill the messenger.
- 3. Disagreement.** Sometimes we’re not afraid and we’re not resentful, we just believe the change is wrong! We think whoever made this crazy decision is hanging out in the ozone, hasn’t thought it through, or has become disconnected from the real work. It’s just a stupid decision and worthy of complaining, moaning and lost time of productivity. What’s almost worse is when this disagreement response is perpetuated by a lack of information; it can lead to apathy and malicious compliance.

Well, none of that sounds good! What if you are the change agent? (Why does this bring to mind some secret squirrel activity with hushed conversations, dark sunglasses and after-hours meetings?

Uh-oh, here comes the change agent to make us do something we don’t yet know about!)

HOW CAN YOU HELP IMPACT THE QUALITY OF THE CHANGE PROCESS?

This is so simple; you’re not going to believe it!

- 1. Information.** In my experience with clients, teams and leaders, this is the number one issue—the perception of a lack of information as it relates to the daily workings of an organization. So here’s my suggestion: share all the information you can. Make it readily available in a variety of forms or forums. Give everyone an opportunity to know the specifics of the change, anticipated timelines, and expectations. Err on the side of more information rather than less, and if some information is confidential or sacrosanct, tell them you can’t tell them all the information right now. Be honest.
- 2. Inclusion.** I’ll start right up front with a caveat: don’t do it unless you mean it. When you can include employees in the decision-making process about the changes to occur, it creates

a smoother path for buy-in to the change and therefore less resistance. Sometimes, because of timeliness, nature of the proposed change, etc. inclusion is not possible or practical.

Shared governance is a lovely idea, but not everyone needs to be in on the conversation about compensation packages or which toilet paper to put in the restrooms—it’s not a prudent use of people’s time to be in on every decision. However, if you examine the big picture of the situation and you decide that participation in the discussion, or a survey, or another query of some kind would benefit the change process, do it. However, don’t institute an exercise of inclusion and then ignore the feedback. This doesn’t mean that you have to include every crazy idea, but you can create a way to value input and respond with logic and effectiveness aligned with your mission. Think long-term. Think about the next change when you’ll try to gain buy-in again.

- 3. Follow up.** This is the ongoing practice of sharing and receiving information. Create a way to gather feedback during the change process. Create a way to respond to feedback. Communicate in person, in writing, in groups—any way to assist people to adapt while minimizing fear, resentment and disagreement. If you don’t follow up, you’re simply setting yourself up for resistance again.

Told you it was simple—not easy, but simple!

Most often, it is the way we perceive change that steers us in our responses. If we see change as a learning opportunity, a challenge or a way to know something different about ourselves, we can feel confident that we can deal with it, even if it wasn’t our idea. We always have choices:

- **We can choose internal acceptance;**
- **We can choose to externally influence the situation;**
- **We can remove ourselves from the situation entirely.**

We are not slaves to change. We can partner with change to create work and lives that we have not even imagined! ❖

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