



Engagement: The **KEY** to Helping People through Transition and Change

by ERICA GROSCHLER

How often do we hear stories about change implementations that have gone awry? What contributes to the challenges of effectively implementing a change? What is missing?

With people becoming increasingly cynical about so many organizational transformations, it doesn't help that the traditional "change management" approach (i.e., sponsor or steering committee-led) only reinforces the jaded impression of just another top-down initiative, which in turn, triggers resistance.

So how can we better support changes?

Consider the sandbox as a metaphor for your latest organizational change. How big is this sandbox? Has management created a sandbox so small that there is little, if any, room to maneuver? Or has it offered a large, open sandbox with a lot of opportunity for stakeholders to participate and create?

Continuing this image, it would be far more satisfying if all the players could become actively engaged. Unfortunately, very few organizational changes provide well thought out 'play areas' where affected individuals can contribute, define and influence the terrain in which they will ultimately be very much involved.

Engagement Principles

With a narrowly constrained change sandbox, there is often minimal opportunity to influence or contribute to a proposed future state. This can cause problems to arise in its implementation. What follows is a set of principles

that will help improve both acceptance and facilitation of change, regardless of its size and scope.

1. INVOLVE THOSE AFFECTED BY THE CHANGE

Traditional change management generally occurs in top-down fashion. The implicit message this sends is that management believes productivity will suffer if too many people get involved in the transformation. This stands in contradiction to what actually happens when there is high involvement in the change process of affected parties as early as possible. Experience demonstrates a much higher likelihood of increasing stakeholder ownership in the change with early involvement, and a concomitant decrease in resistance.

As an example, a 1,200-person company was planning a move to a new facility/location in three years. The engagement strategy incorporated an initial large group conferencing¹ methodology which included customers, front-line staff, community partners and all levels of leadership to define the future state and culture of the new organization. A year later, the same groups were brought together again to help design, in more detail, the future state of the organization, focusing particularly on the interdependencies of departments. Finally, in the year before the relocation, all the players were once

more reassembled to participate in a conference to learn about change and transition as well as to help create strategies for mutual support through what was anticipated to be a significant, transformational process.

2. HONOR THE PAST AND PRESENT

William Bridges², an internationally recognized specialist on managing change, states that "it isn't the changes that do you in, it's the transitions." Transition starts with an ending - a letting go of the old reality. Frequently, when change is introduced, people begin to fear that they will lose something they valued in the old way of doing things. Allowing time to support people through this part of the transition by helping them honor the past can reap huge benefits both for them - decreased anxiety and peace of mind - and, ultimately, the organization as they contribute to facilitating the transition and creating their future roles within the new environment. (This can be done through scenario building, storytelling, creating maps that link to the past and generating learning histories.)

3. SURFACE PEOPLE'S RESISTANCE

Driving change through like a bulldozer will not eliminate people's resistance. In fact, it is more likely to increase it. Far better, therefore, to design interventions that surface the resistances and then work through these via dialogue.

An organizational change with tightly defined parameters provided minimal opportunity for affected stakeholder input and collaboration/contribution toward the future state (i.e., a very constraining sandbox). As a result, resistance ran extremely high. Faced with the consequences of stakeholder opposition, management adopted an engagement strategy that included bi-weekly 'check-ins' with staff for two-way conversation regarding what was going well and what were their major challenges with the change. While the implementation was tough, participants (including those who had been most resistant) shared their gratitude for being listened to, validated and given the opportunity to express their perceptions of the negative effects of the change

including how these could be eliminated.

4. CREATE OPPORTUNITIES TO EMPOWER THOSE AFFECTED BY CHANGE

Bear in mind that when people are expected to 'get on board' with a change they have not chosen, requiring them to let go of familiar ways of doing things, this can be very disturbing for them. However, even when the sandbox is quite small, with little room for participant contribution, there are always ways to create opportunities to empower people.

As individuals shared their issues with the change described above (#3), they were also given the opportunity to problem-solve together rather than simply turn it back to the project team or manager for resolution. The results were higher performing teams and an increased ownership feeling and sense of control over the change.

By applying the four key principles described above and seeking engagement opportunities, regardless of the size of the sandbox, you can increase the probability of people feeling empowered with respect to a looming change. This, in turn, generates a greater sense of personal influence over their futures.

It is worthwhile noting that resistance is purely one part of the transition process. As performance professionals, our role is to devise strategies to surface resistances, then go on to provide opportunities for intense, meaningful dialogue that enhances understanding of issues among all parties and, ultimately, help individuals through their transition so that they not only accept, but embrace the new state.



TPS Consulting Ltd.

ERICA GROSCHLER is President of TPS Consulting and specializes in organizational development. She can be reached at ericag@telus.net or www.tpsconsultingltd.com

¹ *Terms of Engagement: Changing the Way we Change Organizations* by Richard H Axelrod

² *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change* by William Bridges