Improving Performance, Managing Change

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In today's world, there is no such thing as permanent stability. Change is the norm.

Like performance improvement, change can be thought of as a process to be understood and managed. Although definitions vary, **change management** can be defined as a group of techniques used to help people understand the process of change and accept improvements in the way they perform their work. During a performance improvement project, members of a performance improvement team may take on the role of change manager for the project, or the department or executive managers for the areas affected by the change may play this role.

Identifying the Losses

When a performance improvement project is still in the planning stage, identifying the losses that will result from changes that need to be made may be difficult, especially if the change affects more than one area of the organization. The performance improvement (PI) team should start by describing the proposed improvement in as much detail as possible. Using flow charts to map out processes may help the team to identify all of the areas that will be involved. Changes made in one area may create the need for secondary changes in other areas. The task of the PI team is to identify all of the people who will need to let go of a current way of doing things before an improvement can be implemented. The team also needs to determine exactly what will need to come to an end for the project to be successful.

Identifying the losses after the improvement has been implemented is much easier. The PI team or change manager for the project needs only to ask the people affected a few questions, such as "What is different for you now?" or "What don't you do any more now that ...?" Ideally, identifying and acknowledging the losses necessitated by a change should come before the change is implemented, but the ending phase will happen whether it is planned for or not.

Acknowledging the Losses

Depending on the extent of the changes to be made, representatives of the performance improvement team, department managers, or senior executives should explain the planned changes to the people who will be affected. The change manager should be prepared to accept and acknowledge the reactions that result, even when they seem like overreactions.

When endings take place, people may feel angry, sad, anxious, confused, and depressed. All of these feelings are normal reactions to loss. Allowing people to express their emotions openly is difficult but critical to success. The key to effectively handling this step in the change management process is active listening: asking questions about how people feel and sympathetically acknowledging the legitimacy of those emotions.

Providing Information and Asking for Feedback

The timing and content of communications should be carefully planned in advance as an element of project design. It is crucial that the proposed changes be described in specific detail early in the improvement process. If people do not understand the purpose of a change, they will have difficulty accepting it. If they are not sure what the change will entail, they will come to their own conclusions about which processes will need to end and which will stay. And if they are not told how the change will affect them, they may assume the worst.

The PI team or its representative must provide as much information as possible to the people who will be affected directly by the proposed change. Withholding information may lead to intense speculation about the changes to come, and such speculations often create feelings of helplessness and anger. Although some information may need to remain confidential, the change manager should never fabricate answers to questions that he or she cannot answer fully. Rather, the manager should

acknowledge the questions and provide as much information as possible. Glossing over the potentially negative aspects of the change can only create mistrust.

Information about the change project should be communicated consistently and often. Repeating the information in a variety of ways will help people accept the change. Newsletters, special announcements, staff meetings, and other forms of communication can all get the message across.

The PI team should be sure to seek feedback during every critical stage of the improvement project. During implementation, the people actually applying the change should be asked to suggest refinements and improvements. And after the project is complete, they should be asked to provide feedback on whether the goals of the project were met.

Marking the Endings

Actions always speak louder than words. The change manager should find some method to mark the ending of the old way of doing things. Removing obsolete equipment from a treatment area, rearranging work spaces, or replacing old procedure manuals with new ones can be a symbolic end to the old way. Managers sometimes make the mistake of criticizing the way things were done in the past as a way of introducing improvements. Creating negative pictures of the past is not effective. Instead, the past should be honored for the positive things it accomplished and for the foundations it laid for the future.

Managing the Transition

The length of the transitional period between old and new depends on the extent of the changes to be implemented. Obviously, the restructuring of a whole organization would require a much longer transition than the installation of a new piece of equipment, but both would require that people become accustomed to a new way of doing things. In the first case, everyone in the organization would be affected. The installation of a new piece of diagnostic equipment, however, might affect only a small number of people.

The transitional period is a difficult time for everyone. Productivity is likely to diminish as energy levels fall and people feel unsure of themselves and of the systems on which they depend to accomplish their work. During any transition, people tend to put themselves in one of three camps: those who oppose the change, those who endorse the change, and those who have decided to reserve judgment until they see how things turn out. Interpersonal or interdepartmental conflict may result.

The change manager's task is to help people to understand that the chaos the organization is going through is a necessary part of change. It is during this seemingly chaotic period that people learn new skills, redefine their roles, and work through their questions about the new processes or structures to be implemented. Special training in creative problem solving and team building may be helpful during this period.

The change manager also needs to ensure that nothing falls between the cracks. Temporary systems may be needed to maintain operations. For example, interim team leaders may be assigned to handle staff scheduling, or temporary record-handling procedures may be instituted during the transition between a paper-based and a computer-based health record system.

Clarifying and Reinforcing the Beginning

The arrival of a new manager, the installation of new equipment, or the move to new offices only begins the beginning. Before a beginning can be successful, the people affected by the change must have gone through an ending, during which the loss of the old way of doing things was acknowledged; and a transitional phase, during which they built new relationships, learned new skills, accepted new roles, and refined policies and procedures. A true beginning confirms the end of the old way of doing things.

The PI team, the change manager, and other decision makers in the organization need to reinforce new beginnings on every level. Nothing will doom a change effort more quickly than conflicting messages. For example, an improvement that involved making the change from traditional directive management to a self-managed team would not succeed unless the employees were delegated the authority to make decisions.

Celebrating the Successes

Humans use ceremonies to mark beginnings as well as endings. The change manager should find a way to help people celebrate their successes in making meaningful changes in the way they perform their work. A ribbon-cutting ceremony at a new facility, an open house for a reorganized department, and a demonstration of new equipment for colleagues outside the department are some examples of celebrations that mark new beginnings. Even the accomplishment of a minor procedural improvement should be acknowledged with a sincere thank-you to all of the people involved in conceiving, planning, and implementing the change.

Performance improvement initiatives sometimes fail when the human factors in change are ignored or mismanaged. By managing the transition from old to new, change managers can ensure the success of performance improvement efforts.

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