

Leading large-scale change in organizations can be like driving a car down a road full of potholes, curves, and speed bumps. Skillfully using the steering wheel, brakes, and accelerator can help maneuver past them, but if the management team is not in the car, there's not much point in starting the trip.

Want to Make Major Changes in Your Organization? Make Sure Managers are Fully Committed.

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Making meaningful and lasting changes in an organization requires a compelling reason for making changes that everyone understands, a proven process to follow, a clear vision for the future, and the resources necessary to manage the changes during the transition. Without these in place, change efforts inevitably meet high levels of resistance, take too long to get results, or stall altogether. But even with these three elements in place, one other factor, if not properly addressed, will almost always lead to certain failure. That critical factor is the level of commitment and visible support by the management group.

Although there are many factors that determine the ultimate success of an organization change effort, experience shows that the key variable is whether managers are on board, and more specifically, the level of commitment and leadership they demonstrate. The degree to which the management group supports and leads the change process, whether it involves Lean Manufacturing, Six Sigma, culture change, or other organizational change strategies, is the critical factor to success. Successful organization change is not one-dimensional. Structures, systems, and the work culture must be aligned for performance improvements to be made. Given that management has the most influence and control over these “elements of change,” the consistent and visible commitment by managers to the change process is directly related to the amount of real, lasting change that occurs

In addition to the typical feeling that “we don’t need to change,” and “we’ve always been successful doing it our way,” there are three underlying personal “fears” that prevent managers from being effective, committed leaders of change. Although it is very easy to assume that managers will be supportive just because they are managers, these “fears” are very real even though they most likely will not be verbalized and could be unconscious. The impact of these fears on the level of managers’ commitment should not be underestimated.

Fear of Losing Control

First, managers typically are trained, promoted, and rewarded for being problem solvers, being in control, and for “making things happen.” For example, one outcome we’ve seen in organizations

forming work teams and implementing *Lean Six Sigma*SM is a shift in decision-making and accountability to employees who previously were only required to show up for work and do what they were told. For people to accept these new responsibilities, managers must train them in new skills, coach them through daily applications, support them when mistakes are made, and encourage individuals and teams to hold themselves accountable for results, all while resisting the temptation to micromanage. In other words, managers must give up control, and this is very hard for managers to do. They are apprehensive at the thought of giving up control because they suspect that they will ultimately be held accountable for poor results and are doubtful that they will receive much credit if and when results improve. This fear and apprehension can block them from making a sincere effort to develop the capability of others in the organization, resulting in widespread cynicism and a lack of trust by the people who report to them.

Fear of “Not Fitting” the New Work System

Second, managers are fearful of not being able to function in the new work system. They may be concerned about not having the required skills to succeed in a new work system, not being able to perform satisfactorily even with training, or not being given the chance to learn and grow into the new management role. They may believe they’ll be unable to discard their “Theory X” management style. They may have seen other managers shuffled off into less-meaningful assignments, and may know of people who left the organization because they could no longer function effectively. These fears create resistance to the changes the organization is implementing and lead to behaviors that clearly expose their lack of commitment.

Fear of Losing Their Jobs

Unless addressed by the organization, managers are left to fear for their jobs. It is not a question of being ineffective in a new work system or getting poor results. In the manager’s way of thinking, if their teams do not develop according to expectations, then he or she must have done a poor job and will be let go. On the other hand, if their teams develop and results improve, the organization will no longer need managers and supervisors because everybody will be managing themselves. The manager is out either way.

Assessing Management Commitment

It would be incorrect to suggest that *all* people in management positions resist change because of these fears. Many of a change effort’s “pioneers” will be managers who see the logic and the need for change, and take a leading role in getting the process started. Others may join up early in the process and exhibit real leadership. The fact remains, however, that when large-scale change efforts stall, fail, or do not reach their full potential for improving results, the *main* cause can usually be traced to the lack of consistent and visible management commitment to the change effort.

The first step in increasing the commitment level of management is to find out what managers think and how they feel about the changes being discussed. The accompanying framework can be useful in assessing the existing levels of management commitment.

Assessing the Level of Management Commitment

Level 1: *Opposes*

- Actively opposes: “We’ve never needed this before, why now?”
- Demands proof and guarantees up front that it will work.
- Argues for competing priorities.
- “Monday morning quarterbacks” the change process and those directly involved.
- Holds back useful information, then “comes to the rescue” when problems are encountered.
- Goes out of his/her way to find fault and looks for people to blame.
- Lobbies behind the scenes to go back to the old way of doing things.
- *Talks against the supporters, walks in the opposite direction.*

Level 2: *Ignores*

- Tries to avoid the process.
- Pretends there is nothing new about the change effort and may claim that “we are already doing this.”
- If the changes are successful, makes excuses for the past, thus demeaning the accomplishments of the new way of doing things.
- Says other areas require attention and energy.
- Will not spend time learning about the change methodology.
- “Feigns” ignorance or confusion.
- Looks for reasons or excuses not to get involved.
- *Doesn’t talk the talk or walk it; criticizes those that do.*

Level 3: *Tolerates*

- Takes the position: that it is OK to go ahead, as long as the “business” doesn’t suffer.
- Conditionally sanctions, depending on which way the wind (politics) is blowing.
- Stays on the “sidelines,” ready to jump on board if it is going well.
- Resists being directly involved or accepting any personal accountability.
- *Doesn’t talk the talk much; resists walking the talk.*

Level 4: *Supports*

- Supports change and believes it is the right direction for the organization to take.
- Initially, may not have *strong* personal convictions.
- Consents, approves, endorses, and advocates, but may not embrace with evident enthusiasm.
- Supports others but rarely initiates.
- Invests time and energy, but is cautious about taking too many risks.
- *Talks the talk, but mostly encourages others to do the walking.*

Level 5: *Champions*

- Publicly embraces the change effort.
- Provides leadership through words and actions.
- Believes strongly that it is the right thing for the organization to do.
- Finds ways to overcome obstacles.
- Invests personal time, energy and resources to support the change effort.
- Provides the long term vision and a strategic perspective.
- Sets high expectations for self and others.
- Recognizes and rewards individuals who are making it happen.
- *Talks the talk and walks it.*

Increasing Management Commitment

Once commitment levels are assessed, strategies should be developed to address the issues that are leading to low commitment. At first, it is helpful to generalize the commitment level for the various *groups* of managers, then plan for how to address each group. For example, the issues as seen by first level managers in operations may be quite different from the issues concerning managers in administrative areas. Experience indicates the following action steps need to be taken early and continued throughout an organization change process to help managers get on board:

1. Communicate clearly to managers the ***vision and change strategy*** of the organization. Make it crystal clear why the organization is changing, the expected benefits to the organization from making these changes, and why senior managers are initiating the effort. Give managers every opportunity to understand why changes are needed and how the changes might impact them on a personal level. Give a description of the future management role even if it is not totally defined. Encourage questions and answer them as honestly as possible, even if the answer is not totally clear. Do this several times.
2. Establish and communicate ***expectations of the managers' role*** during the transition period. What level of support is expected? What will they be doing differently during the period as the organization begins to change? How will the organization deal with managers who may not “fit” the new work system or who may desire a different career path? Address job security issues.
3. Create a formal, ongoing ***communications system*** to keep managers “in the know” and to address questions and issues that are raised. As the organization proceeds through the change process, many new situations will be faced, raising questions that were not anticipated in the beginning. Establish managers as the primary conduit for keeping all members of the organization informed of progress, and hold them accountable for passing along information to employees and reporting back questions and feedback.
4. Train managers in the ***leadership skills*** necessary to be effective in the new work system. Establish and communicate expectations for changes needed in their role and leadership style. Follow the training with one-to-one coaching to reinforce the effective use of new behaviors and take action to address difficulties they may have. Remember that *everyone* will be learning new skills and behaviors.
5. Conduct ***career counseling*** with managers on an individual basis. Be clear about perceived strengths and weaknesses. If a different career path is called for, address how the person will be “kept whole.”
6. Establish a ***feedback system*** so that all managers receive honest feedback on how they are perceived by members of the organization. Be direct with feedback received and actions to be taken in response.

Summary

Nothing is more important to the success of an organizational change initiative than the commitment level of the managers. When faced with the uncertainties of change, people look to their leaders for guidance and clues as to how they should react. If they see managers whose behaviors indicate they are less than totally committed, their doubts will remain and their resistance to change will increase.

Being candid with managers about the importance of their roles in making necessary improvements in the performance of the organization is crucial. Taking the necessary actions to address the issues and difficulties that they will invariably encounter are key to gaining their sincere commitment. Set high expectations, listen intently, react appropriately, and communicate, communicate, communicate.

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