

Planning for "Change Management"

(or: How to waste your effort and your money with the best of intentions)

by Mark Braverman, Ph.D.

More and more companies are realizing that ongoing change creates high levels of stress on both individuals and work organizations. This results in an increased frequency of operational crises as well as personal crises in the family and work lives of employees. If you are an executive or Human Resources professional, you recognize that the need for some kind of organization-wide intervention to help your people through these transitions. But beware! Most of the traditional approaches to training and skills development will not help you with this goal, and may backfire.

While skills development and training are essential, they are meaningless if the surrounding organizational and social structure is lacking. The fundamental need during times of transition and upheaval is for communication, support and the opportunity for timely response and active, flexible grappling with the challenges of ongoing change. Such an approach focuses on process, rather than content, and on the creation of structures to facilitate ongoing communication and growth over time rather than merely on the transmission of skills or the accomplishment of time-limited logistical objectives.

Successful transition management requires creating structures that will ensure and facilitate ongoing attention to the process of change, rather than "one shot" training programs and other interventions, which are at best useless and can even backfire with respect to lowering general morale and eroding trust in management. The goal of any transition program is to have managers --and union leadership, if a union is present -- become aware of the tasks before them and of the ingredients necessary for success in facing the challenges of the future.

AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO TRANSITION MANAGEMENT

Many companies, with the best intentions, falter in their attempt to plan for transitions because they lack an understanding of the dynamics of change. As a result, they fail to help their people at all levels cope successfully with this very stressful process. Let's contrast the usual approach to this problem with a "better" approach based on systems thinking.

1. Coping with the stress of change

Traditional approach: Take managers through brief trainings to "learn" to accept and grieve the loss of the old, to redirect professional goals in alignment with the new company structure and vision, and to recognize effects of stress on personal health and functioning and take steps to reduce and manage stress symptoms. These are valid issues, but the training sessions occur at one point in time and are simply "delivered" to staff by

external consultants. These interventions do nothing to facilitate communication between organizational levels, allow for sharing and support between peers, or promote crucial communication and transition processing going forward.

Better approach: Continual and fundamental change threatens individual and group health by fostering isolation, mistrust, and breakdown of communication. You must create enduring structures to allow for ongoing, regular sharing and communication among employees about the effects of ongoing change. The focus of transition management program should go beyond skills training and symptom management. Rather, the goal should be to ensure that systems exist to identify areas of need and respond with effective support throughout the period of transition. It is impossible to predict what needs will emerge, from what quarters within the company, and when.

2. Effective roles for upper management and executive leadership

Traditional approach: Executives make high level, "tough" decisions, and delegate the implement and communication to middle levels. Top people make rare appearances at crucial points to deliver news in a highly structured, tightly orchestrated way. Sometimes they have retreats, during which they create "vision statements" that are publicized throughout the company. When leadership carries out its planning and decisions without being visible, they are often perceived as hiding.

Better approach: Finding a guiding vision is important, but is not a static process. Leadership must be involved constantly in the listening process and in the flexible response to changing needs. They need to be involved, not isolated or protected from "bad news," and they must be kept in frequent contact with many organizational levels. How top management communicates sets the tone for the entire company: Are they seen as facing the hard choices with courage and openness? Or do they, unwittingly, promote an atmosphere of mistrust and fear by remaining remote? Employees, from upper management to rank and file, will respect and follow when they feel they are being treated with honesty and straightforwardness.

3. Crisis response procedures

Traditional approach: Wait for crises to happen, and deal with them using standard disciplinary, human resources, legal, and labor relations procedures.

Better approach: Empower a Transition Management Task Force to deal proactively and preventatively with the myriad of crises that accompany restructuring (e.g. disabled managers, behaviorally impaired or potentially violent employees and managers, dysfunctional work groups). The Task Force is the eyes, ears and heart of the company, monitoring how the organization is doing. It will be in a position to consult and take action steps to respond to needs arising from the stress of change and restructuring. This should be a multidisciplinary group with connections to the highest levels.

4. Labor relations and the role of the unions

Traditional approach: The unions sit on the sidelines as restructuring unfolds. Threatened by the prospect of job loss for members, they may attempt to prevent the inevitable, thus increasing an atmosphere of adversarial confrontation at a time when collaboration has never been more important.

Better approach: The unions can be on the front lines with respect to the health, safety and productivity of workers during crucial periods of transition. Labor is a key stakeholder in any efforts to provide retraining for displaced workers. As part of a collaborative effort, the union is a key source of information about the well-being of the workforce and an invaluable player in any effort to respond to critical needs. The union has a key role in cases of where conflict or threatened violence disrupts the workplace. Union participation on the task force and in the planning and ongoing implementation of transition management is crucial.

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