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GUIDE


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How to avoid the 5 mistakes most leaders make when implementing change!



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The first thing you need to know, for most people, change is hard!

When it comes to change, the number one challenge we hear from leaders we've worked with is: the constant struggle they face to get people to embrace and accept any change. Unfortunately they fail to realise that they have more than likely committed at least one, but probably more, of five fatal mistakes most leaders make.

They need to recognise until these five mistakes are addressed they will always struggle.

Avoiding these five mistakes will save you both time and effort; and your people a lot of heartache, stress and worry.

So here are the mistakes and the specific actions you need to take to overcome them.

The Mistakes

1. Failing to realise people need to fully understand what the change is and why it needs to happen now

Whilst most leaders typically communicate what the change involves, rarely do they spend the time required helping people to fully understand why things are changing. Unless people can fully understand why the change needs to happen they are more likely to feel varying levels of confusion, worry and mistrust. Unfortunately the first mistake many leaders make is failing to acknowledge change can have this impact and subsequently don't provide their people with the information they require at the outset.

How to avoid it

- Explain to each individual affected the specific business rationale for why things need to be different. Ensuring the people you lead, understand the logical reason for the change is the first step in helping them to accept it.
- Ask people to highlight what in their opinion is currently not working well. Obviously this needs to relate to the specific area that is changing and you need to ensure you include any complaints they may have made to you previously about the current way of doing things. This exercise will help them to independently validate the need for the change and see the potential benefits of it. You can then use this information to paint a picture of how things will be better once the change has been implemented.
- Make sure you talk regularly to your people; keep reminding them what will be changing, why it's changing and when it's changing. Even if you don't have any new information to give them, tell them: 'I have no new information about the change, but as soon as I do I will let you know'. Using statements like this will help people to feel they are being updated regularly and will quieten down the office 'jungle drums'. By communicating regularly about the change people will realise that it is happening and they cannot bury their heads in the sand and avoid it.

2. Fail to explain specifically what will be different and what the individual will need to do as a result of the change

The second mistake many leaders make is they fail to outline exactly what the change will mean for each individual involved. Without knowing this information it makes it extremely difficult for people to embrace the change, not to mention successfully implement it. As their leader you need to help them comprehend what the change means for them personally and specifically what they will be required to do.

How to avoid it

- Sit down with each individual involved in the change and eliminate any ambiguity for them, by ensuring they fully appreciate and understand the impact of the change for them personally.
- Identify what additional specific training or support your people will need in order to adopt these new ways of working. Depending on the change, this may involve requesting guidance from different departments in the organisation to help both you and your people fully understand what training is required.
- Provide your people with timescales for specifically what is happening and how this impacts them and their work. Make the people you lead aware of any key milestones and if possible provide them with a visual reminder; for example use a white board or spreadsheet that everyone in the team has access to.

3. Fail to demonstrate genuine care for the individual and how they are feeling as a result of the change

People naturally experience feelings of anxiety, frustration and even depression (not the clinical kind) during times of change. You might well be able to relate to this if you've ever experienced change yourself. It is often referred to as 'the dip' because when the reality of change hits an individual, literally their mood, performance and motivation all take a nosedive.

The mistake many leaders make is to shy away from helping people to deal with these types of feelings. Instead they either label people as 'negative', which only increases their levels of anxiety; or they completely ignore how people are feeling, because it's too difficult to deal with, making the person feel undervalued and damaging their long term commitment

How to avoid it

- Don't ignore it! People will ALWAYS have some emotional reaction to change and as the leader you need to know what this is. The simplest and most effective way to do this is to ask them how they are feeling. You may need to probe a bit, as they may believe it's too dangerous to be honest, but be tenacious and keep asking until you know for sure how they are feeling.
- However they feel, assure them its ok. Let them know whilst you can't possibly understand how they are feeling as you're not them, you can definitely appreciate it must be hard for them
- Keep giving your people opportunities to share their fears, anxieties and feelings without judgement or consequence. Discuss options that would help them to feel better and where possible answer any concerns they may have

- Keep making time for them with regular catch ups, even if it's just 5 minutes at the coffee machine to find out how they are; trust us it will make a huge difference to them!

4. Fail to give individuals 'permission' to experiment and get creative with the change instead choosing to be overly directive

The next mistake many leaders make is failing to recognise change can often be a great opportunity to increase levels of creativity and engagement.

Typically leaders simply try to implement new systems and processes with little or no input from those having to action them. This will intensify people's feelings of 'been done to' and does little to engage them in the whole process of change.

One of the most effective ways to help people move out of 'the dip' is to give them permission to experiment with the change and find new and different ways to make it work, with the leader stressing there will be no consequence for mistakes or if things don't go to plan.

How to avoid it

- When the change is first announced, tell your people they have your express permission to experiment and take risks when implementing the change initiative. Encourage them to make mistakes and get creative!
- Even if the change involves implementing a new process that is non-negotiable, it doesn't mean you and your team can't get creative with it. For example you could look at breaking it down into bite sized chunks, developing resources that will help you implement it or even changing the person who completes it
- Hold regular sessions, either on a one-to-one basis or as a group where they can share their ideas and brainstorm new ones. Ask them to try out and incorporate these ideas and let you know how it goes
- Keep the communication channels open, encouraging them to give you regular updates about what's working and what isn't, including plans they have to resolve any issues
- Finally give them regular feedback on how they are doing, both from a point of view of what they need to do differently and what they need to continue doing

5. Fail to give people enough time to embed one change before attempting to introduce another

Whilst every person experiences change slightly differently, it's fair to say they all follow a very similar pattern, beginning with shock, followed by feelings of anger and frustration before moving towards acceptance. The final mistake many leaders make is failing to realise there needs to be time for people to move through these differing stages before introducing any further change.

If change is relentless people become overwhelmed by it, unable to move on and deal with all their feelings of frustration and unhappiness.

Ideally people need time to accept one change before another is introduced. Of course in today's climate that is not always possible, as change is pretty much a constant feature in most organisations. However there are some things the leader can do to help people cope with the volume of change.

How to avoid it

- Where possible defer change initiatives until you know most people have accepted the previous change. This can be achieved by observing your team to see how well the new ways of working have been integrated, and asking them how they feel about the most recent change they have experienced
- Of course it's not always possible to defer some change initiatives, so you might need to help people compartmentalise the different change initiatives happening at the same time. Help them to prioritise which tasks and activities they need to get to grips with first. Work with them to master those before moving on to the next
- Finally in times of multiple change it is more important than ever to make time to have regular catch ups with individuals to prevent them from becoming stuck in 'the dip'. Keep emphasising the business rationale for all the change, acknowledging how difficult it must be for them, reassuring them it's OK to feel bad, whilst at the same time encouraging them to experiment and be creative

So there you have it, the 5 mistakes many leaders make when implementing change and how to avoid them. We really hope you've found this guide useful. By ensuring you avoid each of these mistakes, we promise you'll be well on the way to making it easier for your people to accept and embed change.

For us, the best way to help people through change is to focus more on the leadership side of your role. With this in mind you'll probably have noticed that quite a few of our suggestions about how to avoid those 5 mistakes are based on being able to effectively use some really key leadership tools, such as feedback and people focused one-to-one conversations. If you'd like to learn more about how to use each of these tools and a range of other ones too, then please don't hesitate to contact us or visit our website.

Also if you're dealing with a particular leadership situation, be it about change or anything else people related we'd love to help if we can. Please drop us an email and we'll get back to you to arrange a no obligation chat.

In the meantime, it just remains for us both to say thanks for reading and look forward to being in touch soon.

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