Great Leaders Overcome Resistance to Change

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Leaders have many responsibilities such as communicating a clear vision, developing strategy, inspiring employees, allocating resources and ensuring operational excellence. However, when an organization needs to shift from something old to something new, no responsibility is more important than effectively leading change. When a new business process is needed, a new IT system is installed or a shift in go-to-market strategy is implemented, nothing is more important than quickly moving people to embrace and execute the new process, system or strategy.

Not only is leading change one of the most important responsibilities, it is one of the most challenging. Leading change challenges even the best leaders. Leaders can be very effective in keeping an organization's momentum going in a given direction, yet be inept in changing that direction. People get comfortable with the status quo. They become proficient at what they do and settle into it. They might readily accept a subtle change, such as doing what they currently do a little faster, as long as the core of what they do doesn't change. It is when the core of what they do changes that they are forced to move outside their comfort zone. The change then becomes more than an inconvenience and they often resist it.

Changing how someone fundamentally does something is non-trivial. Changing the way sales people sell, marketing people market, engineers design and managers manage for example, can be a big problem for them. It is akin to forcing you to eat with your non-dominate hand. While you can certainly do it, it is unnatural. It is uncomfortable. It makes what would be an otherwise enjoyable meal an unpleasant one. Instead of relaxing or conversing with your companion while you eat, you have to consciously focus on how you are eating. It takes deliberate thought and energy that you would normally not have to expend. Add to the different handing another change such as having to chew each bite exactly twenty-five times and a simple meal becomes an agonizing experience.

Great leaders have awareness of how difficult change can be and take actions that effectively deal with people's natural resistance to change. Here are six principles to follow when leading organizational change:

1. Appreciate the impact of the change. While something like eating with your non-dominate hand is simple to do, it can be very unnatural and uncomfortable for people to embrace. Understand the impact your change represents.
2. Gain buy-in from key influencers. From the beginning, involve and include input from those most respected in your organization. Ensure they support, feel ownership for and become advocates of the change initiative.
3. Break the mold. Engrained processes, systems, attitudes and traditions are like molds. They are rigid and inflexible. They will continue to be used until they are no longer a viable option.
4. Ensure alignment. Nothing in an organization exists in isolation. Processes, systems, structures, incentives, strategies, resources, values and other organizational attributes should be considered and put into alignment.
5. Provide sufficient resources. Provide the appropriate resources needed to fully enable the change. Don't skimp on documentation, training or other supporting resources. They add to the cost, but will be more than offset by a speedier and more effective implementation.
6. Reinforce. Doing or communicating something once or twice is rarely sufficient. It must be reinforced and practiced many times before it moves into people's unconsciousness and comfort zone. Ensure managers are equipped to coach and lead their teams through the change initiative until it becomes business as usual.

These principles applied to a well-crafted change initiative will enable you to move through the resistance and to a successful conclusion.