

More on Navigating Change...

The Human Side of Change

As the economy has experienced a continuing downward trend, MSU, like many other organizations, faces a difficult challenge—to reduce costs and increase efficiency and effectiveness in order to adapt and react to rapidly changing economic and business conditions. Confronting the challenge of change requires more than simply managing changing functions and processes; it requires a focus on and commitment to the human side of change and its effect on the university's most valuable resource: its people.

It is natural and common for people to respond to change with emotions of fear and resistance. Resistance to change can manifest in not only the behaviors and reactions of employees, but also in managers themselves. Dealing with change and fear on a personal level, managers need to be ever vigilant and aware of their own modes of resistance and recognize that they themselves might rely on habitual activities and responses in order to keep their balance and act as if nothing has happened. Some managers might exhibit resistance by suppressing dissent and becoming isolated or ineffective. In such cases, the staff may feel fearful and uneasy.

Understanding resistance to change by individuals in an organization is an essential element in an effective change process. People generally tend to resist any new way of acting or thinking because it causes them discomfort. An individual is likely to resist change for four reasons: uncertainty, concern over personal loss, belief that the change is not in their own best interest, or a belief that the change is not in the best interest of the organization. For example, asking people to handle work differently or take on different responsibilities might cause them to think that the way they have been working is somehow 'wrong' and deserving of blame. Understanding and being supportive of each other during times of change can help to ease the transition into new ways of doing business.

Communication is perhaps the most important tool to counteract this natural resistance and fear of change. There are six key components for communicating change that generally address the questions of why, what, when, to whom, how, and methods.

- Communicating the **why** related to change is the key to creating understanding, alleviating fear and insecurity, and building acceptance and commitment.
- Knowing **what** to communicate is the first step in effective communication. It relies on clarity of the general message and explains the rationale and technical aspects surrounding a change. It also explains the change process, answers the "me" questions connected with the change, and openly addresses possible negative aspects for the organization and the individual. Most importantly, it confirms and validates that mistakes and experimentation during the change process are okay.
- **When** communication takes place has a significant impact on people and processes. Keep everyone updated throughout the change process, both formally and informally. If rumors surface about a specific change, bring people together for a frank discussion of the issue. Supervisors and managers should tell employees both what they know and what they do not know and attempt to report back on issues for which they can find an answer.
- **To whom** should communication be made? Target communication to everyone who is directly affected plus anyone else who might want or need to know. It is especially important during large-scale change for everyone to know what the change means for the future of the organization.
- Communication is affected by **how** it is delivered. Open and honest dialogue should be encouraged and supported. An effective manager welcomes constructive criticism and does

not react defensively to it. It is important for management to take the first step and not wait for employees to come to them.

- The **methods** of effective communication are numerous and varied. Large group meetings are appropriate to announce major changes and new directions that affect all stakeholders. Small group and/or team meetings can be especially helpful for addressing specific problems, providing details, and answering questions. One-to-one meetings are useful for dealing with change on an individual level, overcoming resistance, reinforcing the positive aspects of the change at hand, and handling individual and/or personal questions and concerns. Other methods of communication that may be appropriate include written updates, newsletters, and change management learning opportunities.

Meeting the challenge of change is not just a concern of supervisors and managers. All employees, when equipped with an understanding of the need for change and the fear and resistance that are a natural part of the change cycle, may utilize these foundations of effective communication to provide understanding and compassionate support for the human side of change.

-Roxann Graham, Compensation