By John Lawrie

The ABCs of Change Management

The times, they are a'changing, and HRD specialists can help managers to move with them. Here's a step-by step plan for a simple, effective change-management program.

Everything around us is changing: family, government, competition, technology, sex roles, your job. . . . You name it, and it's in the process of change. In most organizations, that change is taking place at an ever-increasing rate.

HRD people are in a prime position to facilitate the change process proactively and creatively. At the other end of the spectrum, we could just as easily let the change itself take control and find ourselves being pulled under by its forceful waves. We can learn to manage change so that it helps move people forward rather than sets them back or makes them feel as if they are drowning.

A simple program

Let's assume your organization recognizes that its supervisory people (or people at higher levels, for that matter) could use practical training in the area of change. How might you go about designing a responsive program?

One way would be to buy a "canned" product—such as a film, a workbook, an off-the-shelf program, or a lecture by a speaker. But typically, canned products lead to activity—not results.

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The issues that surround change and changing are fairly deep psychologically, and visible results require a hands-on approach. The following steps make up a simple change-management program.

Analysis of bad change

The first step is to say to the members of the training group, "Think of a time in your own experience, in your organization, when a change was handled poorly, a time when a fairly major change in methods or policies was attempted but backfired or was implemented poorly or slowly and encountered real resistance."

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Have participants write down their responses, telling them to include

- the nature of the change;
- how the change was initiated;
- how it affected productivity and morale.

The "bad change" analysis can be done by individuals or by groups of two or three people, usually from the same department. You, as the trainer, are in charge of making sure all three questions are addressed thoroughly.

As the first session ends, participants should take with them what they have written. You want them to go out the door without any kind of "closure"—with the change issue still unresolved.

Roots and results of bad change

In the second session, the individuals or groups report on their examples of "bad change." On a chalkboard or flipchart, take down the answers to these three questions for each report:

- How was change initiated?
- Who was involved?
- What have been the results?

After all reports are given, you should reproduce the answers to the three questions or post them on a wall for all to see. Ask the group to "look through these examples and see if there are any themes of poor handling running through the negative changes."

In other words, have the trainees distill from their own "bad change" examples mistakes and examples of mismanagement in their own organization. That way, you can avoid later accusations that the program "wasn't practical," "didn't relate to us," or was "too academic."

By this time, the frustration level in the group will probably be rising. That is predictable and desirable as a way of setting the stage for the third session.

Effective change strategies

By the third session, you should sense among the trainees a degree of "readiness to learn" that is significantly higher than it might have been had they simply been given a lecture on change during the first session. By now, the program has become practical to them because it's dealing with real problems. Having analyzed their own experiences, most trainees are ready to make some proactive changes and are thinking, "Let's get on with it. How could all this have been done better?" In short, the process has created a crucial ingredient—the motivation to learn.

It is now up to you to present proven principles of change and changing. The principles, presented against a backdrop of poorly handled in-house changes, are used to expedite the process of change. The contrast between "bad change" and "good change" is a powerful way to promote and "imprint" the learning of the new principles.

The principles of change should not be introduced as cure-alls, nor should they be offered as applicable to every change situation. They are generalizations based on research and experience that may be of use to the group. They can provide the "guts" of your presentation. Wherever possible, they should be linked directly back to the group's own "bad change" examples.

The principles of change are research-based; they are not matters of personal opinion. For brevity's sake, only a few of the principles are listed here. Trainers can select from among them, delete some, add their own, and elaborate as needed. However, the order in which they are presented does make a difference, as some ideas build on others.

1. Any change in any one part of the organization affects other parts of the organization—the "Ripple Effect." (The "organization" can mean a small group or the total organization.)

2. People are funny. Change they initiate is viewed as good, needed, and valuable. Change that is forced on them is met by some form of resistance, no matter what the nature of the change.

3. People need predictability—physical, psychological, and social. It's an offshoot of the basic need for security.

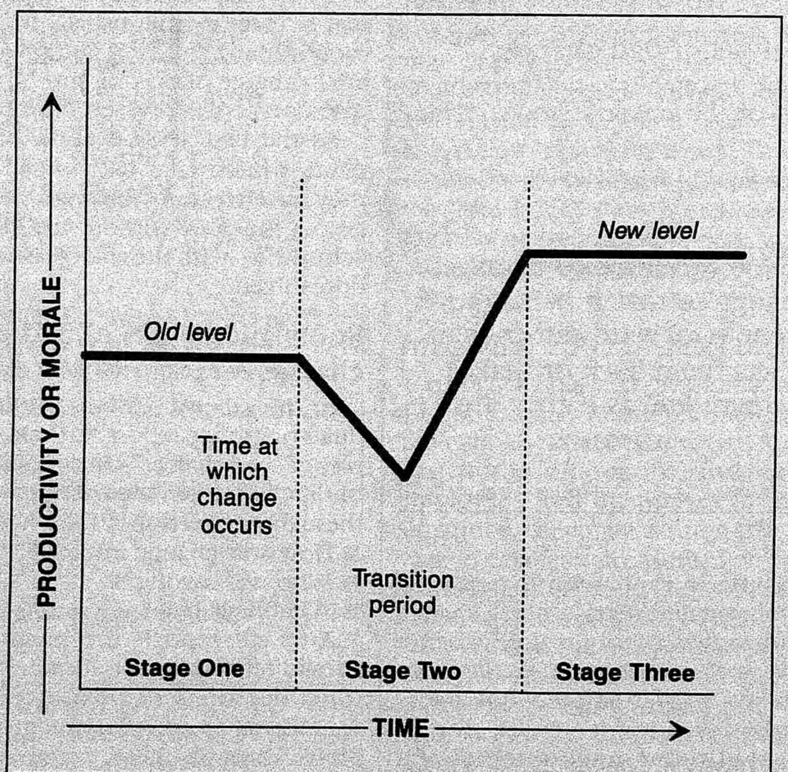
4. People also need variety, new experiences, growth, breaks in routine, and creative outlets.

5. Therefore, effective ways to bring about change are ways that do not threaten security.

6. The following tested procedures, presented against a backdrop of the need for predictable security, can help bring about positive change:

- Provide as much lead time as possible.
- Allow affected employees to participate in creating and installing the change. Control of change by those affected can reduce resistance.
- Expect three forms of resistance: logical, non-logical, and group-based.
- Don't expect a uniform rate of change. As change is introduced, there is always a "dip" in satisfaction and productivity. Later, the levels of both variables go back up higher (see the figure).
- Identify existing, cohesive groups and, when possible, use them as "pilots" for the change. Then watch the grapevine work for you—instead of against you.
- Communicate expected positive results of the change to the people making it.
- Reward change. Positive change in behavior is more likely when correct performance is rewarded than it is when incorrect performance is punished.

Stages in the change process



Application of principles

The next step is to have group members look back over their own examples of poorly handled change, and identify which of the principles were overlooked or not fully implemented.

This step serves three purposes:

- It repeats and reinforces the principles presented to the group in the third session.
- It allows the group to develop its own, new principles of change that can be used later.
- It helps the group members learn from each other.

Attacking a real change problem

At this point, the group should be reasonably well fortified with the basics of bringing about change. Most training processes would stop at this point. But don't stop. Move now to a real-life change problem that trainees will face within the next two months.

When trainees have identified a real, potential change, ask them to lay out a plan for change that specifies

- the problem and the change required;
- how they will go about it;
- which principles they will use, of those that they have developed together.

Make sure their change plans are as thorough as possible. Trainees should be able to justify the steps they want to take, based on what they've learned. Don't move on until trainees have done that. Then call on two or three of the trainees to present their plans on overhead slides for you and the group to critique.

The critique asks the question, "Does the proposed change plan implement the principles learned in the formal presentation on change?" It should. This step allows you and the trainees to reinforce to each other (for at least a second time) the basic ideas of the program.

An important caution: by now, some trainees will be so excited and motivated that they will "bite off too much." That is, the change they wish to bring about will be unmanageably large. Help them pare it down to increase their chances of success. Ambition and motivation feed on small successes.

Quality control and periodic review

As the group moves into the actual change process, several things will happen:

- A small cadre—usually 10 percent or less—will "cop out." These people do not have the motivation to follow through. If, after two conversations with them, it is clear that they will not use the program, leave them alone.
- Some people will redefine the problem; they will create another change plan. Good.
- Some will redefine their objectives, making them more modest. Good.
- Some will "sail right through" and can be praised immediately. Good.

In the meantime, you should be taking careful notes of the group's successes and failures for two reasons:

- to assess the validity of the training;
- to create a storehouse of possible snags to which you can alert subsequent groups.

Creating, delivering, and evaluating a program on change is a change in itself. Such a program should properly model the principles it is trying to convey. That is particularly true in an organization that continues to change at an ever-increasing rate. The specific steps presented here, steps based on experience and field-tested data, can increase trainees' chances of learning to manage and facilitate positive change.