The Human Face of Change

HANGING OVER my workdesk at home is a clever cartoon of James Stevenson's from the *New Yorker*. It shows a harried business executive returning from a long lunch, only to realize that he has been out of touch far longer than he imagined. "While you were out," reads the memo on his desk, "Mongol hordes swept across Asia, Sherman took Atlanta, jazz came up the river, Dempsey KO'd Firpo, the cow jumped over the moon...."

Change. It has, of course, become the one constant in today's workplace—for everyone. But as trainers and human resource professionals, we're often poised at the nexus of change, acting as change sponsors, agents, or cheerleaders in our organizations. Anyone who has been there can attest: It's hardly easy. A colleague, Sally, says, "In my job, I'm not just on the cutting edge of change; I'm on the bleeding edge."

"Change is difficult," she says, "because it forces new learning on people, and most people resist new learning a lot of the time, as do organizations."

Years ago, I served as a project manager for an outplacement project being conducted at the regional offices of a large telephone company. The experience provided poignant insights into ways the company operated and how it hadn't prepared its management and human resource staffs to deal with the challenges of restructuring. So, I often acted as a kind of on-site therapist to anxiety-ridden middle managers who, though they were being retained (at least for the short-term) to manage change efforts, were frequently in emotional knots over the new management roles being thrust upon them. Many were stressed because no one had prepared them to deal with the "people issues" that arise in organizations in times of change. Most felt they couldn't handle the tasks required of them: delivering bad news to people, doing battle with the rumor mill, and trying to manage the concerns and expectations of survivors.

My experience on that project was chastening. It taught me that change has a human face, a fact often lost in boardroom discussions about streamlining operations, improving next quarter's financial performance, and meeting stockholders' expectations. It made me realize how important it is to "clue everyone in" during large-scale organizational change, if you want people to align with the change efforts.

Since that time many years ago, a lot of organizations have become better at managing change. Many have not. In recent years, a bumper crop of business books has explored the issues of organizational change in great depth. And, yet, many of our approaches to managing change still fail to deal adequately with the people issues. That may be why nearly two-thirds (according to a recent CSC-Index survey) of all restructuring efforts fail—and why more than a few pundits in training and human resource consulting have written about the failure of restructuring, reengineering, and other change efforts.

"I am not convinced that we know that much when it comes to helping people deal with feelings of frustration that arise in times of organizational change," says W. Warner Burke, author of *Organization Development: A Process of Learning and Changing* (Addison-Wesley, 1994). Burke, an expert on change management, says that during times of significant change, people usually don't communicate with others enough or provide enough information. To that end, he has developed a framework for helping organizations manage change. Burke believes that to be effective, organizational change must occur at two levels: transformational (the level of leadership and culture) and transactional (the level at which day-to-day work gets done).

What is the significance of Burke's model for us as trainers? Simply, his thinking focuses attention on the importance of aligning employees with large-scale organizational goals and ensuring that systems, processes, and people work together to help organizations rise to new levels of effectiveness, productivity, and profitability. Burke's model provides a road map to a better understanding of the pivotal roles we should play in our organizations in the years ahead.

Now or in the near future, your role might be to help educate senior management about its role in leading change. Or, it might be to coach and encourage middle managers who have become frustrated and demoralized in trying to implement change. Your role could be to help design new training programs. Or, it might be to create new professional-development paths for boosting employees' morale and commitment to new organizational goals.

None of us has yet mastered the change equation. As organizations and as individuals, we are still ascending the learning curve as we develop a deepening awareness of how to bring employees into closer alignment with emerging organizational goals. Let us hope that we're also learning to enlist people's hearts as well as their minds. But one thing I'm sure of: Change models like Burke's provide food for thought—for HR practitioners who are unsure where to go next in their careers and for HR practitioners who wonder what their roles are in organizations on the roller coaster of change. ■

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