
Managing Transitions: Making Change Work

Dr. Mark DeVolder

On February 28th, 2006 as part of the Vancouver Chapter's PD day Dr. Mark DeVolder worked with the group on *Managing Transitions – Making Change Work*. The following is a summary of the presentation.

Picture this. Grim-faced executives seated around a mahogany table. The news is not good. The multi million-dollar project hit another major snag. In addition to cost overruns, one of the departments is threatening to mutiny. "We are not moving," they protested!

Absurd! It did not make sense. The old, rundown building would be demolished and a new state-of-the-art facility erected in its place. The CEO turned to me, the only outsider present, and demanded to know, "Why is everyone so upset?"

I chose my words carefully. "First of all, I am not the expert here. You are. You all know more about this company than I do. However, my area of expertise is Transition Management. So I can help you to understand what is going on and strategize to make this change more effectively."

I have witnessed this type of conversation in many different boardrooms across the country as management wrestles with implementing change. Often difficulties stem from one common problem: not understanding the difference between Change Management and Transition Management. Many people treat these topics synonymously. They are not.

Here is the difference. "Change is the event and transition is the process" (W. Bridges) Change Management concerns itself with the physical aspects of change—what needs to be done, when and by whom. Transition Management, on the other hand, is about *people* and how they are affected by the change. Transitions must be managed carefully to enable people to let go and reorient themselves so that the change can work.

In my experience, most leaders seem to understand Change Management, but they have not done very well at managing transitions. There can be many reasons for this,

but the most common is simply that the details clamour for attention.

Let me illustrate, I was contracted to assist management with the transitions issues of moving into a new facility. After four days of management training, I met with division managers to help them develop a transition management plan for their departments. We began with a reminder of the difference between Change Management and Transition Management. Then, we agreed that we would focus on Transition Management. After only 5 minutes of discussion, information came to light about structural problems with the facility. Immediately, the managers pounced on the problem, asking probing questions about the causes and offered possible solutions to resolve the issue. As the discussion continued, I asked a parenthetical question, "Just curious, is this discussion about Change Management or Transition Management?"

One of the managers turned red and sounded a bit like Brittany Spears. "Ooops, we did it again."

This is usually how Transition Management gets squeezed out of the picture. It is not intentional; it is simply that *the devil is in the details*. Naturally, management focuses on the issues that seem most pressing. Later, when it comes time for the changes to occur, leaders encounter surprising difficulties: dependable employees resist making the prescribed changes, confusion and conflicts erupt in the workplace, costs escalate and increased sick leave, to name a few. Unfortunately, many leaders assume that if they plan the change carefully enough, the transition will follow automatically.

Managing transitions can be frustrating for leaders because the process is not linear or sequential (like Change Management). Transition Management requires a multi-faceted, simultaneous approach. In other



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words, there are a variety of ways to support people throughout the change process. Some managers feel their job is done if they provide Stress Management assistance. My answer would be — it is a good start.

This is probably sounding all too familiar for managers entrusted with implementing change. After identifying some of the traps and pitfalls of the change process, it begs the question: What can managers do to implement changes more successfully? There is not one easy answer. Let me suggest six topic areas that will help managers head in the right direction. The list is not exhaustive, but indicates the kind of needs people have that go through change.

- Leadership
- Engagement
- Trust and betrayal
- Coping with Anger
- Transition Management
- Communication

Leadership

Successful transitions begin and end with effective managers. Employees consistently tell me that the number one factor in employee morale relates to how managers treat employees. In fact, when exiting

employees are asked why they are leaving, most identify the issue as, “not being treated with respect by their manager.”

Leadership is particularly challenging in times of change. If there is an atmosphere of trust, transitions happen more smoothly. Leaders earn employees’ trust in a variety of ways: through a clearly stated vision, transparent integrity, treating people with respect and intentional communication that informs and welcomes input, to name a few.

Engagement

For a change to be successful, employees need to be engaged, i.e. committed. People who are fully engaged give 100 %. But engagement does not happen naturally. So how do managers help people become engaged? Like Transition Management, more than one thing is required.

Clarity

The first *rule of engagement* is clarity. (D. Kinlaw) People need information- clear

information about the change. They need answers to all their questions- who, what, when, where, why and how? Clarity allays people’s fears and helps them feel more committed. Ambiguity, withheld information and double speak has the opposite effect.

Competence

Competence is the second rule of engagement. People who are good at what they do, feel more committed. This does not mean that employees do not like to be challenged, they do! But if a task is overwhelming, it frightens people and makes them feel less committed. This is a barrier for people going through transitions because the change may feel overwhelming. Managers need to help employees make “skill links” from the old to the new. Even though employees may be required to try something new, they will be more committed if they are able to use their strengths in the new change.

Influence

The rule of employee influence is probably the most difficult for managers. However, in my opinion, it is the most important. Stated simply, people want to have influence. In order to be engaged, employees must have influence. We all know by experience, that people are more committed to an idea if it is their own. Conversely, no one likes to be forced to comply. Managers who take this rule seriously ask for employees’ input and look for ways to implement the majority of them. Not only will managers get great ideas from the experts (the ones doing the jobs) but when employees see that they have influence, they will be more committed to the change. It is a win - win.

Appreciation

The rule of appreciation is the most simple and inexpensive to implement. People want to be appreciated for the good work they are doing. When managers notice and express thanks for a job well done, employ-

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ees feel more committed to their work. And by far the best way of showing appreciation is face to face. Keep it simple. "I noticed the extra effort you put in this week. Thanks!" In addition, appreciation must be genuine. One CEO sent an email to an employee, Bob, expressing his thanks. Later that day, when the CEO stood next to Bob on the elevator, the boss did not even acknowledge his presence. Needless to say, Bob did not feel appreciated and his level of motivation dropped immediately.

Trust and Betrayal

In a recent Internet survey conducted by Pittsburgh based Development Dimensions International and the CRM Group, surfers were asked, "Have you ever wished you could fire your boss? If yes, why?" Nearly one third, 32 %, said *a lack of trust and/or integrity*. Building and keeping trust is essential if a change is to work.

Leaders have many opportunities to build trust with employees. Most of these opportunities are directly linked to actions. Dennis Reina defines trust like this:

"Behaving in a way that respects others' needs and feelings while practicing open, honest communication." Notice two words: *behaving* and *communication*. Trust is built through respectful behaviour and honest communication. More on that later.

Conversely, if respectful behaviour and honest communication are not practiced, people feel betrayed. Betrayal is a strong word, but it captures how people feel. And if feelings of betrayal are present, the change process will be severely hampered.

Managers must also recognize that not all betrayal is created equally. Some negative actions affect the entire organization and others impact individuals. This is categorized as major and minor betrayal. Within this continuum, we also recognize that some actions are intentional and others are unintentional. Leaders who address feelings of betrayal, whether real or perceived, can rebuild trust with employees. However, healing from betrayal is more difficult if the behaviour was intentional.

Coping with Anger

If employees feel betrayed during the change process, managers will be dealing

with anger in the workplace. Two things are important for managers to remember. Manager yourself first and then assist others to manage their anger. It is vital that anger be controlled because unbridled anger can have devastating consequences.

When managers recognize their own triggers and defensive reactions to an angry employee, it ensures that there is only one angry person to deal with rather than two.

Managers can assist others to manage their anger by learning techniques to defuse anger. In addition, it is helpful to recognize when an employee's anger reaches the crisis phase. If this happens, time and space are needed. In the crisis phase, adrenalin is pumped into the blood system, making it nearly impossible to make rationale judgments. In fact, it takes a full 90 minutes for reasoning to return to normal. All the more reason to manage anger.

Transition Management

In order to successfully navigate through transitions, organizations and individuals go through three stages: "1) letting go of the old way, 2) making the most of the time of re-patterning in *the neutral zone*, 3) and making a real, new beginning" (W. Bridges). The problem that many people encounter with transitions, though, is getting stuck in stage one or two. Each stage has work that must be completed before progressing on to the next stage.

In Stage One, the tasks are *acceptance* and *letting go*. Many people have difficulty with acceptance. At a visceral level, to accept the change feels like they believe in the change or condone it. Rather, acceptance means that people acknowledge the change has happened or will happen. In this way, they become prepared to let go of the old way.

The tasks of Stage Two are *waiting patiently* and *learning*. Patience is required because Stage Two will last longer than everyone expects. Problems arise; deadlines are missed. During this time, everyone commits himself or herself to learn as much as they can.

In Stage Three, people must *let go again* and take a *leap of faith*. Even though, the previous stage took longer than anticipated, it was still temporary. But people have gotten use to being there and still fear the

unknown future. In order to enter into the new beginning, people must let of Stage Two and take a leap of faith.

Communication

People going through the change process need information and this information rests in the hands of leaders. But leaders cannot be stingy; they must freely communicate at all levels. Communication should begin with a clear and succinct vision statement, then going on to explain the reasons and details of the change. It is imperative to do this in face-to-face meetings. In fact, some would argue, "if it isn't face-to-face, it isn't communication."

After the initial change is explained, allow people time to process the information. Depending on the change, some may be in shock and not remember many of the details that were mentioned. That is why it is helpful to provide people with written communication as well many different opportunities to ask questions and seek clarification.

Some leaders think that once the information has been delivered, their responsibilities for communication are over. However, more is better. Keep the communication going out and coming in. Look for ways to improve communication between management levels, as well between management and employees.

Conclusion

Change is essential in today's economy. Companies merge, departments reorganize, new governments are elected. In order to navigate change successfully, organizations must focus on Change Management and Transition Management. However, as we have seen, usually Change Management gets most of the attention.

To avoid this common mistake, savvy managers have learned to manage both simultaneously: the project and the people. When employees are given the support they need, the implementation process goes more smoothly. There will always be challenges and difficulties, but transitions will work if managers give effective leadership, engage employees, build trust, defuse anger and communicate constantly. ■