Leading Organizational Change: *Techniques for Positive Impact*

Joseph P. Linskey, Ed.D.
Professor of Criminal Justice & Sociology
Coordinator of Criminal Justice Studies Program
Centenary University, New Jersey

Abstract

As higher education continues to search for improved ways to deal with the changing global environment and accompanying diverse student needs, institutions must deal with what has often become continual changes in operations and methods of providing services. Department chairs must demonstrate true leadership so as to move their followers forward in a positive direction for the benefit of each individual employee, their students, the department, and the institution.

Introduction

Over the years it has been said by many that the only constant in life is change. Certainly in modern times change occurs more frequently and at a faster pace than ever before. It is now recognized that for any organization to remain functional, current, and competitive, the organization must remain in a constant state of change. While many now recognize that change is a good thing, the average employee is often concerned if not fearful of change. This paper will address the issue of change in an organization and offer methods for a department chair to be a positive change agent.

Definitions

To provide a foundation I will provide a working definition of two important terms; organizational change and leadership. Organizational change infers *a planned system-wide effort that is managed from the top levels of an organization for the purpose of improving organizational effectiveness*. It is a process that is researched, planned and implemented to bring about positive change in an organization. It can be used successfully in any organization.

In an organization that is experiencing a high number of problems, it is necessary to bring about change for the survival of the organization. In an organization that is doing well or reasonably well, it is necessary to always be involved in productive change in order to keep the organization up to date and competitive.

In studying leadership for the past couple of decades I have read many different definitions. There are certain words that I have found to be frequently used and seem to help to clarify what is actually involved in leadership. Thus, for some time I have defined leadership as *the process of motivating and influencing others to accomplish the goals of the organization because they want to.*

The first key word in this definition is *process*. From this we see that leadership is not a quick fix, but rather a long term method of guiding an organization. Next we see the need to motivate and influence our followers, rather than command them. This involves how we communicate with people as a matter of routine. Communications are open and friendly, orders are given in the form of a request, and input is welcomed. In this way we create a positive environment that allows us to begin to inspire followers to go a bit above and beyond the norm on a regular basis.

Next the definition talks of *accomplishing the goals of the organization*. It is important that we all recognize that the primary purpose of all persons in an organization should be to accomplish the goals of the organization. If this is not recognized it may lead to a division between management and labor, negatively impacting the productivity of the organization.

If the organization is not successful then the employees are not needed, and everyone loses. On the other hand, if we are all working towards the success of the organization, effective teamwork can enhance productivity, the organization will prosper, and some of the prosperity will trickle down and all will benefit.

The final part of the definition speaks to *getting followers to provide highly productive work because they want to*. This involves getting followers to understand the organization's vision and see it as a place they want to go, and getting them to understand what their part is in attaining that vision. If they see the vision as valuable to themselves and understand how they fit in, as a leader you have now gotten them to a point where they see work not as a chore, but as a place that they want to be because they feel they are a contributing asset to something that is worthwhile.

Assumptions about Change

In exploring methods to bring about effective change, we must recognize that time and experience has shown that certain things are always present when an organization attempts to bring about a change.

- First, change will not occur unless there is some motivation in the employees to change.
- Second, the process of bringing about a change involves learning something new, as well as discontinuing current attitudes, behaviors, or practices.
- Third, in combination with this, change requires reinforcing new behaviors, attitudes, and practices.
- Fourth, the most important resource in any organization truly is its people. Though often said but perhaps not as often meant, it is true. If the people do not buy into the change, it will not occur.
- Fifth, resistance to change will be present even when the goals of the change are seen as desirable.

Change Resistance

To bring about effective and positive change in an organization, we must first try to foresee potential causes of resistance within our employees. It has long been recognized that people have a natural resistance to change, even when the proposed change is thought to be a good thing. Much of this resistance stems from the fact that we like to be comfortable in what we do. Even when things are not going well we are comfortable with the status quo because at least we know what to expect. Change will upset or alter the status quo. Thus, often the biggest resistance to change comes from the fear of the unknown. An employee may feel that even though things are really bad at work, he/she can depend on them being that way and will not be surprised. But, when you propose change, even though it may sound good, it is not yet proven, and no one knows what to expect.

Other common causes of resistance to change include:

- an environment of mistrust within the organization
- an employee's fear of failing
- concern over potential loss of status or job security
- inappropriate timing of the change (too soon or too late)
- peer pressure
- lack of or insufficient planning and/or training
- perceived lack of commitment/sincerity by upper management.

Some level of resistance should be expected and planned for. Resistance may come in differing degrees; the four most common of which are:

1. Active Resistance – where employee(s) engage in intentional mistakes or even deliberate acts of sabotage in an attempt to prevent the change;
2. Passive Resistance – where employee(s) engage in protests or work slow downs;
3. Indifference – where employee(s) appear apathetic or resigned to the impending change, and
4. Acceptance – where there is no resistance, but rather cooperation, enthusiasm and an understanding of the changes being proposed.

Minimizing Resistance to Change

As a leader in your organization, when a change becomes necessary or desirable your responsibility is to do all you can to minimize any resistance to the change. The foremost way to do this is through effective communication.

By ensuring an environment of open communication, upward, downward and sideways, you will aid your followers in understanding the need for the change, the details of how it is to be accomplished, and the impact it will have on them. This will do much to allay their fear of the change. Communications is ultimately the resolve to all problems, from the smallest argument to war. Therefore, during a time of change, effective communication skills become even more important.

Another method that can be used to minimize resistance to change is training. By preparing your personnel in advance and ensuring that they have acquired the necessary skills to be successful in the changed environment, you can do much to ease their fears and gain their support of the change. Along with this, it is helpful to use employee involvement. By seeking input as to how best to bring about the change from the people who actually have to do the work, they will feel that they are a valuable part of the organization, have a stake in its success, and will be more apt to work to make the change successful. Additionally, any time that change is occurring, there will be some degree of stress attached. The use of stress management techniques will help to reduce this stress to an acceptable level so that it does not impede progress.

Understanding the Value of Change

If we all can understand the value of change, there should be less resistance to it, and the chances of success should increase. A basic fact of life is that all things must change over time or they will become stagnant or extinct. Organizations are no different. They must continually change to remain competitive, to be more effective, to be more productive, and for mere survival. In line with these reasons, I have always been a believer that if you are going to take the time and effort to do something, you might as well do it the best you can. Though a veteran of the U.S. Air Force, I do have to admit that the Army's former slogan of "be all you can be" sums it up quite well.

Thus, as leaders, if we can get our followers to understand the value of change and how it will benefit them as individuals, we can all be more successful.

Forces for Change

The need for change is brought on by a variety of forces that an organization must then respond to. External forces include market changes, governmental laws and/or regulations, changes or fluctuations in the labor force, technological advancements, competition, and the economy. Internal forces include changes in the needs of the organization, workforce changes, employee attitudes, and new development in or acquisition of equipment. If we can understand the forces that are driving our organization's present changes and effectively communicate this understanding to our followers, we can assist in the furtherance of the necessary changes.

In Conclusion - How to be a Positive Force in Change

As a leader there are a number of things that one can do that have proven to be helpful in bringing about effective and successful organizational change. The first is to believe in yourself. If you do not demonstrate that you have confidence in your own ability to bring about the change, why would anyone want to follow you? It is also important that you understand the "big picture" of the organization's vision so that you can explain it clearly to your followers and get them to understand where they fit in and how important they are to the overall success. You must be supportive of all of your followers no matter how difficult a time an individual may be having in understanding or bringing about his/her part of the change. In trying to do something new, negativity can not be expected to bring about a positive reaction.

Another useful technique is to focus on what you have control over and not spend a lot of time worrying about things that you have no control over. You and your followers are one part of the organization. If you work to do your part the best it can be done, you will be successful in your responsibilities. Far too often, we spend too much time watching others and complaining about what they are doing or how they are being treated. Yet, they are not within our sphere of influence and there is usually nothing we can directly do about it. If we were to use that time and effort to tend to our responsibilities, we often would lead the way.

And, as leaders we must be sure to reward good behavior. This should be done on a daily basis anyway as part of effective leadership, however, it is perhaps even more influential during a time of change. It is during these times that we are attempting to get our followers to abandon old ways of doing things and adopt the new behaviors, so it is truly important that when the new behaviors are demonstrated that they be immediately rewarded. As children we learn that when good behavior is rewarded we are much more apt to repeat it.

Through effective leadership we can create a culture of change. We know that a leader's behavior can have substantial impact on the behaviors of our team of followers. If we work to build an environment of honest and open communication and cooperation, over time our followers will trust and respect us and we them. In such an environment change will be not be seen with fear, but rather as a positive force that is good for the organization and the individual.

Joseph Linskey, a retired police captain, is a professor of criminal justice and sociology and coordinator of the criminal justice studies program at Centenary University in New Jersey and can be contacted at linskeyj@centenaryuniversity.edu .