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The Secret to Leading Organizational Change Is Empathy

By Patti Sanchez

I'm working with a CEO who's in the midst of rethinking her company's strategy so it can better meet customer demands and thrive financially. These are major changes that will affect every aspect of how the firm operates — from the services it offers to the structure of her organization.

When I sat down with the CEO and her executive team to think through their communication plan, I asked not about the change itself, but about how her employees might feel about what's ahead. We started with her team because, in my work as a communication consultant, I've observed the same thing time and time again: [how information is communicated](#) to employees during a change matters more than *what* information is communicated. A lack of audience empathy when conveying news about an organizational transformation can cause it to fail.

[Studies on organizational change](#) show that leaders across the board agree: if you want to lead a successful transformation, communicating empathetically is critical. But the truth is that most leaders don't actually know how to do it. In fact, at Duarte, the communication consultancy where I'm Chief Strategy Officer, we conducted a survey of over 200 leading company executives and found that 69% of respondents said that they were planning to launch or are currently conducting a change effort. Unfortunately, 50% of these same execs said they hadn't fully considered their team's sentiment about the change. Worse, about half said they were just approaching the change "going on gut."

If you are a company leader hoping to undertake a successful organizational change, you need to make sure your team is onboard and motivated to help make it happen. The following strategies can help you better understand your employees' perspectives.

Profile Your Audience at Every Stage

Change consultants typically advise leaders to create personas of various audiences when they kick-off a change initiative. But, considering that people's wants and needs will evolve throughout the process, you should reevaluate these personas during every phase of the journey.

With the CEO I mentioned earlier, we first created audience personas that mapped to key employee segments in the company by level and function. Then we interviewed individual employees in each segment to get a sample perspective on typical mindsets. During the interviews, we asked questions designed to uncover beliefs, feelings, questions, and

concerns about the company's current strategy. We also asked if there were specific changes they hoped management would (or would not) make.

Using the insights from these interviews, we were able to identify how each employee segment felt about the change effort, and planned communications based on whether they were excited, frightened, or frustrated. Employees who were excited about the change, for example, received communication that encouraged them to motivate their reluctant peers.

As your organizational transformation unfolds and you enter new phases of the change, make sure you repeat the interviewing and [empathetic listening](#) process. That way, you can gauge how people are feeling over time, and tailor your communication to match their mood.

Tell People What to Expect

While you may need to keep some facts private during a transition, the general rule is that the more informed your people are, the more they'll be able to deal with discomfort. So, learn about your team's specific fears, then acknowledge them openly.

While working with the CEO who was making strategic shifts in her company, we talked about how she could acknowledge some of the fears revealed in a company-wide survey. One employee had expressed concern that the changes would cause talented employees to leave, which would lead to a greater burden on remaining employees.

In the next company-wide meeting, the CEO acknowledged there was worry about brain drain, then shared statistics about how the recent company turnover was designed to reduce the number of low performers and alleviate resulting drag on other employees. She also explained how the HR department was redoubling its efforts to speed up the recruiting process and add more rigor to interviews to ensure new hires were more likely to be high performers.

Having the CEO talk about the departures in an open company forum might seem like a dicey proposition when HR usually prefers to keep exit details private. But feedback from employees afterward showed that the CEO was able to build credibility and trust by addressing the fear of talent loss head-on.

Involve Individuals at All Levels

A transformation won't succeed without broad involvement. A large European retail bank modeled this well during an organizational overhaul. Following a "dialogue-based planning" model, the CEO created a top-level story for the bank, then asked his executive directors to add a "chapter," sharing details relevant to their departments. Each director then asked their own team to add to the chapter, incorporating ideas about how a change would impact them and their unique responsibilities. This continued down five levels, all the way to branch managers, and helped every impacted individual understand their part.

An exercise like this can help everyone feel like an active participant with something valuable to add. At that same bank, the director of retail operations wrote about how

customers wanted the banking process to be faster. When members of the branch staff read this, they added that document imagers broke down frequently, which was a major headache and caused regular slowdowns. In the end, these frontline employees ended up bringing about a practical, useful change at the organization — one that improved things for all parties.

Business practices evolve rapidly, but there's one technique business leaders should always rely on to effectively motivate and lead: empathic communication. Develop and show empathy for everyone involved in your corporate transition, and you'll lead a team that feels valued, included, and driven to help your initiative succeed.



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