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Surviving change

Six steps to surviving organisational change.

In today's climate of frequent mergers and acquisitions, we're constantly being told to embrace change. We have to be leaner, faster, creating more growth, more profit. Most importantly, we have to impress the new owners / shareholders with ever more ambitious plans. More and more of us now belong to organisations that have recently merged or been bought by private equity – and that means new people at the top with new ideas. Whether you are a leader or a worker in your organisation, there are practical things you can do to survive the inevitable change that's on its way.

If you are tasked with leading the change in your organisation, chances are there's a sense of trepidation at this stage. This is a healthy sign. If it were an easy task, no-one would bother writing about it. As John Quincy Adams said: "If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader."

That's a tall order, so where do you start?

Know where you're heading. Your first task is to create the vision for the first 100 / 300 / 600 days. This needs to be something you can articulate in one sentence, explaining what your organisation will become by when. And the first question to ask of it is whether it inspires you. If it doesn't, it won't inspire others. Once you have the vision, it's easier to work out your journey towards it, planning what the major achievements will be along the way and how you will reach them. The vision becomes a reality when you make and review any measures of success, showing them that you're on track.

You may have a clear vision and know how to get there, but do you and your leaders have the right capabilities to lead the change? This requires a high level of self-awareness, as you face the facts about yourself and your organisation. For example, how connected are you into your organisation? This is important, as you need to empathise with and mobilise your people, remove barriers, see past the politics and bring the vision to life. Placing a high value on innovation will also be vital in creating solutions to apparently intractable problems – something that can only be done in a climate of trust, collaboration and creativity. As the change leader, you need to be focused on what needs to be done. Being able to clearly see what needs to change, in what order and what can be left the same is key. To do this, you will need a robust framework in which to operate with clear accountabilities, goals and review mechanisms.

Know what you are asking of your people. Whatever change theory you subscribe to, one thing is certain: change is emotional and people will react to it differently at different stages. From the outset, you'll need to consider how people are going to feel about the change and how they'll react. The one thing you have influence over is

your own behaviour. If you can alter your behaviour appropriately to the situation and coach others to do the same, you will have a greater chance of reaching your desired outcomes: to convince your people to change, find innovative ways to communicate the urgency and change something small but significant that indicates to the entire organisation how committed you are personally. At the same time, expect people to push back – either blatantly refusing to co-operate or more subtly, perhaps agreeing to something but never quite finding the time to follow through. It could be useful to identify who really supports the change and give them a position of influence. Likewise, by identifying the most influential ‘resistors’, you can find out why they’re against the change and determine how to win them over.

Engage your workforce, involving people at every level. As Kotter said: “Individuals alone, no matter how competent or charismatic, never have all the assets needed to overcome tradition and inertia.”

Create your vision with your management team, communicate it to everyone and then set up small teams throughout the organisation to work on specific problem areas. Once you have their initial buy-in, it can be maintained by ensuring they have the resources they need (time, people, materials) and that they are all using common tools to review their progress and report to you or your senior managers. Small teams visibly working on areas of change will be noticed quickly and will help build up the momentum you need behind the change, particularly if you have a well structured communication cascade in place.

As an employee rather than a leader in your organisation, you’ll be able to see something big coming down the line to you. First, be true to yourself. Are you reacting from an emotional, (‘I don’t like this’), political (‘what’s in it for me’) or rational (‘where’s the plan?’) place? Do you believe in it, or, more importantly, do you want to believe in it? If you’re unsure, the best place to start is to get some facts, talk to your line manager and find out when the next communication event is scheduled. Sort out the myths from the facts. Avoid those ‘emotional vampires’ who will suck your energies dry on why this is wrong for you, the organisation and business in general, and look to the positives.

Get involved. Find out how you can participate in the work groups springing up around the organisation. This change may not be for you but, if you don’t get involved, you won’t be able to have an influence. Typically, any organisation going through a major change will expect to lose some of its workforce because they don’t fit with the new vision. Don’t let that be you just because you haven’t made the effort to find out how to make this work for you.

Whether you are tasked with leading the change or supporting the change, there comes a point when delivery of that change becomes part of everybody’s day job. To reach that stage with as little pain as possible, you will need to be able to work at pace, stay focused, be flexible, able to cope with the demands of ambiguity and take control of your own destiny. So don’t let change happen to you – rather be the one making the change.

By Natalie Gordon, senior consultant, Egremont Group

Turbulent M&A activity means many organisations feel that they’re in a constant state of flux. For those involved in the change, it can feel less like an opportunity to shine and more like a fight for survival.

Those who survive the change will be the people who embrace it, taking the lead and taking others with them, so that the whole organisation is moving in the same direction.

But what does that look like in reality? Natalie Gordon at the change management consultancy, Egremont, suggests six steps people can take to ensure that they are the ones who survive organisational change.

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