

Managing Change

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We often start the New Year with a commitment to develop more good habits and to shed the bad. Often, the change we seek is individual – a personal choice or desire, often based on some judgment about how we're not measuring up (but that's another column!) These tend to be resolutions like: I want to lose 10 pounds; I'm going to quit smoking; I need to exercise more. Sound familiar? But what about when you need to make bigger changes – in your family, your workplace or on the volunteer board you chair – that will impact others and require their buy-in?

Change management takes dedicated leadership and some choice skills. Here are a few tips on how to introduce new developments to others.

Determine the need. Get clear on what you think is the problem and then ask for the advice of the people around you. What do they think? How do they perceive the situation?

Make a plan. Once you know what's needed, plan the solutions. Again, involve those who will be affected by the proposed change as much as possible. If you're considering new office equipment, make sure you're asking support staff what would work best for them. What are their needs? People resist change less when they are actively involved in its design.

Communicate the changes. Good leadership requires good, ongoing communication. Prepare how you will communicate with the group. Make conscious decisions about when, what and how you will communicate. Will you tell everyone at once? Will your communication be written or verbal? How will you use tone, body language and other communication skills to impact the message you give?

Expect and accept reactions. People respond to change in different ways. Some love it. Some hate it. Acknowledge the emotions that come up and give people space to react. There are various stages to these reactions – people may start out in denial, anger and resistance and then move to a place of interest and curiosity, and eventual acceptance. Supporting them through these stages will help them progress to a place where they commit to your vision.

Inspire hope. In order to get on board, most people need to see that the adjustments you want will be worthwhile. Give them reasons to believe this.

Know your audience. Is your staff suffering from change fatigue? Check it out. People can only take so much at one time, especially in light of the uncertain economic times we're living through. Are some people more likely to see the glass half full? How can they help you champion these shifts and influence others to come on board?

Don't let them see you sweat it. Maybe you're not so keen on what's happening because it's being imposed on you too. If you're in charge of a practice group or oversee support staff where changes are necessary, your willingness to commit to the process will impact

how the group accepts and implements the change. Minimizing your own display of opposition will make the transition easier.

Assure them support. If you're downsizing, the remaining staff will naturally worry about whether they can do all the work with less people. Talk about what adjustments are needed to get the work done. Make time to hear their concerns and be open to their ideas about working smarter. With their help you may find efficiencies you didn't know existed.

Monitor progress to discourage back-sliding. Whether it's getting your 8-year-old to pick his clothes up off the floor or changing the way your staff inputs time sheets, remember that old habits can die hard. Stay on top of implementation. Check in regularly to see that the behaviour has consistently been altered. Acknowledge the good work that's being done and, if necessary, remind people when they've reverted to old ways.

Managing change takes a willingness to lead with certainty while remaining open to feedback. With clarity of purpose, you'll find a way to make the necessary alterations and see the implementation through. And then, there'll be more change....