Executive Summary

Change – even seemingly minor change – can be challenging for employees, managers, and executives to navigate. For many people, change, or the prospect of change, generates fear, uncertainty, confusion, or insecurity. The ability to facilitate change means confronting and defusing these negative perceptions by laying strong groundwork for change, leading through the change process, and taking steps to make change permanent.

The change facilitation competency requires high-level communication skills; the ability to articulate a clear vision and a sense of urgency; empathy; persistence; the ability to listen; and a willingness to address others’ concerns while standing firm in pursuit of defined goals. Managers must develop the ability to exercise sound judgment and demonstrate flexibility; they must also demonstrate patience as the change process unfolds. Executives, often the people tasked with outlining a vision for change, must develop analytic and strategic thinking skills, the ability to weigh consequences, and the ability to win commitment from others. At the same time, they must be open to new ideas and capable of looking past existing concepts of hierarchy, structure, and responsibility in order to facilitate change.

Key Takeaways

• Successful change facilitation involves preparing for change, managing the change process, and institutionalizing change.

• Change often provokes feelings of fear and uncertainty. Facilitating change means responding with a reason for change, a strong strategic vision for change, and a plan for making change happen. Clear, consistent communication is central to this competency.

• The change facilitation competency requires empathy, open-mindedness and a willingness to listen to others as well as confidence, persistence, and commitment to defined goals.

• Individuals must be able to think creatively and strategically to revamp existing structures, policies, roles, and processes to accommodate change and make its effects lasting.
Impact on Company

The change facilitation competency impacts companies by allowing change to happen, and by minimizing costs and conflicts associated with change. This skill is critical in organizations facing major change – for example, post-merger or post-acquisition integrations, substantial workforce reductions or increases, or crisis/turnaround situations. However, it is also relevant in the course of everyday business, as when organizations need to adopt new business plans or strategies; implement new processes, policies or technologies; or shift roles and responsibilities among employees.

Change is a destabilizing force, whether it comes in the form of an all-new management team or a new computer system. Therefore, people at all levels tend to resist it. They know it will require time and energy to adapt to the change, and they may also feel fear and uncertainty associated with an unknown future. The change facilitation competency helps minimize resistance, manage uncertainty, and ultimately aids in embedding the effects of the change in company culture (Shere, 2006).

Techniques for Development

There are three stages of organizational change. As a result, the change facilitation competency requires developing three distinct skill categories (Armenakis & Fredenberger, 1995).

Change readiness. In order to lay the groundwork for change, individuals must exhibit exceptional communication skills, both written and oral. Communication at this stage has a highly specific goal: to convince others that current conditions are undesirable; to convince them that change is necessary; and to get them to buy in to the change process. This requires high-level persuasive skills, as well as the ability to understand and communicate context (for example, offering data that backs up the need for change). The ability to reason, respond to complex questions, and demonstrate confidence and clarity are critical. At this stage, individuals must also be able to exhibit active participation and their own commitment to change; they must instill confidence in others through action, not just words.

Change adoption. When the change process gets underway, additional skills are called into play. Individuals must remain committed to open, multi-directional communication, and they must be able to reinforce persuasive messaging about change in a consistent, clear manner. They must also exhibit strong analytic skills in order to track progress and adjust the change process as needed in order to meet defined goals. Empathy, consideration, and tact become extremely important at this stage, as some people within the organization may be more adversely impacted by change than others, and their needs or frustrations must be addressed. Failure to treat “victims” of change fairly can lead to anger, fear, and resentment among “survivors,” and it can diminish overall commitment to change. Finally, individuals must exhibit patience (change takes time) and a willingness to offer clear performance feedback, encourage others, reward progress, and facilitate ongoing learning.

Institutionalized change. For change to make meaningful impact, it needs to become institutionalized and accepted as the “new normal.” Building on prior stage skills, individuals – especially managers, executives, and others in roles of authority – must demonstrate, not just communicate, the diffusion of change throughout the organization. They must think creatively and logically to update existing processes, policies, procedures, and benchmarks in light of the change. Individuals at all levels must develop the ability to lead by example, and to make sure
their actions are consistent with the demands they make of others. Flexibility in thinking, self-awareness, understanding of roles, and a willingness to accept personal responsibility for change are key to making change permanent.

Obstacles

Impatience, a lack of strategic vision, poor communication skills, and an inability to build consensus will slow or prevent the development of the change facilitation competency (Kotter, 2007). Change facilitation can also be hampered by rigid hierarchies or by bureaucracies that do not empower managers to take action while preparing for, adopting, and institutionalizing change. Because the change facilitation competency relies so heavily on the ability to convey messages quickly, accurately, and consistently throughout the organization, systems or procedures that impede clear communication will also prevent this competency from being developed.

Managers

Managers must be able to demonstrate exceptionally sound judgment so they can allocate responsibility for change processes appropriately; involving subordinates in the change process is usually necessary and always helpful in providing a sense of control and participation (Bareil & Gagnon, 2000). Patience, trust and confidence are essential; managers cannot facilitate change by rushing the process or assuming that all their subordinates will progress at the same speed. Managers must also be able to stay focused, motivate and educate others, confront resistance, accept criticism, and adapt to changing conditions (Coulson-Thomas, 2008).

Although change processes often call upon managers to assume strong leadership positions, it is important for them to maintain sensitivity and a willingness to listen to others, as their subordinates may express valid fears, frustrations, or concerns. Likewise, they must be willing to understand individual employees’ needs and adjust their own approaches accordingly. For example, an employee who fears for his job may react badly to a barrage of detailed information about a new process, whereas an employee who is concerned about the effectiveness of a new process may be reassured by learning the details (Bareil & Gagnon, 2000). In addition, managers must be capable of setting and achieving short-term goals as part of a long-term strategy. Such short-term rewards help maintain employee commitment to change and provide evidence that the change is working (Kotter, 2007).

Executives

For executives, the change facilitation competency requires clear and consistent vision, the ability to think before acting, the ability to weigh consequences of different approaches, and a willingness to contemplate potential impact on others. Executives must also be able to demonstrate leadership and commitment to the goals they have defined, as well as the ability to describe the future they envision in such a way that other people want to support it (Shere, 2006). If there are obstacles to change, or if existing hierarchies or structures are found to be antithetical to change, executives must be confident enough to remove or alter them (Kotter, 2007).

Finally, although executives often want to show positive results quickly, they must be able to resist the urge to declare “mission accomplished” before it really is. Persistence, commitment to goals, and the ability to lead through long or difficult transition times are necessary components of the change facilitation competency. Substituting artificial victories will generate distrust among manager and employee ranks (Kotter, 2007).
Case Study

A genomics center, which had grown as a standalone business, was acquired by a global pharmaceutical company. Shortly after the acquisition, a state-of-the-art technology overhaul was ordered to help the unit mesh better with its parent’s production needs. Relations between the unit and its parent were already shaky, as the genomics experts were not yet accustomed to the restrictions and hierarchies associated with being part of a larger corporation. Because of this, the technological change seemed particularly daunting.

The genomics unit’s leaders, in partnership with external consultants, embarked on a plan to a.) upgrade systems successfully and b.) leverage the dialogue sparked by the change to address other problems in the unit’s culture. Their success demonstrated a number of change facilitation best practices (Joffe & Glynn, 2002).

Understanding different reactions to change. Investigation revealed that different employees had different concerns about the technology implementation. Some saw it as a symbolic “final straw” from the pharma parent. Others simply wondered how (or if) it would work. Some had specific concerns about their research. Some just didn’t think it felt fair.

Establishing urgency. Employees knew the working atmosphere in the genomics unit had become strained. Underscoring the harm this was doing – and would continue to do, if left unresolved – helped focus people on the immediate need to improve working relations with the global company, which inevitably meant integrating the new technology in a mutually effective manner.

Explaining a positive rationale and describing a strong vision. Genomics unit leaders positioned the new technology system as a tool that would make the center a better place to work by improving communication and relations with the parent company. Although the new systems would change familiar work patterns, it would also enable scientists to act more like collaborators in the pharma development process, instead of simply providing information when it was requested.

Communicating and listening. In addition to communicating frequently about the changes and the steps being taken to implement them, employee feedback was solicited and valued. Web surveys were used to collect input from all genomics center employees; this information was used to help focus employee involvement in change implementation and improve the overall atmosphere in the workplace.

Empowering people. A core team of employees, including people from all levels of the unit, was appointed and tasked with developing ideas, goals, and metrics that would facilitate the desired changes and simultaneously improve workplace culture. This team was directly involved with handling and processing web surveys, and it was empowered to make decisions and suggest ideas.

Withstanding resistance. Some employees were dismissive or skeptical of efforts to facilitate change. The unit’s leaders did not allow naysayers to sway them from their clearly articulated goals. Instead, they focused on cultivating positive support among employee ranks and demonstrating the measurable value of their efforts, which in turn helped reduce complaints and skepticism.

Changing internal structure. Instead of trying to impose significant change on existing structures, the genomics unit restructured its organization and updated roles and responsibilities to better fit the way its new technology platform worked. The center also appointed project-specific leaders tasked with overseeing change implementation. Appropriate restructuring also ensured that the unit would be prepared to institutionalize the new technology and use it into the future.
Related Resources

The Change Cycle
How People Can Survive & Thrive in Organizational Change
By Ann Salerno and Lillie Brock

Epic Change
How to Lead Change in the Global Age
By Timothy R. Clark

The Inventive Organization
Hope and Daring at Work
By Jill Janov

Leading Change
Overcoming the Ideology of Comfort and the Tyranny of Custom
By James O'Toole

Leading Corporate Transformation
A Blueprint for Business Renewal
By Robert H. Miles

References


