5 Strategies for Leading Change

Leading change efforts in organizations is rarely easy. And from what the research tells us, it’s rarely successful.

For the past 30 years, John Kotter of Harvard Business School (HBS) has been at the forefront of research showing that only 30% of all organizational change initiatives succeed. Since the dawn of the new millennium, the situation hasn’t gotten much better.

- In 2000, research by Beer & Nohria, also of HBS, led them to confirm the statistics: “The brutal fact is that about 70% of all change initiatives fail.”
- In an international survey done by McKinsey & Company, 1,546 business executives were asked if their change programs were “completely or mostly successful.” Only 30 percent said yes.
- A 2012 study of change initiatives within 13 large European corporations showed that 30% were successful, 40% were partially successful and 30% were unsuccessful.

See a pattern here? Organizational change and transformation is difficult to lead successfully, whatever the size and scope. Yet there’s another crucially important side to the story. It’s the side that often gets missed.

The Human Factor Is Where Leaders Need to Focus

Much of what gets written about focuses on change from an organizational perspective – the strategic execution of a change effort. What tends to get missed is the importance of the individual leader’s ability to lead change on the personal, human level.

Part of the problem may come from our view of change. We talk about “change management” as if it’s some sort of formulaic process where we flip a series of switches… where if we just plan, communicate and implement well enough, everything will fall into place. Yes, planning, communication and implementation are crucial pieces of organizational change.

They’re simply not enough. The reality is that successful change requires people to change. It requires human beings in the organization to do things differently. “Successful change starts and ends at the individual level. An entire organization does not change until each member has changed.”

So, as supervisors, managers and leaders, if we want to be more successful at leading change, we need to get better at helping people overcome their fear and resistance to changing.
The Key: Tap into Natural Human Motivations

Below you’ll find the five best strategies we’ve culled from the research and from our experiences in helping leaders at all levels lead change. In essence, these strategies work because they tap into natural human motivations that allow employees to move beyond their resistance.

1. **Show empathy and support.** The change process requires people to let go of the old way. Patiently listen and learn what people feel they’re losing. This helps people naturally move through the process of letting go.

2. **Sell the problem.** Beyond simply selling the vision for change, help people understand what necessitates the change…and the potential losses that will occur without it. People tend to be more willing to let go when they can see how the old way is less favorable than the new.

3. **Create involvement.** When you can, involve your employees early in shaping the change by getting their ideas for the new way. When handing down a change, involve employees by letting them shape the ways they’ll integrate the change. Employees who are involved feel a sense of ownership and can more quickly move forward.

4. **Build in rewards.** Use low-cost incentives to reinforce and stimulate change. Freely give praise and encouragement. Break down the change into small steps, so employees can enjoy early successes. Such simple rewards encourage people to adopt new behaviors and attitudes.

5. **Provide training and support.** People won’t adopt new behaviors if they don’t know how, so make it easy to get started. Provide training that instills the needed skills and confidence. Team up the early adopters with resistors to help the resistors learn the new way. People embrace change more easily when others are there to help them through it.
