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To Make Successful Changes, You've Got to Manage Them –

Today's realities: 1) Change is unstoppable and it's happening faster and faster. 2) Organizations change due to a multitude of reasons, among them: new technologies, new regulations, new competition, and customer demands. 3) Not everyone reacts the same way to change – some embrace it; others may be overwhelmed by it.

"Thirty years ago, a Fortune 100 company probably had one or two enterprise wide change initiatives going on; today that number is probably between 20 and 25," says Jeffrey Hiatt, CEO Prosci Inc., a business process re-engineering company and author of books on change management.* Not only have change initiatives been on the rise, but the importance of managing individuals through change has gained in importance as it's costly to fail.

Failed change initiatives have a direct impact to the organizational bottom line in the loss of employee productivity. Employees who are dissatisfied with or upset by the change are generally less productive than they could be. An employer who is serious about a change has to have a structured, proactive approach that includes a clear and easily understood vision, actively involved leadership, targeted communication that leads to understanding and involvement of the employee base, a plan for dealing with resistance, feedback mechanisms, and ways to measure progress.

Communication has to start with the organizations executives. "When Whirlpool Corp. acquired Maytag, Whirlpool made sure the president of its North American region was up front, talking personally to employees, stated Tim Reynolds, SPHR, VP HR."* Leaders need to be active and visible in their support of the change and consistent and aligned with the change message. Successful change depends on having leadership that will 'walk the walk and not just talk the talk' and will be around long enough to see the change through.

Breaking down an organization into work groups, departments, or organizational levels and conducting a 'stakeholders analysis' is a critical activity needed for a successful change. This process helps to identify those that will support the change, those that will be neutral to it, and those who will put up the greatest resistance. Strategies can be built to leverage the enthusiasm brought by the supporters and analysis can be conducted to determine why the resistance exists and what might be done to eliminate or reduce it. A stakeholders analysis may uncover that a group as critical to change success as front line supervisors is the most vocally opposed to the change. Appropriate actions can be taken and communications planned for maximum engagement once stakeholder positions are known.

"Last year, in a Management Barometer survey done by the New York-based accounting and consulting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers, of about 150 executives at large companies, 66% of the respondents cited the lack of change management skills in middle management as a barrier to change."* If managers don't know what to do or how to support the change initiative, "the conversations they have with their employees will be about managing resistance, not managing change."*

People don't necessarily resist change but they do resist having someone try to change them. Being able to communicate the change in a way that helps employees understand the 'what's in it for them' and to see what will change and what won't, can make all the difference between employee buy-in and change success and failure and a loss of productivity.

For many companies, the ability to successfully manage change has led to a distinct competitive advantage. According to the Corporate Executive Board (2003), "Change management is often defined as the continuous process of aligning an organization with its marketplace and doing so more responsively and effectively than industry competitors...Companies must be prepared to cope with a faster change cycle, requiring the ability to handle change whenever the market or the customer demands it."

Is your business capable of successfully managing change?

* "To Make Changes, Manage Them" by Nancy Hatch Woodward, May 2007 HR Magazine.