

Sense of Urgency; Why? Part Two



Dr. Ali Qassem

www.aliqasseminternational.com

One of the most difficult tasks and crucial roles a leader can face is leading a change. It is accompanied by many opportunities and many risks at the same time and most organizational change initiatives fail or deliver poor results.

In order to drive a successful organizational change, leaders must first create a sense of urgency throughout the entire organization. The entire organization must understand that it is living in a state of complacency, which is too dangerous in the long run.

Creating a sense of urgency is getting people to actually see and feel the need for a change. This can be accomplished by explaining not only what is needed to be changed but also why the change must happen.

Understanding the 'Why' is too important for leading and coping with a change. When people know the 'Why', they can figure any 'How'.

The management, team leaders, supervisors and the operative employees must know the reasons behind a change. They must be convinced that a change is imperative for the organization's sustainability, growth and in some cases its survival.

However, for change to be successful, employees must be convinced that business as usual is no longer a viable plan. This means that leaders must be awakened to the gap between the way things are and the way they ought to be.

Most changes are generated by the top or middle management and then they are passed down. Thus, a sense of urgency amongst employees helps harness the necessary cooperation to start moving toward the expected results.

Building trust between the management and the employees is too important to establish a sense of urgency and then drive a change. If the employees trust and have confidence in the organization, they are more likely to accept a change.

Communication is always important especially when change is about to take place, and so it is when creating a sense of urgency. Therefore, the management should communicate, as open as possible, the reasons for the upcoming change throughout the organization.

It should explain what the change is, why the change is needed, whom the change will affect, when the change will take place, where the change will occur, and how the change will take place.

This will let employees understand the change, recognize that the change will take place, see the big picture as the management sees it, and make them feel that they are valued by the organization. In addition, some of them might have experienced the same change in previous job or position; thus, their advice is also of value.

However the management must make sure that the proposed change is reasonable, avoid threats to implement the change, follow sensible time schedule to implement the change and implement the change in the most logical place.

There are two types of change in an organization, planned and emergent change. Planned change is the change that driven from the top down – management to employees and the emergent change refers to a situation in which change can originate from any level in the organization.

In a planned change, the leader must have a clear vision realized and understood by the employees, create a plan that involves people in the change and ensures a support for the change.

In an emergent change, the leader must create a readiness for change culture that encourages and supports the change process.

After communicating, as open as possible, the reasons for the upcoming change and explaining the 'what's, 'why's, and 'how's throughout the organization, the leader must also communicate a clear vision for the change.

He/she must be able to describe what the future will look like after the change to all levels of the organization in a positive encouraging way that will inspire people to act; and it is a big challenge.

Most organizations have vision and mission statements. However, we hardly find an organization in which all employees understand these statements; let alone even knowing them. There is a big difference between just writing vision and mission statements and communicating them effectively.

Kotter pointed out that the average leader hugely under-communicates the vision for change. Any change initiative should have a good formal communication plan in place before the change begins. The leader must explain the things that will not change, the new things that will occur, what will change, how long it will take, and the like.

Then the leader has to ensure that the support elements necessary for the change to be successful are in place. These are a realistic change project plan, guiding and facilitating team, formal communication plan, formal training plan, obstructions removal, and a supportive management team.

It is important that the management must make sure that the proposed change is reasonable and has a realistic change plan. If not, most employees will resist the change. The success of a change initiative is largely affected by how employees see and accept it.

Leslie W. Rue, Professor Emeritus of Management at Georgia State University, and Lloyd L. Byars, Professor of Management at Georgia Institute of Technology stated that "How employees perceive a change greatly affects their reaction". Thus, affects the success of the change initiative.

They suggested that there are four basic types of employees' reaction to change. The first, employees will resist change if they cannot foresee how the change will affect them, and/or if they believe that the change may make things worse.

The second, employees will resist change if they see that the change is not compatible with their needs and aspirations. They believe, in this case, that the change will make things worse.

The third, if employees see that the change is going to take place regardless of their objection, their first reaction is to resist it. However, when they see that the change is inevitable, they then gradually accept it and go along with it.

Finally, employees will be highly motivated to accept the change if it is in their interests. Hence, employees must feel that the change will make things better.

The next step the leader should take is to establish a guiding team. The team members will act as facilitators and guides for the change. They should be those who accepted the change, and willing to execute the plan for the change.

They will also be in charge of teaching the new skills necessary for the change to be successful and establish the needed training programmes.

The leader and the guiding team members should also have plans to remove the obstructions that may prevent the change, and take action steps to remove these obstructions. These obstructions including – but not limited to - lack of budget, lack of management support, not enough people, lack of time, and the like.

In order to do so, the leader and the team members must have a full support from the organization's management.