

# **LeaderPerfect Newsletter**

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## **It's Not Change That People Resist**

by Dr. Mike Armour

We've heard it so often, we take it for granted — people don't like to change. They resist it. They fight it. They hang on dearly to the status quo.

Or do they?

After working with change processes for decades, I've concluded it's not so much change that people resist. It's ambiguity. Most people are willing to change if they have a clear picture of why change is necessary and where it will take them. Absent that clarity, they are prone to resistance.

### **Making Change Palatable**

For people to accept change, they need a *why*, *what*, *how*, *how much*, and *where*.

- They need to know *why* the change is called for.
- They need to know specifically *what* will be changed.
- They need to know specifically *how* the change will occur.
- They need to know specifically *how much* will change -- the scope of change.
- They need to know *where* the change will take them and what life will be like — specifically — once the change is complete.

When leaders announce change, they often pay only partial attention to this list. Commonly they offer an explanation as to why change is necessary and perhaps what will be changed. But beyond that, they provide few specifics. People are left with only an ambiguous notion of what things will look like once change has taken effect.

Without a clear picture of what to expect, they naturally begin to speculate. And their speculation is usually negative, not positive. That's because ambiguity begets uncertainty. Which in turn begets anxiety. And anxiety is about things going wrong.

### **It's Not About Trust**

People don't like being anxious, and they soon lose goodwill toward leaders who put them in anxious situations.

Leaders tend to respond to anxiety in their organization by saying, "Trust us." But that rarely works when people are anxious about change, because trust is not the issue. Ambiguity is the problem. And ambiguity is only dispelled through information. In calming anxieties, it's impossible to overcommunicate.

## Communication Breakdowns

So why do leaders tend to "undercommunicate" when implementing change? Several factors may contribute. First, leadership itself may have only an ambiguous sense of where the change will lead. This is especially true when crisis or an emergency compels change and there is not enough time to think through all the eventualities the change will trigger. But crisis-driven change is rare. Apart from those rare moments, leaders should postpone announcements of change until they can clarify as many ambiguities as possible.

Second, people who rise to leadership positions frequently have a much greater tolerance for ambiguity than the people they lead. Thus, as leaders they don't recognize the urgency of offering their followers details and specifics. They assume that everyone in the organization is as adept at managing ambiguity as they are.

Third, when leaders discuss plans for change, and do so over extended periods of time, they become quite familiar with the details of the change. All too often they then project their familiarity on everyone else. Because leadership sees the "big picture" of where the change will take them, they simply assume everyone else will grasp that picture quickly. They forget how long it took them to get to that picture and become comfortable with it.

Years ago I was associated with a large non-profit that was planning a major campaign. For 24 months every board meeting was devoted to the campaign's launch. But about a year and a half into the planning process one board member, in a moment of frustration, blurted out, "Why don't we shut this campaign down. Everybody out there is sick and tired of hearing about it!!"

When he finished, someone reminded him that no one outside of the room had ever heard of the campaign. The launch was still weeks away. He was projecting his familiarity with it — and his weariness of it — on the constituency.

While extreme, his projection of familiarity is a threat to every leadership team when it spends months or even years deliberating the merits of a change. They forget that what is "old news" to them is altogether "new news" to their organization.

## Combating Your Worst Enemy

If your role calls for you to implement change, focus on the threat of ambiguity. It's your worst enemy. Think things through. Think them out clearly. And then communicate, communicate, communicate. Explain not only the need for change, but the specific benefits of change. And to the degree possible, emphasize personal benefits over organizational benefits. Show people how things will be better for them personally as a result of the change.

In fact, when announcing change, place the benefits early in your communication. Explain why the change is being made, lay out the personal benefits, and only then go into the details of implementation.

If you talk implementation before benefits, people will give you only half an ear, because they will be absorbed in speculating about "what this means for me." Take that anxiety

out of the picture. Let them know specifically how they will benefit. Then go into the details of the change, anticipating a positive reception.

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