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## Dealing With the Change Agenda

It seemed simple enough at the time - an elementary school wanted to move to what has become known as a "balanced day." Rather than the standard "two-recess, one lunch hour" format, a balanced day involves re-jigging the classroom/recess structure to solve a number of problems. For example, it helps to deal with a shortage of qualified lunch room supervisors, as well as ensuring that teachers get the break time required by contract. It also ensures that children can get just as much outside time as they had before, yet avoids the challenges and problems that can come about from a long lunch hour in mid- day. It also allows more instruction time with fewer interruptions.

It's a great initiative, and yet, when introduced to the parents their reaction could almost have been predicted -- wide ranging concern, opposition and, in some cases, misinterpretation of the reasons for the proposed change.

Which, if you think about it, is a microcosm of the type of reaction that occurs when any association seeks to effect change, whether related to some minor issue or with something that involves far more significant, long lasting change.

Implementing change is probably one of the most significant challenges faced by an association executive. Many of you will have had a long track record in managing the process, yet given that the rate of change around us is swirling ever faster, we're having to constantly remind ourselves of the essence of a successful change strategy.

Bringing change to bear involves understanding the challenges and barriers that will hinder your progress, as well as the methods and initiatives that you can undertake as part of the change process to try to smooth any feathers ruffled during the process. Consider these steps, and you might find the process of change management to be far more straightforward.

Communicate, communicate, communicate - and then communicate some more. Time and again, change initiatives have failed as a result of a simple lack of communication. All too often, those trying to effect the change have simply rammed the change through, without effectively explaining the reasons underlying the need for change, the implications of the change, and the benefits that will come from the change. Poor communication leads to all the classic signs of an ineffectual change process, ranging from suspicion, fear, confusion to distrust and rumor. You will do much better if you spend as much time in creating a "change communication plan" as you do in structuring the details of the change itself, as that will help to ensure that your message doesn't go off the rails.

Anticipate objections. Many people seem to be driven by a rather simple outlook on life: whenever confronted with something new, they quickly respond that we can't change things because "we've always done it that way." And if you get right down to it, such a statement masks the reality that they just don't like change, don't want to have to deal with change, and certainly won't accept change! They've been born with a change anti-virus that immediately rejects any invasion of their comfort zone by any type of new initiative, with the result that you will be guaranteed a great deal of grief as you attempt to move forward. Given this reality, it is best if your change strategy takes account of the fact that you will have strong objections to your plans, regardless of how small or large the nature of the change might be. Take the time to understand the potential objections, and then document and communicate how those concerns are likely ill-founded. You might find that by doing this that things become a little bit easier for you.

Make the presumption that you must sell to the uninformed. The reason that you must work so hard to communicate the reasons for change is because many people will not be in possession of the most

basic facts related to the change. Their daily life is based upon routine - they come into work each day, and do the same thing that they've done the day before - day in and day out. They live such a life of routine that they don't ever spend time thinking about trends, the future, and how their world will evolve around them. Because of their complete lack of any sort of change-radar, they expect that everything will always stay the same.

And as soon as you interrupt their routine, all hell breaks loose.

Call them change-blind - meaning, that as you push forward any type of necessary change, you must spend a lot of time not only communicating with them, but educating them. Education implies information - and you can't have too little information. You can't simply issue a newsletter explaining the forthcoming change. You must have detailed, comprehensive information available that puts into perspective the many issues and areas of concern that will drive them. You must have information sessions at which you can provide them information as to what is going on. You must be prepared to answer all of their questions, regardless of how picayune or minor they might seem.

Presume that you are dealing with indecision. Most people would prefer to live in a world where there was never any change. When confronted with the need to change, they fall prey to that other common human instinct: they are unable to make a decision!

Effecting successful change always requires a degree of support, and yet that support will not be forthcoming if people are driven by the aggressive indecision that seems to be so characteristic of our times. Hence, design your change initiative and communication plan in such a way that you are forcing people into making a decision. You can do this by putting in place a deadline by which they must act, or by providing very clear choices that must be made.

Plan for the fact that people will misinterpret what you say. Many change initiatives will run up the ingrained distrust that exists within the culture of many organizations. It's not surprising that many people will inherently distrust you - after all, there is no doubt that people have been battered by an extremely negative corporate environment through the last few years, particularly as corporate cost cutting has come to be the key change initiative of many an organization.

In such an environment, any type of change you propose might simply be viewed as a part of that cost-cutting agenda. You can counter this by being clear, succinct and concise. You also need to be firmly plugged into the rumor mill, and must be prepared to act immediately on any misinformation that you might hear is being spread about.

Harness the passion of supporters. Successful organizational change initiatives always involve the participation of those who are eager to see the change come about, or who have a stake in the successful implementation of the change. You'd do well to get them involved as early as possible, since they will be very powerful allies.

Seek the involvement of the detractors. At the same time that you get the involvement of those who want to see change, you will find that you also need the support of those who are only marginally against the change. You'll make things easier for yourself if you spend a bit of time trying to turn them into supporters. They might simply need some of the extra care and concern with the issues outlined above - as it might simply be a lack of information that has them sitting on the fence. Spend the time to segment your audience, and address their concerns appropriately, and you might find that you are expanding your support base significantly.

Be positive but address the negative. Hopefully, you are trying to effect some positive change, and you can clearly outline a number of the benefits that will come once the change is in place. Even so, there is always a downside to any type of change, and you shouldn't hesitate in outlining that downside. Make sure all of your communications address any negative issues without hesitation. Don't try to sugarcoat them - people will see through that, which can only help to fuel the negativity that can come about from a poorly managed change process.

Be honest, forthright and ethical. Last but not least, ensure that your change initiative is based upon simple human decency and values. You set the tone and climate for change. If you are not seen to be a full participant in the change; don't share in any pain that it might cause; or are seen to be

aloof and isolated from the change, you'll destroy any support quicker than you can say "off the rails." You've got to be a full participant in the change, and ensure that fact is seen and noticed.

*As a trends and innovation expert, Jim Carroll spends a great deal of time helping organizations cope with the change that swirls around him. This article is based upon insight he recently provided as the keynote speaker for the US Department of Defense Maintenance Symposium & Exhibition, hosted by the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Logistics and Material Readiness). Jim was asked to provide his thoughts on the challenge of change and the need for an innovative mindset, in the wake of the ongoing efforts for overall transformation of the US Military to meet the demands and complexities of the 21st century. Jim's web site can be found at [www.jimcarroll.com](http://www.jimcarroll.com) Jim Carroll, FCA, [jcarroll@jimcarroll.com](mailto:jcarroll@jimcarroll.com), Voice 905.855.2950 / Fax 905.855.0269*

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