

To get employees to change, expand their comfort zone

Education is one method that helps cut resistance

By: RICK CONLOW

Q: How do you get a longtime employee to be responsive to change?

A: Experienced people often resist change for one reason: Change threatens their comfort level. They are so accustomed to doing something one way that any change is simply uncomfortable.

Try the following exercise to test your own comfort zone. Clasp your hands together, noticing which thumb is on top. Now, take your hands apart and clasp them again, this time putting the other thumb on top. Does it feel uncomfortable? Tomorrow, when you unconsciously clasp your hands, notice which position your thumb is in. It'll probably be in the position you're most comfortable with.

It's a real challenge to make people change. You've no doubt noticed that as a rule, employees don't change just because a manager tells them to. You wouldn't change your thumb position that easily. People will change only as their comfort level with the proposed change grows.

How do you make employees comfortable with the idea of change? Number one, educate them so they understand the value of the change. Then, once they make the change, support and encourage them to stick with it.

A CEO from a company with about 100 employees instituted a big change in his company by starting a new performance review system. To put it into effect, he wrote up an elaborate five-page memo,

attached a new review form and sent it to all managers with the instructions: "Do this every six months."

Instead of simply telling the managers what to do, he could have educated them by arranging a meeting to discuss the new system. He also could have used the new system to review the managers' performance. Not surprisingly, six months later, few of the employees received a six-month review.

MANAGER'S ADVISER

Another company in the Twin Cities initiated a change to improve customer process skills that involved several departments. To put these changes into effect, officials first surveyed employees for ideas. Then managers held meetings to explain why the changes were needed and also created a cross-functional task force to review ideas and existing procedures as well as to draft new procedures. The process took about five months, but because of the education, support and encouragement, the changes became comfortable and were readily accepted.

When you're working directly with experienced employees, first explain to them one-on-one your reasoning about proposed changes. Ask for their input; then involve them on a task force to help implement the changes. Finally, recognize their experience, knowledge and contributions as changes are put into place.

LEAVE WORK BEHIND

Q. To stay healthy as a manager, how do you leave your job at work behind you at the end of the day?

A. This is an area where I've learned from my own experience. Early in my career, I was in charge of a training staff in an education curriculum company in Washington, D.C. Traveling much of the time all across the country consumed not only a large chunk of my working days, but often consumed my thinking after I arrived home.

Here are some ideas that helped me.

- Try not to bring work home. On those occasions when you must, minimize the amount.
- Use the drive home as a transition time, drawing on relaxation techniques to unwind.

- At home, take some alone time. Go for a walk, exercise or read a nonbusiness-related book.
- Get involved with your children's activities or volunteer your time to help others.
- Use a time planner at work and plan your next day before you go home. In the book *The Leadership Challenge*, the authors found in their study of managers that the more successful ones were "hardy" – that is they tended to not be sick a lot, were able to handle several things at once and to handle a lot of stress. They were refreshed and focused each day because they used some of the ideas listed above. To stay healthy, learn how to direct 100 percent of your attention to whatever you're doing – whether you're at home or at work.

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