

Five Ways to Get Change Right

Most people prefer an IRS audit or root canal to a change in their software. Some of these same people like change when they choose it. In fact, they see excitement in the challenges and opportunities that come with a change they select.

Sometimes, however, according to author, Kelly Standing, “we like change better when it comes to us by invitation instead of imposition.” When the change imposes itself on us, it becomes a nuisance, and we resist it.

Why? Fear. We don’t know what lies ahead and how our lives will be affected. If the change surprises us, that further exacerbates the fear. We can’t steel ourselves to consequences we don’t anticipate. Unexpected and unwanted—two of the most onerous characteristics of change.

Add the element of “unnecessary,” at least in the eyes of some, and you have a recipe for opposition. Most of us resent decision makers rearranging our lives, but we don’t resist so much when we can see that the change improves our condition. Initially, however, either this evidence doesn’t show itself, or it doesn’t exist. When we see only the *burdens* of the change and none of the *benefits*, we tend to lose confidence in the new approach.

How can anyone expect us to champion a change that we don’t want? They can’t automatically cast us in the role of change agent when we feel threatened or annoyed. Hope does spring eternal, however, for the savvy leader who learns ways to get change right. Here are five things you can do to help yourself and others adjust when things seem to spiral out of control. I call them The Five E’s for Change:

1. Serve as an **exemplar** and identify others who can too.

In addition to championing the change yourself, you will do well to identify those among you who will also embrace the new. But what if you don’t want the change yourself? Pretend. As a leader, you may have to act as though you approve of the change when you really would have preferred the traditional approach. Your direct reports depend on you to shine the light into the darkness for them. If you don’t, both you and they will suffer from lost momentum, low morale, or even the departure of some of your key talent.

2. **Engage** champions of the change and the change agents among you. Talk to them about what they see as the most pressing issues and the needs they have, but don’t let your conversations turn to gripe sessions. Instead, take a positive approach. Ask them what they aspire to achieve during the transition and how they will measure their success. Reward the change *efforts*, not just results, and let them experience the excitement of the change.

In addition to offering explanations, you can help them discover their own answers. For instance, you can ask, “What does this future state look like? Describe it in detail. What

will be different? What new capacity will emerge?" Talk about past successes that changes have engendered and innovations that have proved profitable.

3. **Empower.** One of the most disturbing aspects of change is people start to feel victimized. No one asked them about the change, so they feel a profound loss of control. They won't hold sway over many things, but if you empower them to take control of the things they can control, talk about potential problems, and then communicate your faith in them to address the roadblocks as they appear, you'll notice that those who might have resisted the change start looking for the opportunities in it. Give them the authority to practice and master experimentation.
4. **Elevate.** When change occurs, often emotions reign. Logic may make us think, but emotion makes us act. If you allow discussion and decisions to remain in the arena of emotion, however, you and those who count on you will end up frustrated but no better off.

Elevating the discussion to one that addresses problem-solving and decision-making puts the focus where it needs to be: on those things they can control. It also helps to concentrate efforts on things that will improve conditions, not on the problem or change itself.

Talk about the links between their efforts and the best possible outcome. What improvements and benefits will be possible going forward? Exude optimism as you draw attention to past successes.

5. **Educate;** don't just train. Of course, people may need some training to adjust to the new situation. They will have to know how to use codes, how to comply with mandates, etc. But you can go beyond training to educate people about the thinking behind the mandates. They may not agree with the reasons for the change, but they should at least understand them.

Most of us wish unplanned, unexpected, and unpleasant change would bother someone else, but as a leader, you can't stay in this mindset and hope to help those in your chain of command. Instead, when you focus on long-term benefits to both the individual and the organization, you take important steps to ensure your people have what they need and zero in on ways you can combine efforts to ensure you get the change right.