

When HR becomes a “Change Agent”

Guru Dave Ulrich has been saying for ages that the HR manager has to be an agent of change! Alright, but under what circumstances must he wear that hat? What should he take on? And for what kinds of changes?

Change is often due to a change in strategy that requires reorganization, a redistribution of resources or a reallocation of operational capabilities. HR sometimes feels powerless because management or the departments affected by the change take matters into their own hands. This is where HR must align itself with management to take on a principal role and propose solutions, which will moreover strengthen its credibility in the eyes of the organization.

Organizational changes occur frequently: a new leader, the application of a new strategy, the implementation of a savings program, restructuring, and the introduction of a new information system or a new management process. These changes all have the same effect when they're announced: they create fear! Why? Because: “change is good, except when it applies to me!” People don't like to go out of their comfort zones, to be rushed. And even if the change could be synonymous with hope and joy for some, most often, the majority will dread it. In the face of the unknown, fear manifests as resistance, an unconscious emotional reaction usually related to our defense mechanisms.

Let's take a specific example. In a highly technical enterprise, management decides to focus on behavioral skills (in recruitment, evaluations and promotions) to try to eradicate abusive behavior by some of the managers and staff members who capitalize on their technical expertise to come out on top. Such an announcement will generate resistance, particularly among those who have established their credibility



through technical prowess. These heavyweights usually hold key positions and are therefore “untouchable.” It's normal that some of them will be opposed to this new concept. We're proceeding, then, faced with negative attitudes from people who are resistant and protesting loudly. They can have a negative impact on others who were neutral towards the announced change. As in a mutiny, there are opposition leaders who must be “dealt with” quickly and efficiently.

Incorporate both the allies and the detractors into the process

The goal is to segment the key players (executives, managers, professionals, employees), identify the allies and the detractors in each of these groups, and develop a communication strategy adapted to each of those sub-groups. In particular, efforts should be focused on where the biggest impact will be made. Going back to our example, it's necessary to identify one or two allies at each level by asking them to take on the role of Ambassador and to explain to the others, during a coffee break, at meetings, why it's positive that behaviors are being emphasized by this organization. Or maybe engage in personal discussions with the detractors, listening to them before explaining and showing the positive outcomes of exercising and promoting positive behaviors, without, of course, neglecting the

technical aspect. In fact, integrating one or two allies in the meetings with the detractors is a real “must”. While negative opinions of all kinds will emerge, the calm of the allies will indirectly influence the detractors who aren't necessarily going to give up then and there, but will reflect later on. A plan of meetings or interviews with the key players must be executed and has an enormous impact upon the success of the change.

Investing in communication and training

As in activity A, communication is paramount at all stages of the change. The support of a communications department for a successful communication campaign related to the change isn't always available. HR must therefore act as a leader in proposing a communications strategy to Management, wherein each action will be described in detail. The goal, contents, audience, media, format, timing and responsibility are articulated and this plan has to be rigorously executed.

“And even if the change could be synonymous with hope and joy for some, most often, the majority will dread it.”

Trainings are excellent forums for allowing people to express their viewpoints, exchange ideas with others and formulate opinions. When organizing trainings aimed at introducing change, one should incorporate, in part, points A and B above. Going back to our example, a training that educates technicians as to how their behavioral skills can energize a team, on what their purpose is by simulating real-life situations and demonstrating that they can change and improve behaviors through simple and efficient means, will convince the audience.

Laurent Jaquenoud



Laurent Jaquenoud is a Senior Partner at Optimis (www.optimis.ch) and has more than fifteen years of experience in designing and implementing international organizational structures. He advises organizations on strategies, structures, processes and systems of HR management to maximize the performance of HR service delivery. He trains managers (HR and line) in navigating the challenges of structural change.