

Improving Attitudes Toward Change

BY RICHARD S. DEEMS, PhD

Whether you're a healthcare CEO, a department head, or a floor nurse, the way you look at change will shape your work. It will, moreover, shape the work of the employees you supervise. Because that's the case, you might want to keep three basic facts about change in mind.

PEOPLE DO NOT NATURALLY RESIST CHANGE

Our daily lives are filled with change, ranging from the major (you get a new job, for instance) to the minor (your favorite restaurant closes). By the time a person reaches adulthood, he or she has mastered thousands of changes. Indeed, change has made us what we are today.

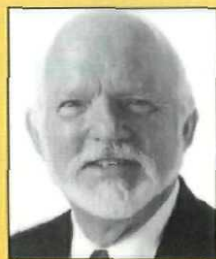
People do *not* "naturally" resist change. We are, in fact, programmed to grow and develop in the midst of it. It is true that we are not always thrilled about change. For example, I did not welcome the lifestyle changes—in diet, exercise, and so forth—made necessary by my first angioplasty. But I understood that such changes were necessary for my health, and I accepted them as such. Most people accept change once they understand its benefits.

That's why it always bothers me to hear leaders say, "Change is always resisted." I know that, if they really believe it, those leaders will themselves tend to resist new ideas. Fearful of asking too much of employees, they will ask too little of them. As a result, the leaders' beliefs about employees' resistance to change will keep positive changes from occurring.

PEOPLE RESPOND TO CHANGE DIFFERENTLY

Although people do not automatically resist change, they do respond to it in different ways. Kathy Kolbe, a management consultant, says (in *The Conative Connection*, Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA, 1990) that people have different natural strengths and respond to change according to these strengths. She sees four basic strengths:

- Fact Finder—insistent people need things explained in detail.
- Follow Through—insistent people need to see



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how a proposed change fits into the current system.

- Quick Start—insistent people naturally think in terms of possibilities.
- Implementor—insistent people need to convert ideas into tangible forms.

Employing Kolbe's terms, we might expect a Fact Finder confronted with change to ask, "Why is this necessary?" A Follow Through person will wonder what the proposed change will do to existing structures and routines. A Quick Start type will ask, "Why not?" and plunge ahead with a minimum of conversation. An Implementor will want to know what things will look like after the change is completed and whether the tools necessary for high-quality work are available.

Understanding how people will react, a leader can plan change in a way that makes the best use of everyone's talents.


FOCUS DETERMINES OUTCOME

Many organizations, after implementing a serious change, provide their employees with what they call "survival" or "stress" training. Given that kind of emphasis, employees naturally assume the defeatist attitudes of stressed survivors.

Focus determines outcome. A leader seeking positive outcomes will provide employees with learning programs that have a positive focus. Such programs might, for example:

- Celebrate change as a natural phenomenon, thereby helping employees to put it into perspective
- Identify the ways employees themselves prefer to deal with change and the skills they think they need to make change work
- Help employees learn skills to make change work, both on the job and in their private lives

Such programs can be offered either before, after, or during significant organizational change. The more skills employees have in making change work, the more secure they will feel and the more effectively they will do their jobs. □

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