

You Can't Tell Folks To Change, Period!

"Tell me and I'll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I'll understand."  
Chinese proverb

What's the most common process for introducing change in our organizations? Right. We hold a meeting. Tell folks why the change is necessary and give our reasons for the change, our perceived benefits of the change and tell them be prepared to do it our way. Then, we become angry and frustrated as all heck when we experience workers' resistance, lack of buy-in and little to no change (or resistance, resentment, complacency, lack of commitment or sabotage in some way, shape or form) in the long run.

As leaders, managers and supervisors should know by now, people resist change when forced upon them. "Telling" is what initiates the resistance. Resistance is the energy spend on NOT doing something, avoiding doing something or fearing to do something.

The deal is that resistance not so much about the change; it's all about being changed.

Leaders, managers and supervisors, the initiators of change, approach change from a different mindset than the folks who are told to change. Leaders, managers and supervisors come to see change as an initiated, proactive "creative" process. Those who are told to change come to change from a "reactive" mindset. And, most leaders, managers and supervisors can't "get" why workers are "reactive." What's wrong with them! Why can't they see the positives of the change effort? Reactive thinkers most often view change as an event that will end up hurting them in some way.

So, these differences in perspective, being "creative" and being "reactive", create conflict when used in a "telling" situation. It's very hard for workers to take in the "you are our most valuable asset" mantra while being told what to do, when to do it, and how to do it.

The conflict here is that the leaders', managers' and supervisors' intentions are well-meaning. BUT, "telling" is the catalyst in the equation that causes overt, subtle or silent reactivity.

So, what would it be like when leaders, managers and supervisors engage employees in the change process, ask workers to engage in decision-making and problem-solving? In many cases, employees will come up with the same solutions or change efforts leaders, managers and supervisors are suggesting. The difference? Employees have a greater sense of self-esteem, value and self-worth because they feel they are part of the process, part of the solution. Commitment and buy-in usually follow closely behind. There is much less tension, conflict and resistance around change.

In just about every employee survey that asks employee what they want, what's important to them at work, in the top five responses we find: (1) acknowledgement, recognition and appreciation; (2) being involved in decisions that affect them; and (3) support with personal issues. This gap between what employees want and what management "thinks" employees want seems to never narrow.

When employees feel they are treated as functions and roles, when they feel management does not care about their needs and wants, when they are never asked, "What do you think?", employees' energy lessens, and begins to evaporate. Performance, productivity, engagement and commitment begin to wane, attitudes turn negative and the "us vs. them" mindset takes over.

When leaders, managers and supervisors take a "telling" approach towards employees, in essence they are saying to employees "We really don't appreciate you; we really don't want to include you." Pure and simple. Like it or not. That's the perception and we all know perception is reality to most folks — especially in workplace situations where change is the issue.

In the final analysis, the real experts in the organization are the employees in the organization. There is a great deal of value and wealth in your organization, in the folks who report to you, in the folks you deal with on a daily basis. They possess a great deal of knowledge, insight and expertise.

If you would take the time, and be honest and sincere in your efforts, you can ask your folks, "What do you think?" and be assured folks will do the self-reflection necessary to come up with the solutions required for them to do their best for themselves and for the good of their team and your organization. Why? Because asking employees improves their self-esteem, motivates them, and empowers them to do their best...consistently. They take ownership for finding solutions.

Finally, asking communicates, "I care about you as a person." "Your opinion is important to me/us/the team/the organization."

Asking makes a difference. If you want folks to use their innate talents, wisdom and knowledge and to be creative, engaged, committed and proactive.....ask, don't tell.

So, some questions for self-reflection are:

- How do you feel when you are told what to do?
- What message do you think folks hear when they are told, and not asked? Do you care what they hear?
- Can you think of a time when you had a good idea, an effective solution, and no one listened to you? How did that make you feel? What happened to your enthusiasm?
- Have you recently faced resistance to an idea you felt was first-rate?
- In your role as a leader, manager or supervisor what solution have you recently tried to implement by telling? How did folks react? How well did they implement the change? How effective was the change? What was your contribution to its success or lack of it?
- Are you a "tell" or "ask" type of leader, manager or supervisor? Why?
- Can you remember the last time you resisted a change effort?

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