How to Help Make Your Organization’s Change Initiative a Success

The Manager’s Guide to Getting Employees to Execute Change Initiatives More Quickly and Effectively, with Less Resistance and Drama

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Your Leadership Team Has Unveiled Their Big Change Initiative...Now What?

Managers and frontline supervisors have a huge effect on the success or failure of a change initiative. They largely determine whether what sounds good in theory translates into tangible results.

As you probably know from personal experience, getting people to buy into change is not easy. Getting employees to execute quickly without getting bogged down in drama and the inevitable frustrations and irritations caused by change is not easy. Dealing with employees’ emotional reactions to change is far from easy.

This report is designed to make all of this much easier.

Not only is this report designed to make your job easier, it can make you an even more valuable player in your organization. It will help you build your reputation as someone who knows how to get better results from people in less time, while still maintaining high morale.
1. **Find Out if Your Team Truly Understands the Vision**—Chances are disturbingly good that they don’t. In a study involving 23,000 US employees commissioned by Franklin Covey, Harris Interactive found that only 37% of employees said they understood what their employer was trying to accomplish.

In another study by Leadership IQ, only 50% of the employees who said they knew their employer’s vision could accurately articulate it.

Thus, the alarmingly low 37% of employees in the average company who say they know their employer’s vision is probably an overly optimistic figure of how many actually do.

Clearly, if employees don’t understand your company’s vision or business goals, they are unlikely to act in ways that will help make that vision and those goals a reality.

2. **Communicate the Vision and the End Result Using “Future Stories”**—
Describe what the end result will look and sound like in action 6-12 months in the future, or whatever time frame fits the initiative.

Describe what you envision people doing differently once the vision becomes reality. The more specific your “future story,” the better. In other words, drill down to specific examples of what the vision will look and sound like in action.
This makes it far easier for employees to grasp the vision. For instance, if your company is embarking on an initiative to be more client-centric in all its interactions, give examples of common client interactions, and what your new client-centered approach would look and sound like in these scenarios.

3. **Make Sure Your Team Understands “The Why”**—One of the eternal truths about human nature and change: people are far more likely to embrace change if they understand the reason behind it. Employees are far more likely to execute a strategy wholeheartedly—even if they disagree with it—if they understand the “Why.” To paraphrase Nietzsche: “People can handle almost any What, if they understand the Why.”

To complicate matters, certain personality styles (e.g. people who have a high C score in the DISC profile) are especially resistant to directives that don’t make sense to them. It is particularly important to this segment of your workforce population that you explain the reasoning behind the change or initiative. Without that understanding, they will at best comply but never commit and, at worst, actively resist.

While it may seem time-consuming to explain the reasoning behind a decision or a particular strategy, it is time well spent. Time invested in effective communication in the beginning of an initiative means less time spent fighting resistance and subtle sabotage throughout the initiative.

When it comes to explaining The Why, don’t assume explaining it once will suffice. Often when people are shocked by news, their brains lose the ability to process information. Often when struggling with a difficult execution, it’s easy to forget the Big Picture and its validity. Thus, keeping The Why on people’s minds helps them maintain commitment and enthusiasm throughout the process.
4. **Make sure you address the “WII-FM”**—In case you’re not familiar with that acronym, it means “What’s in it for me?” and is a question that must be answered if you are to be persuasive. As you communicate your vision and tell your future stories, make sure you describe how this change or initiative will benefit your employees, your customers, and the company (and therefore job security).

5. **Don’t BS When You Address The Impact The Change or Initiative Will Have on Them**—Not only do you need to answer the “WII-FM” question, you also need to answer the other question that will undoubtedly be on every employee's mind: “How will this affect me?”

   While you want to talk about how an initiative or change will benefit your staff, you don’t want to spin something as having a positive impact on them when it does not. As you know from being on the receiving end of “Company Spin”, all it takes is one dishonest message from a leader to irrevocably damage trust in that person.

   You also don’t want to be that kind of manager, right?

   So don’t try to pretend certain outcomes or changes are a great thing when they actually are a net loss for your team. Also, don’t try to hide from the downside realities. Honestly acknowledge them.

6. **Wherever Possible, Involve Your Team In Deciding How To Best Execute The Strategy**—This not only gives you valuable “in the trenches” insights that will help you execute faster and better; asking your employees’ for their ideas also communicates respect. Giving them as much autonomy over The How also leads to a greater feeling of control over the process. This greater sense of control creates greater receptivity and commitment. It also helps prevent feelings of overwhelm and helplessness, which result when employees feel change has being “done to them” rather than feeling like they were a part of
the process.

Next to involving your team in creating the strategy, involving them in how to best execute the strategy is arguably THE most important thing you can do if you want to minimize resistance. It is also possibly the second most important thing you can do to increase the success and speed of the execution, because,—as you know,—the people who do the work every day are most in touch with potential obstacles that need to be addressed.

7. Anticipate Likely Questions and Objections, and Generate Answers—One of the reasons why managers drop the ball in the communications department is they feel ill-equipped to respond to difficult questions or objections. If you think through what questions and objections you are likely to get, and generate helpful answers, you will be far more confident about having those sometimes unpleasant but critical conversations. This is an area where brainstorming with fellow managers or your manager will be helpful.

8. Relate Human-to-Human, Not Role-to-Role—Some leaders make the mistake of “putting on their game face” when having to communicate difficult news. They adopt a stern, unemotional persona. They relate as The Leader or The Boss, rather than as a genuine human being. If you have been on the receiving end of this approach, you know it alienates employees.

9. Don’t Be Afraid To Be Real, To Be Authentic —If a change will have negative consequences for your employees, let them know that you realize this and that you don’t take it lightly. Interviews with employees at client companies going through downsizings have repeatedly shown how powerfully it affects employees when they can see—and hear—how much their manager (and senior leadership) cares about them and the impact their decisions will have on employees.
The more real you are, the more “bondable” you become, and therefore...the more your team will want to do their best for you.

10. Acknowledge Their Concerns and Distress—Just as a customer who has been inconvenienced wants to know that the customer service rep “feels their pain,” so does your team. Make sure you acknowledge their concerns. If they are upset, let them know you get that. Through your words and voice tone, indicate you appreciate how they feel. If they at least feel like their opinion and distress have been understood, they are far more likely to move on and execute wholeheartedly – even if they continue to disagree with the change.

11. Invite Feedback And Make It Safe For People To Speak Openly—This is where you cannot let efficiency trump effectiveness. Cutting discussion short either because you feel like you don’t have the time, or you don’t want to listen to “negativity” will cost you far more time later on. If your people don’t feel like they had a chance to be heard, they will not try to understand your position. Their resentment over not being heard will, at best, make them not want to give it their all. At worst, it will make them want to actively sabotage the initiative. For specific techniques about how to make it safe for people to speak up, refer to the article Can We Talk?: How to Foster Honest Open Conversation at HumanNatureAtWork.com.

12. Ask “What can I do to help?” and “How can we best support you?”—First, asking these questions communicates respect. It communicates that you don’t have the following attitude: “Here’s your marching orders. Whether you have what you need to make it happen is your problem.” Second, these questions show that you understand and recognize your
responsibility—and leadership’s responsibility as a whole—to support and allow employees to produce the best results possible. This involves removing unnecessary obstacles if at all feasible. It also means providing the resources that make executing with excellence possible.

Third, asking these questions also will provide you with valuable information that can make the difference between a botched execution or one that unfolds smoothly and efficiently.

Doing everything you can to permit your team to execute with excellence also allows you to tap into the motivational power of making progress and of mastery. When you consider the truism “nothing succeeds like success” and combine it with the research by Harvard Business School’s Dr. Therese Amabile on the power of small wins, you can see even more clearly the importance of this component. By finding out what specifically you can ask and do to help your team be successful, you set them up for “the thrill of victory” rather than “the agony of defeat”…which in turn builds confidence, momentum and a “Bring it On!” spirit.

13. Ask Your Team To Focus On Their Circle Of Control—Remind your team that if we focus on things that we cannot control or influence, it just leaves us feeling helpless, angry, and afraid. This is obviously not where anyone wants to be. Conversely, when we focus on what we CAN control, it helps us recognize the power and choices we DO have in a difficult situation. Focusing your team on their Circle of Control also helps them perform far more effectively, because they’re not wasting their time and energy ruminating about things they cannot change.

14. Complement “I feel your pain” with “We need to move on”—This can be a tough balancing act for even the most compassionate, interpersonally savvy person. If you try to rush or shut down employees expressing their concerns and distress over the change, you can virtually guarantee that you will pay for doing this in terms of sluggish execution, and simmering resentment.
On the other hand, regardless of how your employees feel about the situation, it “is what it is” and you have a business unit to run. When dealing with this challenging situation, many managers get stuck in one of two extremes. One extreme is the manager who doesn’t move beyond “I feel your pain.” They don’t transition into “I hear you loud and clear, and...this is our reality, so let’s focus on what we can do about it. Let’s focus on our Circle of Control.” When this happens, the vocal complainers and negative personalities start to dominate the emotional climate of the department and the manager feels frustrated at having to continually revisit their complaints about things that cannot be changed.

At the opposite extreme is the manager who adopts a hardline “It is what it is. Deal with it. Move on” stance. These managers probably will not hear the complaining that managers who invite discussion will, because employees are unwilling to speak up to these “hardline” managers. However, these managers will likely experience--usually without being aware of it—resistance and sabotage from a team that doesn’t feel heard or respected.

The middle path between these ineffective extremes consists of first letting people express themselves, acknowledging their feelings and perspective, and then at some point moving on.

The next step is acknowledging that you all need to work with the reality at hand, and that you are going to need them to focus on their Circle of Control. At the same time, you also express that you want to keep the conversation going as the initiative unfolds, so you can get updated feedback from them that will allow you as a team to execute well.

15. Let Your Team Know You Will Communicate Their Concerns Upstream—
Encouraging and coaching your people to focus on their Circle of Control, does NOT mean adopting a black and white “Hey...it is what it is...let’s make the best of this” position. Having this position can be tempting to the
manager who does not have the power to change the strategy or the accompanying decisions, and consequently feels helpless in the face of a barrage of complaints and concerns. Feeling unable to change the situation, they shut off the conversation. After they do this, their team feels powerless because they now believe that nothing they say will make a difference. Their concerns will not be heard.

To prevent this damaging dynamic from happening, be clear with your team about what is in your Circle of Control and what is not. You can say something like this:

“I hear what you are saying regarding how this change will affect X, Y, and Z. As you can see...I’ve taken notes about your concerns. However...right now...executing on this strategy is not optional. So...even though I understand your concerns, we need to move forward on this. What I can do, though, is communicate your concerns upward. I promise I will do that and get back to you on the response.

I also encourage you to pay attention moving forward to what’s working and what isn’t, and let me know. Since no strategy works perfectly as planned in the real world, there are undoubtedly things that weren’t anticipated that will come up. Because you’re in the trenches, you are the eyes and ears of this organization, so...we need you to share what you’re noticing,...including the things that aren’t working. Again...I promise to share your concerns with my boss. That is something that IS in my Circle of Control.”

16. Don’t Be Shy about Sharing “Bad” News and Your Concerns To YOUR Manager—No one wants to be the bearer of unpleasant news, be seen as a complainer, or labeled a “high maintenance” employee. However, just as you need your team members to be candid with you about what’s working and what isn’t, your manager needs to hear how you are being impacted
As you know from being on the receiving end of whining and complaining, there’s a difference between that approach and giving clear, fact-based information combined with a well-reasoned perspective. When you do the latter, you are providing tremendous value to your employer. Just like the old military saying “No battle plan survives contact with the enemy,” no business strategy can be expected to survive 100% intact when it meets the real world. There are bound to be flaws and aspects that need to be tweaked.

Wise leaders realize this and welcome feedback from “the trenches.” They understand that the success of their strategy depends on their ability to get real-time feedback and make adjustments accordingly. So help your employees participate in that.

17. **Involve Your Team In Simple Experiments**—Giving employees the latitude and encouragement to engage in low-risk—i.e. not “bet the farm”—experiments is one of the most powerful ways to cultivate a resilient, “can do” workforce. Doing this fosters flexibility because trying out new things becomes a way of life. This practice has been identified by numerous thought leaders as an essential practice for organizations to engage in if they want a workforce that rises to the challenge of – rather than resists -- change.

When you are in the midst of a change process, finding opportunities for employees to experiment with various aspects of the day-to-day roll-out helps prevent employees from feeling that change was “done to them.”

Since the degree of control a person feels in any situation largely determines their stress level, the more control you give employees over their work experience, the less stress they experience.

Because they are experimenting, because they are getting the chance to be creative and think for themselves, employees also feel more energized. Because experimentation triggers curiosity, exploration, determination, and victory, it is a natural mood elevator.
Experimenting as a way of life also helps reduce employees’ fears of taking appropriate risks. Because experimentation by definition means you don’t know if what you are trying will work or not, it removes the stigma attached to “failure.” Just as in science experiments, there is no “failure”, just feedback.

At the simplest, most practical level, actively involving employees in small low-risk experiments allows you to tweak your tactical execution rapidly. It makes for a smarter, more agile, more responsive approach to change.

18. Make Knowledge Sharing of What’s Working A Part of Everyday Life—
During major change initiatives, it’s easy for everyone to have their heads down and focus on simply executing. Doing so means losing a hugely valuable opportunity to spread excellence and wisdom. Not capturing and sharing best practices and lessons learned means others will need to reinvent the wheel when faced with similar situations. Make the sharing of knowledge and wisdom a part of your regular meetings. Keep a simple database that captures lessons learned.

19. Recognize and Celebrate the Attitudes and Behaviors That Lead to Effective Execution—While knowledge sharing will implicitly recognize and celebrate the type of experimentation, initiative, and “going for it” behavior you desire, it’s not enough. You want to leverage the powerful motivational nature of recognition and appreciation. Sharing stories of people engaging in the behaviors and demonstrating the attributes you want communicates “We notice and appreciate when you do the things that help us succeed.” It also strengthens your cultural norms and values because it explicitly communicates “These are the behaviors and attitudes we value highly here.”

Don’t make this a once a year event. Make it a regular part of both team meetings and organization-wide meetings. This is one of the most powerful
methods used by Ritz Carlton to keep their culture strong and the vision of excellence alive. They regularly share “Wow” stories in their daily team huddles to both inspire great customer service and provide a vivid picture for all employees of what great service looks and sounds like.

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About the Author

David Lee, the founder of HumanNature@Work, helps leaders and their management teams improve employee productivity, engagement, and customer service.

An internationally recognized thought leader in the field of employee engagement and performance, he works with organizations and presents at conferences both domestically and abroad. He is the author of nearly 100 articles and book chapters that have been published in trade journals and books in the US, Europe, India, Australia, and China.

In addition to his research and consulting with both struggling and “best in class” organizations, David Lee’s work draws from a wide range of scientific disciplines including cognitive neuroscience, anthropology, psychoneuroimmunology, trauma and resilience research, and paleopsychology.

Taking this research which typically doesn’t find its way into the business world, David translates these principles of human nature into practical organizational and managerial strategies that optimize employee performance.

Using the popular TV show The Dog Whisperer as an analogy for the difference understanding human nature makes, David’s work helps leaders become “Employee Whisperers,” thereby allowing them to become more effective at getting the best results from their team.
Client Comments

I've now worked with over 150 presenters since you last were a part of MEBSR's Spring Conference, and still you stand out as the best person we've ever had come and present on how we best work with one another, increase productivity and thrive.

*Sanna McKim, Executive Director, Maine Businesses for Social Responsibility, Maine*

David Lee facilitated our senior leadership retreat recently. I was most impressed with how well and how quickly David engaged with the team, and the members with him. It provided for a very smooth and effective transition into what was an open, honest and valuable discussion. David’s facilitation skills put people at ease and at the same time allowed for broad participation. At the end of the day, there was unanimous agreement to bring him back for our next retreat!

*Jim Donovan, CEO and President of Lincoln County Healthcare, ME*

Weeks after David Lee spoke to our college, people are still talking about the message he sent. One employee thanked our President and said it was a gift to employees to hear David speak. David took the time to get to know US before he stepped foot on campus. We didn’t expect the level of service that he provided. He interviewed people, sent out surveys and dug deep to find out exactly what our college needed to go from good to great. He then customized a program that fit what we needed and has been great with follow-up and feedback. It’s clear he truly cares. David does more that give a great speech a leave, he transforms the culture.

*Deb Carlson, PhD, Director of Institutional Research and Communication, Nebraska Methodist College: The Josie Harper Campus, NE*
Your program on *Constructive Conversations* was THE most memorable seminar I’ve ever attended, and I’ve been to a lot of training and a lot of school. It amazed me how you engaged the audience for four hours without PowerPoint.

*Ingrid Lederman, DDJ Capital Management, LLC, Waltham, MA*

There are several reasons why I’ve brought David Lee in to work with different management teams and organizations I’ve led over the years, despite the many management and leadership development consultants and trainers I’ve encountered.

First, while everyone says they will help you be more productive and get better results from your people, David is the only one I’ve worked with who really helps you get there.

One of the things that sets him apart is how he incorporates scientific research that others don’t. Because he grounds his ideas in research and links them to the workplace, even the skeptics understand the importance of the so-called “soft skills” required to be a good leader.

What’s more important than his content, though, is his ability to adjust his agenda on the fly, and work with the issues that come out of the group. Over and over I’ve seen this happy, where we able to talk about things in a way we hadn’t been able to before. So rather than just learn a bunch of new ideas and techniques, we actually got to a new place in how we worked together and the results we got.

Because of our work over the years, I am much more tuned into how to tailor my approach to each individual so the interaction is a positive, constructive experience that gets better results. At the more global level, I find I’m much more tuned into opportunities to acknowledge and leverage people’s talents and strengths, which makes them happier and more productive. Being able to do this also makes my life a lot easier, and me a lot more effective.

If you want to work with someone who doesn’t just really know their stuff inside and out, but who really listens to what you and your team need, and knows how to get you there, I highly recommend you reach out to David Lee.

*Eric Henry, Hershey Trust, PA*
We chose David Lee to provide us with customer service training over a well-known national franchise in part because of his customized approach. Rather than trying to convince us that a one-size-fits-all, off the shelf “solution” was just what we needed, he took the time to learn about our business and unique needs, and tailor a program to address them.

The fact that his program was addressing the real life issues our customer service and tech support people faced every day, combined with his engaging and informative training style, had a huge impact on our staff’s interest in, and commitment to, his ongoing program. It’s exciting to hear everyone using the concepts from his training in conversation – his concepts have become our vernacular.

One of the other things makes David such an effective trainer is the fact that he is clearly a voracious learner who is always on the lookout for new research or best practice to share with clients. Whether it’s how stress affects the brain and its implications for engaging people in constructive conversations, or a million other applications of “human nature at work”, David shares ideas and information you won’t get in “standard” business programs delivered by the average consultant. I know I have used his examples with staff, customers and friends. If you want an effective and customized training program that will enhance your external and internal communication, David Lee is the best choice!

Nancy Hellman, Customer Service Manager, Loftware, Portsmouth, NH