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Managing Organizational Change - Adapted from SkillSoft Ireland Limited © (2014) for learning purposes

What is organizational change?

Change is defined as an alteration or transformation individuals, teams, and organizations undergo in a response to internal and external forces. Often the external forces are beyond the control of the company though an organization can choose their response to these forces. Examples include competition, economic factors, social and demographic factors, political and legal factors, and changes in technology. Other forces of change are internal to the organization, some are company initiatives to improve the organization, others are in response to external factors or are the result of a major organizational event, such as a merger, acquisition, or impending legal action. Additional examples include a change in organizational strategy and goals, organizational development and restructuring initiatives, introduction of a new technology, and corporate governance and regulatory compliance related changes.

Change is an inevitable part of modern-day organizations. Regardless of the cause, the reality is managing change is a key function of management. One reason HR professionals should be involved in all aspects of organizational change is because managing change involves managing people. It's about supporting employees transitioning from the current state to the future state.

There are a number of reasons why properly managing change is important for the organization. First, change can happen at an incredible pace, so organizations need a structured approach to help individuals impacted by these changes. Next change management focuses on the human side of change and ensures employee participation, empowerment, and their engagement in the change process. This approach is more effective than the standard top down enforcement of change. And finally, in today's business environment, speed and agility are valuable. A strong change management model to quickly and effectively implement change by using change management as a tool can provide a great competitive advantage. However, poorly managed organizational change can result in reduced productivity, strong employee resistance, confusion, and even financial loss. Unmanaged organizational change can negatively affect employees psychologically, emotionally, and physically leading to stress related illnesses, loss of productivity, damaged working relationships, and the loss of good employees as they search for employment, they believe is more secure.

Employee resistance

Employees and people in general often resist change, because they perceive change as a threat to their comfort zones. Not knowing what to expect and consequently expecting the worst creates stress, confusion, anxiety, and uncertainty. This can lead to employees withdrawing, becoming skeptical and distrustful, and shifting into self-protection, or even a survival mindset. Resistance to change can be open, for example launching an organizing drive or more subtle, such as presenteeism or even intentional destruction of company property. Often viewed as a loss, people handle change in the same way they handle significant loss in their life. First there is shock and

denial, then anger, followed by discussion and negotiating, then depression and detachment, and then finally acceptance. HR professionals should anticipate these stages and manage them effectively.

Organizational change management is a systematic approach and involves applying knowledge and resources to effectively manage the process. There are several guiding principles of change management. First, communicate the need and vision for change. Employees are more likely to accept change when they understand the reasons that make it necessary. Communication should be regular and timely and done through several different channels. Also, creating and communicating a vision of the future helps set the change in the employees' minds, making it more familiar and acceptable, and making the perceived loss less painful. Second, involve employees at every level of the organization in the change process from the very beginning. This will help win trust and acceptance and create a sense of ownership among the employees, rather than a passive acceptance of what is being done to them. Third, facilitate the change, removing obstacles like uncertainty and fear that can lead to resistance. Leaders should support the desired behaviors by modeling the desired changes. Employees also must understand exactly what is expected of them. Fourth, you need to motivate employees, for example, by celebrating short-term wins in the change process. The change process can be long and hard, and periodic motivation and reward can help keep everyone focused on the goal. And finally fifth, incorporate the change into your culture. An organization's culture is made of the collective values, beliefs, and behaviors of its employees at every level. Incorporating the desired behaviors into daily activities helps make the change an accepted part of everyday work life.

Phases of change management

The ultimate goal of change management is to adapt and make changes quickly, effectively, and economically with as little negative impact as possible on customers, employees, suppliers, and the community at large. HR should be involved from the very beginning in any new change initiative. HR professionals should realize that there are three actions, which taken during their corresponding phases, help the change management team successfully plan for and implement change in the organization. First is preparing the organization for change, this is called the **prechange phase**. Next, managing the change or the **change phase**, and finally, reinforcing the change, which is the **postchange phase**.

The prechange phase involves identifying issues which are causing the need for change, creating a vision for the change, and assessing the organization's readiness for that change. Then keeping the vision in mind, a change management plan and communication plan are prepared to make the change happen. Possible resistances to change are identified and a strategy to overcome the resistance is also worked out in this phase. There are a few general steps to help prepare the organization for change. First determine what needs to change. Next assess change readiness and define your change management strategy. Then, prepare your change management team. And finally, develop a change management plan including a communication plan.

The implementation of change is only appropriate when the organization is prepared and ready for the change. There are four steps necessary in a strong change plan and again communication is key. Communicate the vision and plan for change by communicating the need and the risks of not

implementing the change. And answer any questions honestly, linking answers to operational requirements whenever appropriate. Gain commitment by accurately describing the effects of the change as they're currently known. Resolve any perceived fear and uncertainty associated with the change. Clarify the goals and benefits of the change, as it applies to the organization and the employees. Involve people in the change process by mentoring and coaching them through the process. And develop individual action plans to help employees own the change. And then, take action and implement your plans by communicating and managing the implementation schedule, providing necessary training, identifying and removing any remaining barriers, and finally, reinforcing the change by recognizing and celebrating short-term wins.

Once implemented, change should be reinforced. Managers should regularly monitor and evaluate the change process. This helps identify improvement opportunities in the process and helps make necessary adjustments. This can be done by checking for success through post implementation review, collecting data on the change process, and analyzing employee feedback. Also be aware that employees may revert to the old ways very quickly. Support and sustain the change by ensuring you have leadership support, adapting the structure of the organization, and implementing and enforcing a system of accountability. When change becomes part of the organization's culture, it becomes part of the organization. This can be accomplished by clearly communicating the connections between the new way of working and organizational success, encouraging the new way of working by providing financial and nonfinancial incentives, and reinforcing the new culture with every employee at every opportunity.