Change Management: Getting to the "Heart" of the Matter

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One of the primary reasons that change initiatives result in disappointment is failure to anticipate and manage "resistance" to the change effort. Regardless of the type of change being initiated, the scope of the change, or the urgency of the change, "resistance" should always be anticipated! **Skilled change leaders are generally adept at identifying the causes of "resistance" and dealing with them effectively.** This case study is about anticipating "resistance" to change and taking proactive steps to address the causes of "resistance" before the opportunity passes. Consider the following vignettes…

Story A

Bobbi has been working in the human resource department of TailorMade, Inc. for the last 10 years after working 7 years in the HR departments of two other companies. She is smart, ambitious, experienced and dedicated. During her tenure with TailorMade she has been given the "employee of the month" award three times, and has had perfect attendance in five of her 10 years with the company. Despite these qualities, her upward mobility as a HR practitioner has been limited due to a lack of formal education in business, or HR in particular. As such, her career has peaked at the "paraprofessional" level. The role she has performed for the vast majority of her tenure with the company has been to coordinate and maintain the complex and voluminous set of records that is typically associated with the HR function of a company the size of TailorMade. Bobbie, reports directly to Jane, the Director of Human Resources, who reports to Dannette, the Senior Vice President of Human Resources.

When Bobbi first started with the company most HR transactions and records were manual. Shortly after her arrival the company decided to purchase and install HRTech+, a very sophisticated software package for the day that provides substantial functionality for supporting payroll, records, and human resource information storage and retrieval. Like many other software packages of this era, HRTech+ is a free-standing package that interfaces with a number of financial software packages. Since its adoption, Bobbi has become very fond of the HRTech+ system because of its extensive functionality. Several years ago she vowed herself to become the ***resident guru*** on HRTech+ and has been successful in doing so.

Over the years a number of people have come and gone from TailorMade's HR Department. Each time a new person starts they need to be thoroughly trained in the application, and Bobbi has always been the ***go-to*** person. In addition, regular updates and new releases of the software mandate that all members of the HR staff receive periodic retraining, and Bobbi always manages to fulfill this need. She also spends a good portion of each day fielding questions and helping people with the system, sometimes at the expense of her own regular job responsibilities. But, she has always been granted some slack with her own work, due to the larger role she plays.

Last month during a regularly scheduled HR department meeting, Jane informed the staff, Bobbi included, that Dannette and CFO Bruce Jenkins had decided to outsource the payroll function to ChecksExpress (an outsourced payroll service provider). She went on to say that the conversion would take place within 30 days, and from that point on all payroll data and records would be entered and processed using ChecksExpress's proprietary software, which includes a robust and fully capable HR information system that would make the existing HRTech+ system obsolete. Jane went on to sing the praises of the ***robust*** ChecksExpress software saying that all members of the HR staff would be thoroughly trained by ChecksExpress in the use of this new system, and that ChecksExpress would also maintain a ***help desk*** to help staff with any learning or technical questions. In hearing this news, one staff member asked if it would still be necessary for Bobbi to train new staff members and help other members with periodic application problems and/or onsite training. Jane answered "no" explaining that all future training and support would be provided by

ChecksExpress. As such, Bobbi's time would be freed up to focus on her own work and help with other administrative functions.

Over the next week or so a number of HR staff members noticed that Bobbi's normal ***sunny*** and ***helpful*** demeanor had changed dramatically, and that she had become more reserved and kept to herself. When she did meet or talk with other staff members, it was as though a grey cloud hung over her, and she often expressed her feeling that management was making a grave mistake in abandoning their current processes and the HRTech+ system.

Two weeks before the scheduled conversion, Jane was informing staff of the schedule for implementing the change. At that time she publicly asked Bobbi to perform a number of important tasks in preparation for the upcoming changeover, tasks which few others could perform without Bobbi's keen familiarity with HRTech+. A week later, Jane asked Bobbi about her progress on these tasks only to find that, in contrast to her nature, Bobbi had completed very little of the required work. Bobbi offered a number of excuses concluding that they would have to delay the conversion by several weeks. Jane took this information to Dannette who said any delay was clearly unacceptable!

Jane again approached Bobbi this time directing her to ***pull-out-all-the-stops*** working as many hours as necessary to ensure the conversion would be completed on time. Several days before the scheduled conversion, Bobbi called in sick. The following day she also called in sick. On the third day, Jane received Bobbi's letter of resignation via email … effective immediately. Without Bobbi having completed her assigned work, the conversion had to be postponed for two months as others rallied to learn the HRTech+ system in sufficient degree to complete the planned conversion. By this time the ChecksExpress system, despite its robust functionality, was no longer looked upon favorably by the HR staff.

While Bobbi's story is pseudo-factual, it is descriptive of how resistance to change can and has foiled numerous change efforts. But how can we better manage that resistance? Well consider the following retelling of the story:

Story B

Dannette and CFO Bruce Jenkins had several meetings to discuss the changes they thought might be necessary to better equip the company for the expansion and growth their leadership team was envisioning. As a consequence of those discussions they expressed concerns to both their boss and peers about the "lack of bandwidth" in their current staff, processes and systems for supporting the planned growth, and gained authorization to make the necessary changes. The solution they selected, with the blessing of the leadership team, was to outsource payroll to ChecksExpress and redirect internal staff to other pressing accounting activities.

After getting the green light on this change project, Dannette and Bruce met with Jane, the Director of Human Resources to discuss the plan. It was Jane's recommendation that prior to making any announcement to the HR team they meet with Bobbi individually to discuss their intentions, get her thoughts, and hear any concerns she may have. That made perfect sense to Bruce and Dannette since Bobbi had been the recognized ***resident guru*** for some years. So that's exactly what they did.

During that meeting Bruce explained the company's vision and the expected growth associated with that vision. He also explained their concern that the current staff, processes and systems ***lacked the bandwidth*** necessary to support the rapidly growing company, and that this concern had precipitated their search for an outsourced payroll provider. Dannette entered the conversation indicating that in their search they had come to the tentative conclusion that ChecksExpress was the best alternative, partially because of the robust HR information system that served as a companion to ChecksExpress' payroll processing software. She then handed a brochure to Bobbi for her review.

While Bobbi was thumbing the pages of the brochure, Bruce went on to say that both he and Dannette fully realized that she (Bobbi) had played the role of *resident guru* for a number of years, had trained all existing staff members on the current system, and was generally seen as the ***go-to*** person within the organization. Bruce then thanked her again for that service. Joining in this affirmation, Dannette told Bobbi that they

would like her to continuing playing this important role, even though they anticipated it taking much less of her time and effort than in the past given the training resources and service desk capabilities that ChecksExpress would bring to the table. Nevertheless, she went on to say, they felt it would be in the best interests of the company to have their own resident expert on staff. Finally, Dannette explained to Bobbi that before announcing their plans for this change to others on the staff, they would like her to attend a week-long intensive training program on the ChecksExpress technology, and then meet with them again on her return.

Of course Bobbi had been listening to all of this with interest, but also with mixed feelings. When it came time for her to express her feelings, she did, all the time expressing her current level of skepticism regarding the ChecksExpress system while extolling praise upon the existing HRTech+ system. But in the end, she agreed to attend the training.

When Bobbi arrived for her training she brought with her a healthy dose of skepticism and challenged the ChecksExpress trainers at every corner. But they met her challenges by listening to her concerns very thoroughly, discussing the features of their software, and providing hands-on examples of what the ChecksExpress system could do for her company. All in all, Bobbi had a great time talking "shop" with these pros, and by the end of the week she had become a "true believer".

The day Bobbi returned she met with Dannette and Bruce as requested. During that meeting she gave a report on her experience acknowledging the skepticism she had taken with her to the training, but then extolled praises on both the trainers and the software. She was clearly ***onboard***!

The following day Dannette and Jane met with the rest of the HR staff just as they had in Story A. This time they lead with a discussion of the company's vision and associated plans for growth. They explained the concerns the leadership team had regarding the ability of their current processes and systems to have the ***bandwidth*** necessary to support their goals, then announced the decision to go with ChecksExpress. Before staff could muster questions the leaders quickly made mention of the fact that Bobbi had been involved in finalizing the decision and that she herself had already gone through extensive training on the new system. They then asked Bobbi to make some impromptu comments about her experiences at the training and her overall impression. Of course, Bobbi talked to her peers as a ***believer*** in the new system and what it could do for their organization. It was very comforting for the rest of the staff to hear an endorsement of the new system from one of their peers, especially from the ***resident guru*** herself! So the meeting ended, and all was good.

As the weeks progressed, Jane again asked Bobbi to coordinate and complete certain tasks in preparation for the scheduled conversion (just like in Story A). This time Bobbi undertook these duties enthusiastically and worked very closely with her new trainer-friends (via email and the phone) to ensure she was doing everything correctly. In the end, all was taken care of completely and on-time.

Needless to say, things went a lot better for all parties in Story B than in Story A. But why? Let's compare by looking at the details!

1. **Lead from the Top:** In Story A, the two senior executives were not engaged, and the Director of Human Resources (a middle manager) was left to announce and manage the change pretty much by herself. By contrast, in Story B both the Sr. VP-HR and CFO were actively engaged and able to communicate by their sheer involvement the ***urgency*** of the change effort. In addition, the fact that they both took time to meet privately with Bobbi spoke volumes.
2. **Cast the "Vision":** When presenting their case for change, both when meeting privately with Bobbi and then again during the HR staff meeting, the first thing discussed was the leadership team's ***vision*** for the organization. Presenting the *vision* always puts the details of a change initiative in context!
3. **Sell the *Problem* Before the *Solution*:** In Story B the senior executives set the stage by not only talking about the vision, but then introducing the problem that needed to be addressed (e.g., the existing payroll staff, processes and technology would not have sufficient bandwidth) in order to achieve their vision. Hence the change effort itself was to be seen as a mean to solve a problem, not celebrating change for change-sake.

4. **Anticipate Opposition and Resistance:** In Story B, Bruce and Dannette clearly were anticipating some resistance on Bobbi's part, and understanding the role she would likely play in making this work or frustrating the process, they were taking proactive measures to minimize resistance.
5. **Provide Affirmation:** Dannette and Bruce spoke to Bobbi's heart when they acknowledged the important role she had played in the past, and fully acknowledged the value they saw in her continuing to play that role in the future. In that regard, they gave full affirmation of those attributes that made her ***special*** within the organization.
6. **Listen:** In Story B, the senior executives not only talked … they listened! Dialogue with key players was part of a successful approach.
7. **Compensate for Loss:** It was clear that Bobbi was going to loose what made her special, unique and needed within the organization. In Story A, no effort was made to compensate for this loss to her role and self-esteem. In Story B, special knowledge of the ***new*** was provided as compensation for loss of the old.

My hope in providing these two contrasting stories is to show that the effectiveness of your change leadership is often tied to matters of the *heart*. We have also illustrated that doing some simple things can make a huge difference when these matters of the *heart* are given proper recognition. Finally, much research, a lot of the management literature, and most importantly the personal experiences had by many of you and I teaches us that these little things … **these matters of the *heart* … can be the stark difference between success and dismal failure.** So keep your heart, and lead well!

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