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Breaking The News

Some guidelines for managers who have
to communicate difficult news



Guidelines To Help With Making Difficult Announcements

Introduction

It has finally happened. After many weeks of rumours about the shape and location of the new organisation, facts are starting to emerge.

These guidelines are intended to help you with briefing your team. We know and appreciate that this is going to be a time of uncertainty for you as well. Perhaps you feel excited, more likely you feel apprehensive about what will happen in the next few months. This is natural but your attitude to change during this time will be critical for both you and your team.

The information contained in these guidelines, is based on two years of research by Roffey Park Management Institute, about the skills, behaviours and practices that have been used successfully by managers in a diverse range of organisations going through change, mergers, acquisitions and partnerships.

Not all the information below will be relevant immediately but we hope that it will help in preparing you for what might happen.

What Makes An Effective Manager In Times Of Uncertainty?

The following checklist supplied by Schweiger and Weber illustrates effective and ineffective behaviour by managers managing successfully through change and times of uncertainty.

Think about how you can incorporate some of these effective actions and behaviours into your own style of managing at this time:

Commitment and Understanding

- Effective managers are highly visible and act as friends to their teams, thereby reducing their anxiety and helping them to maintain a sense of attachment to the organisation.
- Ineffective managers become withdrawn and appear to abdicate any responsibility for their team. They appear more interested in looking after their own career prospects.

Openness and Honesty

- Effective managers are honest and do not make false promises. They give as much information to their staff as possible and are open about the limits of their knowledge. Their employees therefore feel better equipped to make decisions about their future.
- Ineffective managers sometimes lie or fail to honour their promises, making teams more anxious and less committed to the organisation.

Minimising Political Behaviour

- Effective managers try to retain a team atmosphere and minimise any destructive political behaviour among team members.
- Ineffective managers are seen to protect their favourites, leading to divisiveness and competitiveness among the team.

Preparing For A Partnership

- Effective managers try to prevent their staff seeing the Partner Company as the “bad guys” and seek every opportunity to obtain information and face-to-face contact with their counterpart teams in the partner organisation.
- Ineffective managers fail to do this, thereby losing potential career development opportunities for their staff and decreasing the potential of them becoming emotionally attached to the new business.

Retaining Key Players

- Effective managers identify the people they want to retain and let them know this. These people tend to be highly employable and will vote with their feet if they do not like the look of the new organisation.
- Ineffective managers fail to do this and therefore lose key people.

Gaining Buy In – Understanding the Case For Change

One of the biggest ironies of partnerships is that despite the fact that many organisations make strenuous efforts to communicate both externally and internally, employees can still be dogged by a nagging question: **“Why are we doing this?”**

As well as being satisfied on an intellectual level, they also need satisfying on a personal level that the turmoil of change will be worth it.

Encouraging Intellectual Buy In

Often, employees have all sorts of issues and questions that they may not be able to raise in front of senior managers. Line managers and coaches therefore have a critical role to play in giving their people opportunities to air their concerns, even when some of these may seem trivial or strange.

These discussions can reveal a surprising range of emotions including anger, grief, bewilderment and even denial. Managers need to be prepared for this and steer the conversation in a positive way. As well as helping staff to see the big picture, managers need to encourage people to explore some of their own attitudes and pre conceptions about the changes.

Be prepared to tackle the following questions:

- **What is the commercial rationale for change?**
- **Is this a proactive or reactive response?**
- **Are we changing because we want to or because we have to?**
- **How will we select our partner?**

Employees often want to know why their company is doing this and will employees really benefit. They also often want reassurance that their future is secure. Don't give false promises but be prepared to tackle questions and issues honestly.

You may not be in a position to drive the changes or to influence the shape and structure of the emerging organisation. You can, however, exert an enormous influence on the climate of the new entity. As a manager and leader, your behaviour and attitudes will speak volumes to others in the organisation about what working life may become, after the changes.

Encouraging Emotional Buy In

If employees are to commit their energies and creativity to the new organisation, they need to believe the partnership is about creating an exciting future.

It's the role of managers to create a vision of the new business. There is often a gap between the vision, which may be clear in the mind of senior managers and the means to translate it into action on the ground. Line managers can have a vital role to play during this period. They can supply leadership and vision to their own people, keeping them focused on why we are doing this. The personal behaviour and actions of line managers can act like a lifeline to employees during a time when little visible direction is coming from the top.

Gossip and Rumour

A characteristic of any organisation going through change is that rumour and speculation go into overdrive. Managers may talk until they are blue in the face but there will still be some employees who do not believe the official version.

While some of the rumours will be harmless exercises of the imagination, some may be more destructive. This may undermine people's confidence and trust in senior managers and the business case for change.

Actions

- *Don't waste your time trying to stop rumour and gossip; they will continue to exist long after you.*
- *Tap into the informal grapevine so you know what people are really thinking.*
- *Identify key influencers in your team and try to supply them with useful information that may dispel some of the more counter productive rumours.*
- *Let your senior managers know of any concerns that may need addressing.*

It is easy to overlook the need for your team to gain a sound understanding of the rationale for change. Don't rely on formal communication processes. Talk to your people and remember you need to find out what they are thinking and feeling.

Preparing Your Team For Change

This section looks at the critical period between when senior managers announce their intention to look at a deal, to when a decision is announced and sealed. This time can last a few weeks or a few months.

Your role as a line manager is vital during this period. Due to legal requirements, your managers may not be able to release all the details until changes are crystallised. The corporate communication machine can only swing into action as, and when decisions are made. The silence is deafening. It is up to you to try and reassure your staff and keep them focused on their jobs during this time. You may have to work hard to ensure that by the time a decision is announced your team are braced for change, rather than nervous wrecks.

Warning Signs Of Strain

The waiting period between announcing and completing an impending change is often an Achilles heel. Employees can enter the phase feeling relatively positive, but if the silences are too long, people can begin to feel highly stressed.

Be on the alert for the following behaviours (identified by Marks 1991):

- Preoccupation and speculation about the change
- Constructing worst case scenarios
- Stress reactions, especially fear and aggression
- Crisis management
- Constricted communication
- “Them” versus “us” mentality

Sound The Emotional Barometer

If your team is displaying some of the above behaviours, take active steps to help them acknowledge and gain ownership of their feelings and reactions. You may not be able to give staff any concrete information but you can create a climate of openness where people can air their anxieties and pull together better as a team.

Actions

- *Ask people open-ended questions about how they feel. What do they think might be the benefits and what are their concerns? Don't assume you know all the answers.*
- *Explore people's perceptions of Eastern and what might change for the better.*
- *Explore people's past experiences of change. There may be people in your team who can help you in the coming months. Alternatively there may be people who have had bad experiences. Begin to get a feel for potential sore spots and areas of sensitivity that might colour their experience.*

Managing First Encounters during a takeover or merger

At some stage in the run up to any new partnership deal there will be contact between the potential partner organisations and yourselves. This is a crucial experience as first impressions do stick.

Actions

- *Ensure that anyone briefing the Partnership Company is adequately briefed about the sensitive nature of the visit.*
- *Pay attention to small details, which may be unimportant to you but might be important to the other organisation.*
- *Try not to assume that you know how the partners perceive the partnership. As you begin to work with them, ask open-ended questions about how they perceive the two organisations, and where synergies can be achieved.*

The run up to a deal can be a difficult and emotionally charged time. With top managers working on the deal and the internal communications process working on a limited basis, a huge vacuum can seem to form.

Your role as a manager is vital. You can help your team by:

- Creating a climate of openness and by promoting team working.
- Learning about your team and how they react to change.
- Honing your own change management skills.

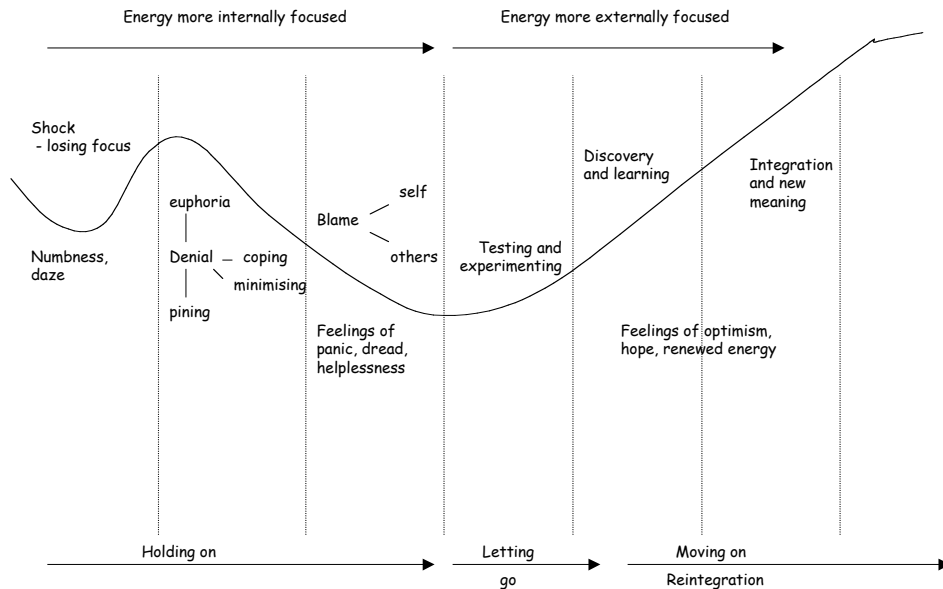
Supporting Your Staff: Riding the Emotional Waves of Change

Regardless of how much change is likely to occur, expect your people to go through a series of emotional reactions as the changes proceed. These fall into two distinct strands, which may be operating at different times and can be difficult to identify and manage:

1. The changes as an organisational event

Even when they are not directly experiencing any change, many employees go through a cycle of shock and grief, followed by anxiety and denial as they see things change and have to let go of the past. This reaction shown in the transition curve below, can be immediate, or occur some months later as the changes become evident.

The Transition Curve



2. The change as a personal event

Changes can cause mayhem in people's lives. At a personal level, employees will go through a similar process of grieving as they see their work environment change. Many will worry about their job security and income. The following questions according to Roffey Park's research will be uppermost in people's minds:

- *Have I got a job?*
(Unspoken issue: **Can I trust any promises made to me?**)
- *What will my job be?*
(Unspoken issue: **Will it be satisfying? Do I have a career here? Will I be able to do it?**)
- *Who will I report to/ work with?*
 - (Unspoken issue: **What about my boss/ colleagues?**)
- *Where will I be based?*
(Unspoken issue: **What are the repercussions for my family and me?**)
- *Will there be any changes to terms and conditions?*
(Unspoken issue: **will I lose out? What are others getting?**)
- *When will this affect me?*
(Unspoken issue: **what is the timescale?**)

Actions

You may become frustrated with the fact that there are so many unanswered questions. Try to be realistic about what you can and cannot do in this situation:

- *Accept that you cannot resolve all of the questions. You can however, relay these up the line or encourage your staff to use other forms of communication*
- *Expect a timetable of events, so that your people can anticipate changes and when they will get some answers.*

- *Try not to make promises – you can no longer be sure of which areas lie in your jurisdiction.*
- *If you do make any promises, stick to them. If you are seen to break your promise it could take you a while to regain the trust of the team.*
- *Be as honest and as open as possible. Don't protect your staff by denying any bad news. This will only increase their anxiety.*
- *Use/ initiate informal discussions where staff can tell you what they are thinking/ feeling.*
- *Acknowledge people's concerns and be honest about your own. Employees said to Roffey Park that this form of openness means they respect their manager more, and feel supported.*

The transition is probably the most stressful time of any change. This is when anxiety levels are at their highest and the pace of change is greatest. Your job as a line manager is critical. You have to help people deal with their feelings and anxieties so that they can move forward in the emerging organisation. However, your scope for action may be limited and you may find yourself buffeted by feelings of frustration and anxiety about your own future.

Be open with staff about what you can and cannot do for them.

Communicating Change

Roffey's research suggests that partnerships are more than an exchange of assets and capabilities. In reality they are human based transactions. If the partnership is to succeed everyone concerned needs to commit his/ her time, energy, commitment and creativity to making the partnership work. Communication plays a vital role in this process of building a business that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Communication is more than conveying facts and figures. It is about relationship building. It is about helping different groups to talk to each other and challenge and explore different ways of doing things. It is about building trust and commitment. People need to become attached to the new organisation and to gain gradually a sense of its new personality and identity.

Line managers can act as spokespeople of the "official view" and help clarify and reinforce messages. What you say and do will speak volumes more to your teams, than any newsletter.

There will be lots of opportunities to ask for information and air questions and issues formally. Use these processes to gain as much information as possible for you and your team. Encourage your team to do the same and identify any opportunities to discuss controversial issues.

Actions

- *Back up formal communication processes by creating opportunities for staff to discuss the implications of the latest briefing/ communication.*
- *Encourage your team to take advantage of communication processes.*
- *Be prepared to repeat messages. It is easy for people to feel overwhelmed and lose sight of the bigger picture.*
- *Be prepared to handle negative feelings.*
- *Be honest and open at all times about the extent of your knowledge.*

Although you are not in control of the communication messages, you are the best-placed person to sell them. View yourself less as an internal communicator and more as an internal marketer. Formal communication is important but only provides half the picture. What you say and do and how you sell the message, is what really convinces people to buy in to the changes.

Managing Performance

Managing the performance of your team is the *raison d'être* of your existence as manager/ coach. Yet the range of change means that there will be countless issues and pressures tempting you to take your eye off the ball.

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Many of the organisations in the research that Roffey Park did admit that their core business suffered during the transition. The reasons for this are:

- A loss of focus
- Paralysis – People stop working and spend their time speculating and gossiping.
- A loss of direction – Managers are more focused on doing the deal.

You will need to continue to oversee normal operational activities during the transition phase. Business processes and systems may well be in a state of flux. It may be unclear what decisions to take. Try to find someone who can help you with these ambiguities. Keep your team focused by setting and monitoring interim performance targets. Keep them simple and attainable. Encourage everyone by celebrating early successes.

Actions

Finally the line managers in Roffey Park's research supplied the following practical advice:

- *Continue to do the things that still work and have always worked.*
- *Value those who are still doing the basic work and getting the job done.*
- *Acknowledge past achievements and don't rubbish the past.*
- *Help your team to be open to change.*
- *Recognise and acknowledge that employees are working hard in a difficult situation. Reward them in whatever way you can, especially in ways that are energising and rewarding e.g. a team night out.*

It is easy to take your eye off the ball and to forget the reason for your existence. Ensure that your team concentrates on deliverables. There is a world outside that is as competitive and as pressured as ever, and competitors will be on the lookout to exploit any weaknesses.

Good luck!