

Industrial Manufacturing

The right way to implement business change

Making a change in a medium-sized or smaller business should be easy since the chain of command is usually streamlined.



But somewhere between the idea and the result, much can go wrong.

How can you improve the chances that a change will work?

Identify the right problem

Sometimes, an implemented change cannot make things better because it is simply the wrong step to take. Before you decide to implement a change, be sure it is the right one.

If you are trying to solve a problem, be sure you have identified the real causes of a problem before concluding that a particular change is the best solution. There are many ways to do this.

For example, a still-useful method made popular in the 1970s at Toyota is to “ask five times why” a problem took place to get to the root causes of the problem. It is often tempting to rush to implement the first plausible solution, but be aware of the difference between “quick hits” and root causes.

Address the ‘people factor’

To successfully implement a change, it is essential to consider the reaction of everyone in the company who will be affected. The leader of a company can set the direction, but the success of a change usually needs the support of everyone affected.

It is human nature to fear and resist change. The more you acknowledge resistance and take steps to minimize it, the more likely the change will be successful.

To minimize resistance, it is important for employees to understand the reasons for the proposed change and how it will affect both them and the organization.

Another helpful technique is to get employee input when considering what changes to make – for example, by having a problem-solving team or a team responsible for implementing the change. You may also want to consider soliciting employee feedback during the change process.

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Provide communication and support

Clear, detailed and ongoing communication about the change is one of the best ways to smooth resistance, as well as to ensure that the change is correctly understood and implemented. Be candid about the change,

communicate openly and honestly, and communicate early in the process before employees learn of a change informally.

Also, be sure that you provide any support that workers will need to make the change. Consider whether employees will need new skills, training, technology or extra time to do their work using an unfamiliar process. Ensure that they have adequate resources, guidance and people to whom they can direct questions and difficulties.

Spell out the plan

If the change is not simple, spell it out. Clearly define the objective and planned outcome and provide clear steps for execution, with adequate time allowed for each step. The plan should also identify the resources needed to make the change and the key people involved in implementing and assessing the change.

Ensure that there is a clear set of measures for assessing whether the change process is on track and whether it is successful. And, as obvious as it may sound, be sure the process includes a means of ensuring that the change is actually made. Surprisingly, many changes are not implemented simply because of lack of follow-up.

Be open to feedback

If there is more than one company leader, all should have a consistent voice with respect to the change to avoid giving mixed messages to workers. Leaders can motivate employees to support the change by showing enthusiasm for it and acting as role models, avoiding “Do as I say, not as I do.”

Strike a good balance between giving the message to workers that the change is required and being open to feedback. You may want to consider having weekly or other periodic small group sessions, perhaps for breakfast, lunch or coffee, where workers can meet informally with company leaders or their manager to raise problems, questions or suggestions.

Change is essential for a business to adapt, grow and survive. If the change is well planned and implemented, you will enhance the likelihood that the change will be successful.

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