

McLean, Koehler, Sparks & Hammond

Certified Public Accountants/Business Consultants

Adapting to Change: THE Value Skill Set for Business Leaders

It's here. The brave new world ushered in by all that technology has changed our business playing fields forever. Our work environment now runs 24/7, service is king and flexibility is no longer considered an option. Companies continually adopt change in order to keep up and keep ahead. The ability to integrate the new, while simultaneously leading others through organizational change is a serious business advantage. Avoid being a passenger to change. Make a conscious decision to be present, accountable and a lead participant. Managers who proactively navigate change *are worth their weight in gold!*

Adapting: *The process or state of changing to fit a new environment or different conditions; implies a modification according to changing circumstances. Webster's.*

Change represents the greatest influence in the workplace today. The current acceleration of change and the associated impact on how we conduct business is unlike anything experienced in modern times. "Work" is no longer defined by a specific location (an office) or a particular timeline (9 to 5). Thanks to the internet and cell phones, work can now be conducted anyplace and at any time. Work is now determined by an employee's state of mind – rather than a time and place. Many aspects of our work day would be unrecognizable to professionals who led companies as recently as the 1980s.

Technology has shifted management's expectations for the workforce in many ways:

- More autonomy is expected of employees; the ability to obtain needed information, overcome obstacles and independently solve operational problems is becoming a basic requirement.
- Companies insist employees be tech savvy, comfortable with learning and quick to implement new applications.
- Managers need employees who are flexible and open to new ways of working as organizations expand, contract or upgrade to compete.
- "Specialists" are valued and managers depend on their expertise to provide customized solutions.
- Teams often tackle projects together; the ability to work well with diverse groups is expected.

And employee's expectations and perceptions have shifted as well:

- Work can now follow an employee anywhere; work-life balance is now a priority with many.
- Employees want quality tools and training from employers; fail to provide those things and employees will find them elsewhere.
- Employees want a coach-manager, "an advocate who coaches and assists," rather than "a boss who tells and directs."
- Employees expect to be valued personally; the competition for talent has seen to that.
- An employee's loyalty to one company for life is a charming relic of another age.

For employees, the freedom from more structured business environments brings its own set of responsibilities: Self management, resourcefulness, keeping current with continued education and the capacity to create value independently with less supervision.

For managers, the environment brings a myriad of supervisory challenges: Teaching time-management skills to the un-initiated, accommodating flexible employee schedules, learning new industry related software to keep up with employees, motivating independent employees who have many options in the marketplace and creating "place identity" in companies where the average tenure is now three years.

As never before, managers must absorb the new and then function as the purveyor of change for others. While change in organizations is now the norm rather than the exception, (many books have been written on the subject of managing change) the key component of successfully managing change is a personal one; it all begins with the individual manager's talent for dealing and winning with change.

Change in business can often herald a manager's Waterloo. Change can also be leveraged to showcase rich talent in the areas of communication, employee relations management and analytical thinking. A manager's ability to implement and successfully lead employees through change is now a crucial component of business.

Here are some tried and true strategies which work well for personally adapting to change in the workplace.

1. Create a list of things which will cease to exist based on the proposed change. Now create a list of things which will not be affected and which will stay the same.
2. Align with other managers who have successfully navigated important organizational change. Interview them. Ask them for specific examples of strategies which worked for them. Ask them to share their greatest challenge during that time.
3. Allow yourself time to think about and absorb all criteria associated with the proposed change. Become comfortable with your own opinion of the change. Don't kid yourself. If you think you will be charged with implementing the stupidest idea since the New Coke, admit it.
4. Focus on how the change will impact you personally. Write down every point you can think of. Look at the list each day and record any shifts in your initial perception. While there may be some negatives, do you see areas of opportunity as well?
5. Hold on to a "reality barometer": The world is not changing. The nation is not changing. Your family is not changing. The entire company is not changing. A specific aspect of the company is changing.
6. Do not project your resistance to the change (no matter how much you disagree with it) by shutting down and becoming a "very quiet person." Seek information on a regular basis, promote discussion and keep the lines of communication open. Be a base of stability for the people you lead.

In the coming years, the necessity to adapt to change at work will increase, not decrease. People must absorb and implement the change that businesses require. And as in most cases where behavior must shift to accommodate business strategy, the ability of organizations to move forward will depend on the wisdom and guidance of company managers.

McLean, Koehler, Sparks & Hammond helps owners and business leaders become more successful by providing innovative financial, technology and management solutions for every stage of their organizations' life cycle. MKS&H's organizational consulting division, Tandem Partners, specializes in people strategies that drive business results. For more information on this article or MKS&H, please contact Melissa McDaniel at 301-662-2400 or via email: melissa@mksh.com.

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McLean, Koehler, Sparks & Hammond

11311 McCormick Road, Suite 100
Hunt Valley, MD 21031
410.296.6200

www.mksh.com

70 Thomas Johnson Drive, Suite 100
Frederick, MD 21702
301.662.2400