

Moving beyond the sticky place in the middle

Strategies for managing employee intransigence during a change process

By Andrée Iffrig

Fifteen months into a change process that's supposed to make the organization more customer-focused, Robin is feeling frustrated. Managers seem to be going their old ways and it feels like no one is listening. As the President for a technical services company with five locations in Western Canada, it is Robin's job to make this change work.

Having reached that sticky place in the middle where nothing is happening, this is the time for Robin to persevere, not abandon ship. There are ways to motivate those intransigent managers and salvage the change initiative.

There are three actions that Robin could take to engage managers and employees in supporting the process and becoming more customer-friendly.

1. Be visible and accessible. Robin has a preference for communicating via email and spends the majority of the day at the computer in the office.
2. Build a supportive management team, reinforcing the managers' understanding of the changes.
3. Tie rewards and recognition to support for the change initiative.

Be visible and accessible

By circulating more among the locations, and making time for informal coffee dates and structured meetings with staff, Robin will become better acquainted with employee concerns. As long as Robin is trying to direct this change from behind an office door in Calgary, no one is going to listen, or feel like they've been heard.

By hitting the floor, Robin will quickly discover what matters to employees and where the sticking points are. It's also a way to share an upbeat message with staff about the advantages of the changes.

Build a supportive management team

The dispersed nature of the locations makes building a cohesive management team more difficult, but not impossible. Part of Robin's responsibility as leader is to orient managers to the necessity of being supportive of both employees and leadership. By digging in their heels and ignoring the change effort, they send a negative message to employees. Customer service will ultimately be adversely affected.

Robin's teambuilding effort would do well to highlight the benefits of the change effort for both staff and customers. Staff also needs a clear message about the impact of hanging on to old ways of doing business in a competitive business environment.

Tie rewards to new behaviour

Support for the change process is likely to remain low as long as managers face no consequences for undermining the initiative. Tying performance rewards to a number of indicators, both financial and in terms of support for the change, will provide incentive to laggards. It will reward staff that is supportive and behaving in new, more customer-centric ways in the workplace. Failure to meet performance measures will mean that managers who are holding out will not share in financial rewards or recognition.

As the foregoing discussion demonstrates, getting staff onside is a two-way street: leadership needs to be present, inspire, listen and support. Managers need to remember where their loyalties lie and motivate staff by visibly supporting leadership's direction. Robin has a vital role to play in modeling behaviour worthy of an employer who understands business realities and how to lead the way for employees.

Andrée Iffrig is the author of *Find Your Voice at Work – The Power of Storytelling in the Workplace*. Visit www.find-your-voice.ca to learn more.