

**Take Charge of Change:
*Build a Roadmap to Better Transitions***

by
Barbara Wirtz
(541) 344-8213 bwirtz@wirtzconsulting.com

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Do we take charge of change or does change take charge of us? Often it feels like change grabs us by the neck, shakes us around, and plops us in a new spot. We sometimes feel relieved just to find ourselves in one piece. No wonder most of us approach change with dismay and trepidation. The havoc it creates can be stressful and energy-draining to say the least. So what can we do to guide ourselves and others through change with less stress and strain? Here are some suggestions:

Recognize how most people handle change—haphazardly. They bob and weave around and within it without any idea of what’s causing their reactions or how they can deal with it better. They assume that, sooner or later, it’ll either go away or they’ll adjust. It’s discouraging when neither of these happens.

Recognize how most credit unions handle change: Top management studies a situation; puts together a plan that lays out what needs to be done, when, and by whom; announces the change; and then implements the plan. The assumption is made that if everyone follows the plan, the change will work. But often the best laid plans don’t work as well as we would like.

Understand why change is so difficult: Change stimulates an underlying process of transition and it’s this process that is the culprit. The transition process is a difficult three-stage one through which people give up old ways, find themselves temporarily in a state of “inbetweenness,” and eventually align themselves with a new beginning. Assuming this is easy and not taking steps to facilitate it will inhibit the process.

Understand the relationship between change and transition: Many think that transition automatically occurs because the change is happening but just because two credit unions have merged, doesn’t mean they operate as one. Just because credit unions have adopted a sales culture doesn’t mean one exists. Just because new technology has been purchased doesn’t mean it’s being used to its optimal level. Just because the change has been made doesn’t mean people are supporting it.

As a credit union leader, taking charge of change means taking charge of the transitions associated with change. It requires three actions on the part of leaders: increased visibility, strong “change” messages, and transition strategies.

Increased visibility: During change and transition, your people need to see you more, hear from you more, and talk to you more. In other words, they need greater contact and connection with their leader. There are some things that can’t be delegated: inspiration, support, understanding, and relationships. People want to hear what’s happening, why, and how straight from the horse’s mouth. They want to believe in something and someone; they want to see someone stable and strong in the midst of the chaos and confusion they are experiencing. Find ways to increase your contact with your people both formally and informally. Try having lunch with different

employee groups regularly—one day the tellers, another day the customer service reps, etc. Visit your branches, take them some donuts, pies, whatever, and sit down and talk with your people. You must find out where they are in the transition process, what's on their minds, and how your strategies are working. People trust only those they know and have contact with; you need their trust as much as they need yours. Stay visible.

Craft & deliver strong “change” messages: At different stages of transition, your people need different types of messages. This is another task that can't be delegated; you're the leader—you need to address the troops and give the marching orders. The better speaker you are, the more inspiring, reassuring, and motivating you'll be. Before a change is implemented, call your people together and explain the circumstances prompting the change-- sell the problem before the solution. Then speak to your people regularly and give them what they need at each transition stage.

During the ending stage, your communications should be information-based: what will happen, when, why, and who will be affected. During the neutral zone, your messages must be supportive: let your people know you care about them and are looking out for their well being. As new beginnings emerge, your messages must be evocative: you need to create a new picture of things—expectations, behaviors, rewards, benefits. Speak to your people.

Develop strategies to accompany each transition stage: Although increased visibility and strong change messages are both essential, their effectiveness will be diminished without the third piece, that is, specific strategies to help people through each stage of the transition process. In his work on transitions, William Bridges points out the importance of managing endings, the neutral zone, and new beginnings.

Managing endings means paying attention to the losses people feel—losses of attachments, turf, structure, future, meaning, or control. You can help them accept and deal with their losses through rituals, empathy, negotiation, temporary structures, career planning, an inspiring vision, involvement, and choice. When you feel resistance, think about what people are losing in the change and help them deal with it.

Managing the neutral zone involves supporting your people through the chaos and confusion that exists between the ending and the new beginning. You can help them through the ups and downs of this stage by giving them opportunities to step back and take stock of where they and your credit union really are, by arranging temporary support structures so they have something to hold on to, and by providing new communication channels. When nothing seems to be getting done as well or as quickly as you'd like, help your people tap into their own creativity, innovativeness, and strength.

Managing new beginnings requires great attention to developing and rewarding new attitudes and behaviors. Leaders sometimes feel relieved when they see the new beginnings taking shape and mistakenly assume the worst is over. However, genuine new beginnings depend on internal alignment rather than external shifts. Your people can be in the new building, using the new technology, or working in new teams but the inner new beginnings are still going on so your work is not done.

You can help ensure success by answering four questions on the minds of those embarking on a new beginning: What idea lies at the heart of this new beginning? How will the idea be implemented? What will the new situation look like? Where will everyone fit it? These

questions are not equally important to all employees; know your people and answer the most pressing question for each. Guide your people through each stage.

Taking charge of change and not letting it take charge of you is one of the biggest leadership challenges you face. Every time you think of change, think of the transition process that underlies it. Pay as much attention to the internal process as the external change and you'll find yourself and your people coping with change more positively and successfully.