

Overcome resistance

Help your employees embrace changes

Question:

We are in the midst of a restructuring initiative, and two sales team members are resisting the change. One is our best sales performer who has been with the company for over 16 years. The second is a relatively new player who has a great deal of potential. I'd like to retain them both. Is it appropriate for me to think about negotiating with them to gain their buy-in?

Response:

Absolutely. Considering a negotiation is the coming together of two parties who want to understand what's important to each and exploring possible solutions for developing a mutually agreeable outcome. This strategy is in everyone's best interest.

Before scheduling time together, take some time to prepare. Think about exactly what is causing the resistance within them. Are they feeling threatened, insecure or just overwhelmed by the change?

To better understand what's creating the resistance, let's review the four stages of change and see if one of these aligns with the current experience of your sales team members.

Stage 1 - Denial

Denial is when people act as if nothing is happening. They remain unresponsive to the information about the change effort. Their silence preserves their comfort zone by ignoring signs that a transition is happening. An individual, group or even an entire organization can exhibit denial.

When people are in denial, they:

- Avoid the topic as much as possible.
- Act as if nothing is happening.
- Do not take initiative.
- Only do routine work.
- Focus on little issues or ask picky questions.
- Blame others for their difficulties.
- Question the data or method used to make a decision.

People who are in denial need time to process the information they've received. Many leaders make the mistake of presenting the plan they've worked on for days, weeks, even months, and expect their employees to immediately embrace the change initiative after hearing the plans. This is totally unrealistic.

When people initially hear about change, they often experience an emotional shock. They shut down on some levels and begin to filter what they hear and see. This results in them receiving only bits and pieces of information, not the complete story.

Stage 2 - Resistance

Once people have moved through their denial, they often shift into resistance. This is when they become conscious of the change and what it means to them on a personal level. They gain awareness of

how emotionally upset they really are and may project their frustration in a disruptive manner with angry outbursts, caustic comments, or pointed questions in a public forum.

As leaders, it's important to understand that change doesn't happen in a straight line. People can shift from feeling overwhelmed in one moment, to feeling pure anger in another, and then, within the same day, retreat altogether.

When people are experiencing resistance they are often really experiencing a profound loss. The loss might be about status, power, security, influence, comfort, relationships, seniority, or meaningful work.

To determine if your two team members are experiencing resistance, ask yourself if they:

- Express anger toward the organization.
- Question the wisdom of the decisions.
- Complain a lot.
- Seem to feel overwhelmed or exhibit signs of depression.
- Refuse to comply and adjust.
- Become passive – act like they are just going through the motions.

To help people work through their resistance, give them a safe place to express or vent their feelings. Don't try to talk them out of their feelings - instead, honor them. Validate their feelings by saying, "I can understand from your perspective how you could be angry right now. What else are you feeling?" Honor their anger, honor their concerns, honor their fear. If you challenge or judge their feelings, they will dig in their heels and refuse to budge.

Stage 3 - Exploration

Exploration is the stage in which people become more conscious of their feelings and accept that change is necessary, even if they don't welcome it. No longer is the change perceived to be a grave threat, but rather, the change is now viewed as a necessity, or in some cases, as an opportunity. They no longer hold on to the old ways with clenched fists, but rather attempt to step into the new way of doing things.

When people move into exploration, they:

- Are energetic.
- Want to solve problems.
- May have difficulties staying focused because the path isn't exactly clear.
- Seek new ways of doing things.
- Are willing to look at possibilities.
- Take risks.
- Work together.

Be mindful that during the exploration phase, it's common for people to feel overwhelmed – they are navigating in uncharted waters. They may not know what's expected of them or how they should handle a situation. In exploration, they are struggling to acquire the knowledge, skills and strategies to embrace the new way. This requires a tremendous amount of energy and effort.

During this time of recalibration, retooling and recalculating, be supportive and offer encouragement.

Stage 4: Commitment

When people make the conscious decision to accept the change and adopt the new way of doing business, they are at the commitment stage. This is the time when productivity returns – maybe initially not at the same level as before the change initiative started, but certainly the trend is moving in the right direction. People are operating with more confidence and are focused on achieving goals.

People at the commitment stage:

- Feel in control of their new environment.
- Have the knowledge and/or skills to be successful.
- Work efficiently.
- Assume accountability of their results.

This is the time when you look for ways to celebrate your collective achievements and successes.

To determine how to negotiate with your team members, first, take a moment and decide which stage best represents their behaviors and actions. I suspect they are either in denial or resistance. Then sched-

ule time to meet with them individually. The sole purpose of this meeting is to listen and learn. It's not to get them to buy in to the change initiative but rather, to help them become aware of their feelings and how they are expressing them.

During this meeting, ask gentle questions such as "How are you doing, really?" "I can see that you are struggling with the change initiative, tell me what you are experiencing?"

Be fully present and listen. Really listen. Listen to their feelings. Listen to their fears. Listen to their rationale.

Throughout the conversation, honor their feelings. People will only embrace the change initiative for their reasons, not yours. Listen so you learn what they need to embrace the change initiative and how you can help them process their resistance. Hopefully, the approach will help you gain insights to help them move from denial and resistance into exploration and eventually into commitment.



Christine McMahon

is the owner of Christine McMahon & Associates, a training and coaching firm in Milwaukee. She can be reached at (414) 290-3344.