



This Week: • [Embracing Change](#)

[Ask a Question](#)

[Free Subscription](#)

[About the Experts](#)

[Terms](#)

How Do We Get Employees to Embrace Change?

Q: We are starting a change-management program. While the plan itself is watertight, a basic question comes to mind: how do I get the buy-in of affected employees? Since this change will require them to become more productive and learn new skills, their job security will depend on performance.

-- Wearing kid gloves, science and research, California

A: Managing change--particularly employees' reactions to change--is probably the most difficult area of management. Successful approaches require a thorough understanding of the nature of the change, building a business case for change specifically geared to employees, and identifying and communicating desired behaviors to employees.

Because your success will be determined by employees' perception of this change, the direction you take depends to a large extent on the reason for change. Generally, change will fall into one of two categories.

1) The change is driven by external factors such as a downturn or major industry shift. In this case, gaining employee support for and ownership of the change is, relatively speaking, easier because the basic message is "Our work has been good but our world has changed."

2) The change is driven by largely internal factors such as a business underperforming relative to its competition. Getting employees to support and take ownership of the change is more difficult because the underlying message is "Our work isn't passing muster anymore." It is difficult to hear that your behavior is not effective, and often employees and managers react defensively, blaming others rather than acknowledging that change is needed in many aspects of the business, including perhaps their own

behavior.

Differentiating between these two scenarios will guide decision-making and communication as you help employees understand the need for change and how to address it. In either situation, however, leadership must mobilize the organization by building the case for change.

While management may think the plan is watertight, employees must have the same confidence. In other words, management must promote the plan by proving its merits to employees so that everyone takes responsibility for it. While fear of losing one's job is a powerful motivator in getting people to change how they work, it doesn't necessarily result in the right behaviors.

Don't assume that laying out the business case alone will result in action. Employees also need to know how to participate in it to make it work. Define the behaviors that must change. This sounds like a huge undertaking--and it is. Prioritize this process by asking (a) what roles in the organization will drive change and (b) what behaviors you need from people performing those roles.

For example, if the change involves launching a critical new product line, and your sales/marketing team is your frontline change agent, focus on their behaviors first. You cannot boil the ocean, so start with the most critical roles and then expand the change process throughout the organization.

SOURCE: Carol Henriques, [Capital H Group](#), Chicago, June 8, 2004.