



Managing Change Into The 21st Century

Elisabeth von Clemm, M.A

Introduction

One digital watch contains more computing power than existed in the entire world before 1961. The amount of information generated in the world is doubling every five years. Change itself is not a new phenomenon. However, the rate at which today's manager is forced to adapt to change is unprecedented. Managers work fiercely to align themselves with each new set of circumstances - only to find that their target has moved once again!

Managing in an environment of rapid and relentless change can be disorienting and demoralizing. At the same time, today's manager is moving into a future that is not yet clearly defined. Eighty percent of the jobs our children will be doing don't yet exist! So planning cannot be based on what was done yesterday, last week or last year. A dynamic and moving environment requires a new set of strategies and skills that most managers are not familiar with, as well as a focus on the human side that most organizations overlook.

What Do People Need During Change?

Most problems implementing change initiatives are people problems, not technical problems. A single-minded focus on technical/systems issues without attention to the human factor results in resistance, low morale and a lack of commitment from the very people needed to run the new systems! One thing that you, as a manager, can do to shorten transition time is to actively meet the four basic needs that all people have during change: a need for information, a need for empathy, a need for ideas about what to do differently, and a need for time.

In what order are these needs to be fulfilled? Some people like to have information about the change before they vent their feelings; others prefer to express their feelings about the change before they're ready to assimilate concrete data. *The key is that all people need information and empathy before they need ideas on which to act.*

As a manager, be careful not to skip over the need for information and empathy in a desire to plan for the future. In the words of Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, "Sell the problem before you sell the solution." The pressures of maintaining performance and the fact that you probably have had more time to assimilate news of a change, (and to meet your own needs for *information* and *empathy*) mean that you are ready to develop creative ideas for doing things differently while everyone else is still grappling with what happened and how they feel.

Information: Give Them The Facts

The problem with disseminating information about change is that, under most circumstances, people only retain about 25 percent of what they hear. During change, people will retain even less because they're worrying about "what this means to me" rather than what you're telling them. It's no wonder that people swear they never heard what you already told them three times!

There are some things you can do to increase your effectiveness in sharing information with others during change:

- Keep your communication concise and to the point. Too much detail up front can confuse the basic message. You might consider some of the following elements in your presentation of information:

"The present situation is..."

"What I know is..."

"What I don't know is..."

"My own thoughts are..."

"What we're hoping to achieve is..."

- If you don't know something, tell people that you don't know. Omissions are always subject to exaggeration and distortion.



- Use several different approaches and mediums when communicating the same information. (e.g., large groups, small focus groups, one-on-one meetings, memos, e-mail, etc.)
- Make it safe for people to ask questions. Remember that many people are afraid to ask questions at the risk of appearing stupid and become even more inhibited as a result of the tensions associated with change. Hold one-on-one meetings or solicit questions and concerns anonymously by having people write their responses or report them to someone else.
- If you're not being asked questions directly, but you hear about them later, ask yourself what may be inhibiting the process. Fear? Prior Experiences? If people don't ask you questions directly, did you train them not to?

Empathy: Use the Power of Feelings

While information is critical to any change effort, **people make their decisions based on feelings as well as facts.** As we know, the distance between intellectual understanding and a wholehearted commitment to change is long. It is like the person who knows smoking is bad for their health and who may even have all the information they need on how to quit, yet they do not quit. Until that internal emotional shift occurs that moves a person to action, all they have is interesting information.

Does this mean that you, as a change agent, need to be a junior psychologist? No, but it does mean you need to allow people to express and integrate their feelings regarding the change.

Unexpressed fear, anger and disappointment will distort how people perceive the change and how they respond (or refuse to respond) to it. For example, instead of expressing their fear regarding the use of new skills, a person may simply refuse to complete new assignments. Or, instead of expressing their anger and disappointment at being moved to a new team, a person may simply continue to network and share information only with former teammates.

There are some things you can do to help people express their feelings during the change process:

- Ask for their opinions directly in a safe environment: *"What do you think about this change?" "Do you have any concerns about it?" "Is there anything that might keep you from moving forward with this change?"* Do this one-on-one or in a neutrally facilitated small group.
- Remember that listening is a far more effective way of changing minds than talking is! How can you build a viable argument for change when you don't even know what the reasons are for the opposition? Unfortunately, statistics show that when people try to convince others to change, they talk 80 percent of the time and listen to the other side only 20 percent. So, to influence others, reverse the ratio: listen 80 percent of the time and talk only 20 percent. Remember, you have to know where people are before you can take them somewhere else.
- Since every change begins with an ending, it's helpful to get people to identify the things they are losing as a result of the change. Many organizations are too quick to focus on the future, leaving people confused about what expectations or behaviors *need to be released*. People end up reaching for the future with one hand while still clinging to the past with the other.

Ideas for Action: Step Outside the Box

Once people have received information about a change event and feel that their concerns have been heard, they are ready to find out, "What are the next steps?" What makes this question difficult to answer is that the organizational forms of the twenty-first century have not yet been created. Action steps cannot be based on what was done in the past. So, what is required to help people become creative in adapting to a new future?

- Generate movement rather than giving solutions. To create movement, decide what you want. (Most of us are better at describing what we don't want, than what we do.) Then, give people the authority to find their way to the destination. Finally, help them identify "first steps" that will help get the momentum started. *"What are you willing to do to make this situation the way you want it? What are you willing to stop doing?"* "First steps" help overcome the paralysis that often accompanies so much uncharted territory.
- Remember that plans are "best guesses" which need to remain fluid and flexible to adapt to new information. Don't be overly ambitious in the beginning. Create short-term goals. Perform frequent "calibrations" to evaluate if you are on target.
- Stay focused on your ultimate destination, while remaining completely attentive to where you are in the moment. It is like crossing a small creek or riverbed by picking and choosing different stepping-stones. While you know the ultimate destination before you start, you are not clear of your path. Rather, you stay focused on each stone,



- testing for solidity and slipperiness, until you zigzag your way across to the other side.
- Hold yourself and others accountable for action items. No amount of thoughtful planning has any value whatsoever if there is no follow-up.
- Engage people's creativity. Ask for their ideas before suggesting your own solutions. Remember, people don't resist change. They resist *being* changed. Expand your thinking and the thinking of those around you by identifying outmoded rules and policies and by creating an environment where mistakes are acceptable..

The Need for Time

In addition to information, empathy, and ideas for action, there is one final need that is implicit in any change process - the need for time. Adapting to change is an inner as well as an outer process, and the inner process has a timing of its own that will not be rushed. A reorganization is announced, a new product line is unveiled, a new strategic direction is set, or a new team leader is announced - the outer forms of these changes happen in an instant, while feelings, attitudes, expectations, and beliefs will adjust more slowly.

Many organizations implement a change and then expect everyone to "be o.k." or to "get on with life as before." **The fact is that a truly transformational change will involve a decrease in productivity, morale and efficiency.** Expect this. This is true for any kind of change in any system. The very nature of change is that it produces chaos in its movement to create new growth. So, what can you do while people move through their "mourning period?"

- Create an outer symbol for yourself and others throughout a change process to help honor the basic need for "time" to process change events. For example, one organization gave small paddles to all team members - this paddle honored their efforts to "paddle" through the "white water" of change.
- Understand that change is not something that can be "fixed" or "cured" but is a process which extends beyond the moment of its implementation.
- Don't create unreasonable expectations for yourself or others during radically shifting times. If your environment is pressuring you to "keep pace," ask for priorities and educate those around you on the importance of using changing times as an opportunity to find a new, easier way of doing things.

Jack Welch clearly understood that change takes time. After he had announced a major shift or change, and his people asked him, "Is that it?" he immediately and smilingly responded, "No, it's just begun."

Biographical information: Elisabeth von Clemm, M.A. is founder and President of von Clemm Leadership Solutions, a Greensboro-based leadership training and consulting firm. Her recently published booklet, "Managing Change Into The 21st Century", helps organizations and the people in them identify what type and level of change they are dealing with and describes concrete strategies and tips for maintaining morale and addressing people's four basic needs during any change process.

Copyright © 1990 - 2005, by von Clemm Leadership Solutions, Inc. Unauthorized distribution or reproduction is forbidden. However, authorization to photocopy items for internal or personal use is granted by von Clemm Leadership Solutions, Inc.