

THE MAGAZINE OF HUMAN RESOURCES THOUGHT LEADERSHIP | MARCH/APRIL 2010

# HR

PROFESSIONAL

## DRIVING CHANGE

HR exec Tracy Lapointe's  
practical approach

Communicating change

The Second City's take on  
ethics training

ALSO: POLICY MANUALS | SIX SIGMA IN HR | COACHING SUPERVISION

## COMMUNICATING CHANGE INITIATIVES

**C**hances are your organization is undergoing change. Even if you aren't currently experiencing a layoff, reorganization, merger, acquisition, outsourcing or big shift in benefits—you probably will be in the near future.

Now, raise your hand if a senior leader has delegated communicating the change to you. Many leaders don't realize the critical role they play in supporting change. Your change efforts are more likely to be successful if leaders—from the CEO to VPs—are actively involved. Based on lessons learned working with a global pharmaceutical company, a North American telecommunications company and a leading financial institution, here are the seven most effective ways to communicate change.

### 1. Clarify communication roles and expectations

• Your CEO probably understands his role, but the leaders who report to him—and the VPs on the next level—may not see themselves as key change communicators. Set those expectations. At a telecommunications company, the CEO brought VPs together to provide an overview of an upcoming organizational change, and to emphasize how important it was that they meet with employees in their areas. VPs were then provided with a leader guide that further articulated their role, and gave them essential tools to fulfill that role, including key messages and frequently asked questions.

### 2. Ensure that leaders truly understand the change

• Often VPs and unit leaders know what's changing in their own area, but don't get the full extent of the organization-wide implications. Make sure leaders have an opportunity to learn what's changing, where and when; this is best done through a face-to-face session with senior management.

### 3. Give leaders a chance to internalize the change

• Leaders are people, too, so they feel the same anxiety and uncertainty employees do. When a pharmaceutical company was undergoing reorganization, HR organized a half-day



ILLUSTRATION: MICHAEL EDDENDEN

session for the company's Top 100 leaders. After the CEO gave a presentation on the change, the audience broke out into groups of 15 to brainstorm questions they thought employees would have. A member of the senior team then answered key questions. By going through this exercise, participants were given a way to express their questions and concerns by channeling employees.

#### 4. Use this opportunity to teach leaders how people experience change

After a financial institution announced it was merging with another bank, the bank's VPs and directors stopped communicating with their employees because key decisions had not yet been finalized and the leaders didn't know what they should be communicating.

HR responded by organizing a two-hour workshop to help them understand why employees needed contact, even if definitive information wasn't available. As a result, 95 per cent of leaders agreed that the session gave them what they needed to facilitate dialogue, address anxiety and gain buy-in for the merger.

#### 5. Provide leaders with easy-to-use communication tools

During times of change, leaders have less time than ever. So they need a toolkit that contains key messages and facts, a PowerPoint deck and answers to FAQs.

#### 6. Help leaders answer questions

Just as important, give leaders help with questions they won't be able to answer. In some cases, the answer is not yet known; in others, it can't be shared. Regardless, HR should coach leaders on sample responses to all questions, including what to say about rumours or when someone expresses anxiety.

#### 7. Use clear language

Don't use clichés or slogans—employees can spot “corporate speak.”

Leading change is never easy, but by equipping leaders with the help they need, they—and the organization—will be set up for success. **HR**

*Alison Davis is CEO of Davis & Company, a firm that helps its clients—which include Johnson & Johnson, MasterCard, PepsiCo—reach, engage and motivate employees.*

## DOS AND DON'TS OF CHANGE COMMUNICATION

Don't:	Do:
Think only about the information you need to share.	<b>Tie in “what does this mean to me?”</b> Use specific examples of what employees need to do differently to help the company succeed.
Deliver a message once, then expect everyone to “get it.”	<b>Repeat, repeat, repeat.</b> By the time leaders are ready to introduce a change, they've been working with the issue for months. But employees are hearing it for the first time, so they need reinforcement.
Get irritated when hearing a question you've answered many times before.	<b>Act patient, even if you don't feel that way.</b> How well leaders answer questions can mean the difference between encouraging employees to speak freely and shutting people down.
Do all the talking.	<b>Be a good listener.</b> Letting people give voice to their anxieties has been proven by researchers to release tension.
Become defensive when someone asks a tough question.	<b>Answer difficult questions.</b> If leaders don't know all the details, it's OK to say, “I don't know,” but make sure to tell employees you'll give them the rest of the information as soon as possible.

For tips on coaching leaders to communicate more effectively, visit [www.HRProMag.com](http://www.HRProMag.com)