

Managing Continuous Change

by Todd Alexander

I just completed a session with a team that was trying to recover from the last round of changes that swept through their organization. The interesting thing was that when I had worked with the team four months earlier, guess what they were dealing with: Change! I don't think I've met a person in the last year who hasn't identified change as one of the key challenges they have had to deal with. I'm sure everyone's heard statements like, "We've had more changes in the last six months than in the previous ten years." Phrases like, "If you don't like this change, just wait a few months and it'll change again" are commonplace.

There is no question that we all need to learn how to work in an environment where change is no longer the exception but the norm. Think of it this way: in the old environment, we used to have long periods of stability with intermittent periods of change (see inset).

In the last few years, the business environment has changed so much that the situation is exactly the opposite, so that we now experience an almost constant state of change with intermittent periods of stability (see inset).

As I explain this to groups, they typically ask me when they should expect the periods of stability, because in the last few years, they don't remember any!

Mistake #1:

The first mistake I see people make is thinking that this is just a phase that businesses are going through, and eventually things will revert back to normal where they can enjoy long periods of stability. To these people, I've got bad news for you. It's not going back to being the way that it was. The reason is because it's not a phase or just something that businesses are going through. The changes are being caused by our customers who woke up one day and found out that they didn't need to just buy whatever we were selling at whatever price we felt like charging. The customers started demanding more from us and showing us that they were willing to shift their business to the competition if we couldn't do it better, faster and cheaper than we used to. If we used to produce a widget in ten days that cost \$5 the customer now wants a high quality widget produced in seven days that cost \$3.50.

If we should view this as improper or unjust, remember that while the supplier considers it to be "exploiting a situation," the customer considers it to be "their right." We are angry that we aren't getting the raises and bonuses we used to, but we don't complain about paying less for higher quality products. It's all part of doing business in an age of change driven by savvy customers and aggressive competition.

Mistake #2:

We think that when we now hit the stable periods, no matter how infrequent or brief, that we have time to relax and enjoy the stability. In the past, as we encountered periods of change, we focused our energy to endure the turbulence so we could return to stability.

Once we got back, we could pull out the deck chairs and coast contentedly off until the next change, hiding beyond the distant horizon.

Today's environment is vastly different, and the way that companies, teams and individuals handle their times of stability determines their success in times of change. In order to succeed in handling change, we must take advantage of stable times and use them as a "launching pad" to prepare for handling the next wave of change. It's during stable times that we need to begin to ask where we think our customers are going to change and what we think their needs will be. We also need to look at the industry and investigate how to position ourselves more competitively when the changes inevitably come.

Mistake #3:

We allow ourselves to become attached to stability and trying to create it in the workplace. This is the hardest part of all for most people - losing our attachment to stability. I'm sure we have all met people who claim to love change. Some seem almost prideful about it. I usually find that these people like change as a departure from the stability of their lives and like to depart from and return to a stable world. For most of these folks once the stability is taken away all together they are as discomforted by constant change as the next person.

The challenge is for us to embrace change and harness its power and the opportunities it presents us. The trouble is it sounds like a lot of work. In our old paradigm we worked hard at getting over change so we could relax, now we're saying we work hard at change so we can work hard at more change. The only alternative is to play the role of the victim and ignore the change until we finally have to deal with it. The problem is by that time we are in a position where all we can do is react to the change because we lost our opportunity to prepare for it.

So what's the solution?

First,

Make it okay to deal with change. We tend to make judgments when faced with change and look at it as positive or negative, justified or unjustified, good or bad. The truth is the label that we give to the change doesn't change the reality of the situation. There comes a point where we have to accept where we are and what we have to deal with.

Second,

Create a safe environment for yourself and others to deal with the change and take some risks. Break the change down into manageable chunks where people can begin to take some action on a small piece of it. Start small and build from those small successes. Allow people to take risks in coming up with new ideas and solutions and provide a lot of encouragement.

Third,

Set-up some accountability and support for people who have a tendency to fall into

victim patterns. Communicate clear expectations and if necessary create some interaction agreements that focus on interlocking accountability where team members support each other in taking action.

Fourth,

Provide a constant and appropriate blend of acknowledgment and challenge for people. Be careful not to perpetuate the old paradigm by withholding acknowledgment until you are in a stable period. This sends a message that the people have done a good job in making it through so they can now relax. Provide acknowledgment when people get discouraged and challenge them once they have had some success.