

Why change in the workplace is a psychological risk

By Kerry Howard, Workplace mental health specialist



- Change can be exciting, but it can also be challenging for employees.
- People need to understand why change is necessary in order to adapt to it.
- The biggest issue in any change management process is poor communication.



www.shutterstock.com - 1036570951

Most organisations will experience change at some point, whether it's a merger, acquisition, new product launch or the introduction of a new system. Change can be exciting, but it can also be challenging for employees. The responsibility for effective change firmly rests with good leaders, who need to ensure that their team is on board with the changes that are taking place.

There is a common misconception that that human beings don't like change, especially in the world of work, but in reality, we don't like change for change's sake. We need to understand why change is necessary to enable us to adapt to it. We need to recognise strategically, why that change is important to the business. Then w change management itself is actually a risk for psychological injury. e need to have that information distilled down so that we can buy-in to why the change is necessary.

Since the pandemic, there is a much greater onus of responsibility on the employer to mitigate psychological risks in the workplace. The reason that we must mitigate risk when we are implementing change, is because change management itself is actually a risk for psychological injury.

Change management is difficult for people because it challenges the status quo. Employees may be hesitant to change their ways or adopt new processes. Most organisational change is process oriented — focused on the 'new and improved' way of doing something — either through the adoption

of technology or a restructure of the business. The reason it creates a big risk to our psychological safety is because it destabilises our working life and uncertainty at work will have flow-on effects into our personal lives.

The biggest issue in any change management process is poor communication. Most formal change management processes don't consider the 'people' element of the transformation. Planning around the systems or structural changes are often made by the senior leadership and then shared with the staff — sometimes without adequate explanation for the strategic rationale that led to the change.

Communicate with clarity about the problem that needs solving

Employees often feel unduly pressured to follow a new process when it has not been clearly communicated why the process is necessary, or what problem the new process is going to solve. Effective communication is a key factor in change management. Leaders need to be clear about what changes are taking place and why they are necessary. They should also keep employees updated on progress and let them know when things change or if there are any delays. Transparency is crucial during times of change, as it helps to build trust between leaders and employees.

If we communicate more clearly and openly about a problem, it's not a reflection of any inadequacy of our leadership. We know how to fix a problem! But a big part of being a good leader is engaging your people in helping you to solve the problem. This creates buy-in to your leadership because they see that you value them as employees. So, if you make communication the number one priority in any organisational challenge, your change management process will be much smoother.

Make time to develop buy-in at the beginning

The key to improving engagement is helping people to feel like they have been heard. Leaders will often try to push people into submission around change. This is problematic because people who don't see value in the change may feel devalued and want to leave. Driving change may produce positive results for the bottom line, but can result in increased psychological injuries. People feel like they're not heard by the leadership, that their input is unimportant.

It's important to ask for input and give your people an opportunity to provide it in a variety of different ways. We often think we don't have time for that! However, it is essential to ensure successful change, so you don't have time to skip it. If you don't take the time to engage them at the beginning, you are going to lose a lot of time at the other end, trying to enforce change on people who don't want to embrace it. This results in staff turnover and is ultimately very costly to the business.

Introduce the proposed changes and explain why they are necessary

If you want to reduce resistance to change, you need to communicate with clarity what it is that the change is going to achieve for the organisation.

Often leaders feel that the communication of the rationale is superfluous to their desire to enact change. This is a common mistake that can be a by-product of the perception of hierarchy in your organisation. However, by making the link between the change that you want to bring in, and the problem that it's going to resolve, you make it clear to your people how they are going to benefit in their work from the change.

Leaders should engage with their people to obtain input and feedback from team members and be prepared to take their concerns into account. Employees will feel more invested in the change if they have a say in why it is necessary and how it is implemented.

Seek feedback to mitigate any psychological injury risks

In focusing on mitigating the risk, make sure that it's very clear about what this change is going to bring to the organisation, and then deliver training and information to varying levels of management within your organisation to ensure consistency in the message.

To determine if you are effectively mitigating the risk associated with your change process, you need to establish a variety of feedback mechanisms for your people to streamline feedback — both direct and indirect. Provide a single point of contact within the leadership for the escalation of issues in affected areas of the organisation, and a clear reporting path with fallback.

It is important for leaders to explain why change is necessary, especially where there may be a sense of urgency around it. They should also be prepared for resistance from employees and have a plan to overcome it.

Kerry Howard can be contacted on <https://kerryannhoward.com>

Material published in *Governance Directions* is copyright and may not be reproduced without permission. The views expressed therein are those of the author and not of Governance Institute of Australia. All views and opinions are provided as general commentary only and should not be relied upon in place of specific accounting, legal or other professional advice.