

What to Expect When You're Expecting (A Major Organizational Change)¹

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ABSTRACT

When new parents are about to have their first child, they do a significant amount of research in order to understand all of the changes that will be coming. There will be changes to them personally, to their home, and of course, to their family.

The same principles are true when an organization is about to undergo a major change. The organization may be nervous about what will happen and what the impact will be for the future.

Much like a parent expecting a baby, being aware of what will happen throughout the major organizational change will help to provide a level of comfort and understanding. Information reduces uncertainty, and this translates into buy-in within the organization.

WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU'RE EXPECTING

The book, *What to Expect When You're Expecting* is the longest running New York Times bestseller, with over 18.5 million copies in print. Why is this? Well it may be because it describes every conceivable issue that new parents would want to know about in order to be fully prepared for the pregnancy, and during childbirth.

For some parents, the book is overkill and a scary game of "What Could Go Wrong?" For others, it helps to ensure proper planning and provides strategies for mitigating the various risks. The book is organized into trimesters and thoughtfully articulates an answer for every question you may have.

WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU'RE EXPECTING A MAJOR ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Unfortunately, there is no corresponding book for what to expect during a major organizational change. You may think that if the CEO of your organization requests the change, the change will

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magically happen and all will be well. But this is not true. Organizational change needs nurturing and constant support, just like an expectant mother.

Every organizational change is different, and will be handled differently based on the change and the organization. However, the change life cycle of: identifying the change, getting buy in, implementing the change and then reviewing the impact of the change should be constant.

Twinkle in Your Eye – Identifying the Need for Change

When someone in your organization gets the hint of an idea that they would like to implement that is different from the current standard, this is similar to prospective parents determining if they are ready to start a family. During this phase, there are idealistic visions of what the change will be like, once realized. When people say “this change will revolutionize the company”, this is similar to parents talking about how their hypothetical child will win the Nobel Prize, or find a cure for cancer.

And just like not every child grows up to win the Nobel Prize, not every change will have the sweeping benefits that were originally anticipated. What can be anticipated, however, are the reactions that may result from the change. If the change includes a reorganization or a shift in workload or work product, those issues should be addressed and discussed openly and frequently with the staff impacted by those issues.

Researching what to expect, who can help, and identifying information sources that provide insightful strategies and tactics increase the opportunity for a successful change process.

Getting Ready for Change – Getting Buy In

Change is hard. Two key things to making the change more tolerable are: thoughtful and constant communication of the change, and identifying your change agents.

Communication

Communication is important for socialization of the change. If the change you are considering will have a major impact on your staff, you need to discuss the change early and often. And as part of this process, you should be transparent and discuss both the benefits and the drawbacks to the change. You should also identify multiple strategies for communication such as “townhalls”, change bulletins, vlogs, email updates, etc. The key is to target everyone that will be impacted in a method that will engage the stakeholder.

When you bring a new sibling into a family, you have discussions with the current family members. You may have to have a conversation where you explain “Yes, you will have to share a room, but you are gaining a sidekick that will always look up to you.”

If the change is going to have a perceived negative impact, you should discuss that openly as well. To some, all change is negative. So, you should explain the total impact in order to lessen any potential surprises. If the system is going to look different and require training to use, but replaces something antiquated that the organization needs, then make that case again and again.

Change Agents

To help in implementing the change, your organization should identify your change agents. These change agents will be the biggest advocates for the organizational change. They will likely also be the implementers of that change, helping to provide training and constant reinforcement about the need for change.

Your change agents can come from within your organization, or can be external, depending on the will of the organization. Some organizations choose to bring in external parties to identify the need for the change and then share that with the rest of the organization. This is typically done so that those change agents can be the “bad guys” and then leave once the change has been implemented. Other organizations find their change agents internally, as they know that the change does not end at implementation, but rather remains ongoing and it can be more successfully implemented with known, trusted agents. Essentially, you need people who will advocate for the change and influence the opinions of those individuals that are opposed to or unsure about the change.

Response Plan

The vast majority, about 70%, of organizational changes fail. In addition to improved communication, another method for mitigating impediments to change is to leverage input from change agents and stakeholders to identify a response plan. This plan will identify the actions to take in the event certain issues start to arise and typically involve your communication strategy and change agents.

The Due Date Has Arrived – Implementing the Change

The time has come to implement the change. The timing of your implementation may be based on external factors, like the system you are using is out of date and going to be discontinued. Or it can be based on internal factors, like the best time for your organizational change aligns to a new fiscal year.

In either case, your organization needs to plan for the day the change is kicked off. Expecting parents likely have a travel bag ready and the best route to the hospital identified at various times of day. The change agents of an organization need to have announcements ready for the day of the change that can be sent at intervals as reminders that the change has occurred and why.

And though everything has been planned out, there still may be hiccups. People may have forgotten the change was occurring. Or maybe they are still in denial. In any case, your change agents should kick in to gear with reassuring words for those employees, and a reminder that, though change is difficult, everything is going to be ok.

Post Change Depression – Reviewing the Impact

Sometimes, though precise plans were made, and the change is having the desired impact, people may still not be happy. Think about how your eldest child reacts to a new sibling, and you will understand this phenomenon.

After the change has been implemented, both sets of staff need support: the change agents and those impacted by the change. The change agents will take the brunt of the response regarding change, and will likely be blamed for the reason the change took place. They may hear things like “everything was just fine until you came along”. And though your change agents have been prepared to be the lead communicators, too much pushback can be trying. Executive management needs to be prepared to publicly support the change, and the change agents throughout the process. This is particularly important if the change agent was internal to the organization, since employees will likely always remember the day that change agent disrupted their processes with new ideas.

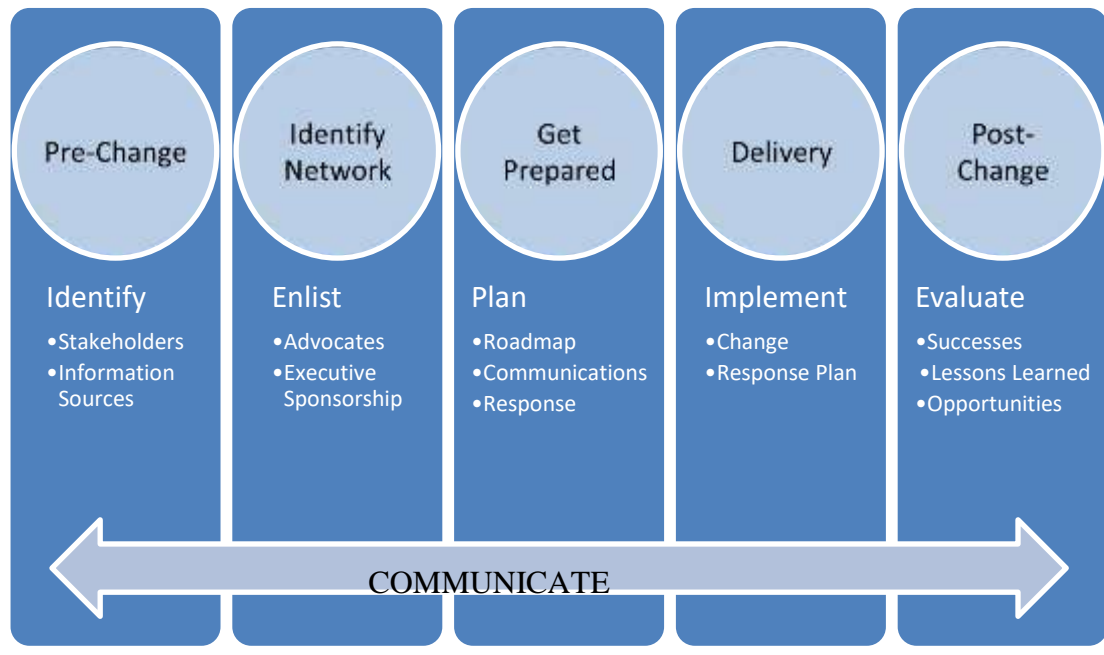
Even while supporting the change agents, there needs to be a continual acknowledgement for those impacted by the change. The acknowledgement shouldn't be “those darned change agents”, but instead needs to be reassurance about why the change was needed, and why the benefits outweigh the costs.

Transparency and communication should continue post implementation. Stakeholders should be engaged by providing them with information and allowing them to contribute towards identifying the successes, mistakes, opportunities, and other lessons learned resulting from the change.

CONCLUSION

Much like expectant parents who benefit from a roadmap of what will occur throughout pregnancy and during childbirth, so too would organizations benefit from a roadmap explaining what to expect when implementing a major change.

Every organizational change is different, and will be handled differently based on the change and the organization. However, the change life cycle of: identifying the change, getting buy in, implementing the change and then reviewing the impact of the change should always be considered.



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