

Support employees during challenging times^{1, 2}

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In relation to change affecting a company, most employees are comfortable with the status quo, and therefore they have a natural resistance to change. In the business environment, most of the time, changes are inevitable. These changes can affect different aspects of the organisation, for example, the way it is organised internally, its policies and procedures, the products they sell, the type of customers it serves, and the employees' functions, among others.

When a company supports its employees on a continuous basis, they tend to feel more at ease when they perform their work tasks. Nonetheless, most employees tend to feel anxious when their company goes through challenging times. In some of these situations, employees tend to feel threatened, which prompts them respond to these factors in a defensive manner. Schein (2009) observed that employees' fear can have different origins, for example, fear of losing their share of power, fear of being incompetent in the new scenario, etc. In these situations, employees are likely to become overwhelmed, which prevents them from tapping into their skills and talents.

Oftentimes these anxious employees become incapable of tackling challenging circumstances effectively. Goleman (1996) stated that anxious individuals' cognitive functions become severely impaired, which affects their capacity to generate creative solutions to troublesome issues.

Sometimes, employees feel powerless and left to their own devices, as if they had to face these challenging situations on their own. Some tips for managers to take into account during challenging circumstances are:

- Some employees are very fearful of the negative effects of change affecting the company they work for. These employees must be thoroughly told the main aspects of change and the main reasons that justify it. In this way, employees' uncertainty and apprehension regarding changing circumstances can be lowered.

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² This is an excerpt from the book "The Art of Compassionate Business: Main Principles for the Human-Oriented Enterprise" (2019, Routledge). Link to the book: www.bit.ly/2MAkr4k

- Angell and Rizkallah (2004) observed that during periods of change, managers should always avoid any communication vacuum, where employees do not know or understand what is going on in the organisation. Managers should provide subordinates with loving support and reassurance during turbulent times. Managers should show employees the potential implications of the changing circumstances, especially highlighting benefits that change will bring about for employees. Managers should be a sounding board for subordinates to navigate these changes confidently.
- Hardingham (1992) suggests that managers should help employees to perceive challenging situations in a less threatening manner. This author observed that management should be more encouraging and patient with employees than usual, so that they can feel safe and assisted.
- Sometimes, employees are thoroughly trained regarding the actions to be compliant with the upcoming change. Employees can also be directly involved in the discussion of potential actions to implement in relation to the change.
- When changes affect the organisation, managers can set a transition period for employees to adapt to the new circumstances. In this period, the change can be introduced gradually and smoothly to allow employees to become comfortable and familiar with the new situation. Sometimes employees can be valid participants of changes to be introduced. In those cases, employees are consulted and their opinions duly taken on board before any change is implemented.

In these cases, employees are also thanked for their contribution of ideas. When a company uses this participative attitude toward change, employees tend to feel more valued, which prompts them to be engaged with the implementation of the change.

Oftentimes, changes affecting an organisation implies a learning process, which includes unlearning old ways of doing things to learn new ones. In some companies, there are people assigned to explain to employees the specific aspects of change affecting them. In this way, employees can feel more supported and can engage with the overall process of change in a more committed manner.

Sometimes, management can even offer valuable incentives to employees who have adopted change, or to encourage people to adopt it. These incentives are very valuable, especially when some employees feel that their situation worsens after the implementation of change.

In a warm work environment, there is a continuous atmosphere of togetherness, which allows employees to handle changing situations in a more effective way. In those cases, employees do not feel on their own, but are accompanied by their colleagues to face the effects of change. This supportive environment acts as a safety net for employees; in this type of environment, the most important values are empathy and solidarity.

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