

Supporting Operational Managers Through Change: A Comprehensive Discussion

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Introduction

This paper brings together several discussions surrounding the complexities of managing change, particularly when operational managers are required to lead change efforts without formal expertise in change management. The key themes of the discussions highlight the challenges faced by managers, strategies for supporting them, and the role of change practitioners in guiding and coaching leaders through change.

The Role of Managers in Leading Change

The primary focus of the session was on the role of operational managers in leading change, particularly those who may not have a background in change management. The discussions emphasized that operational managers—such as team leaders and supervisors—often have demanding roles and are not always equipped with the necessary skills to handle organizational change effectively.

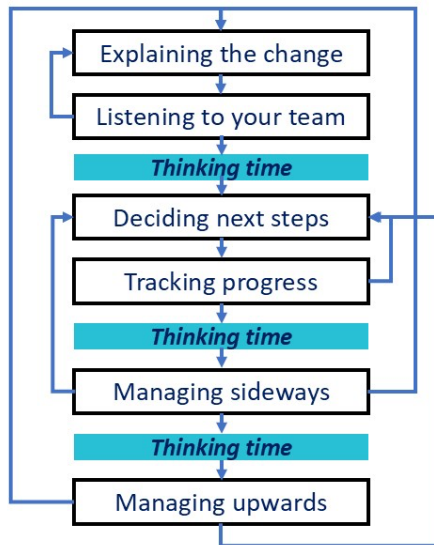
Key Responsibilities for Managers in Change

To help managers lead change successfully, the following responsibilities were highlighted:

- Repeatedly explaining the change to their teams.
- Holding one-to-one conversations to address individual concerns.
- Allocating time for reflection and preparation.
- Tracking progress and making adjustments as necessary.
- Managing relationships sideways with peers and upwards with senior leadership.
- Balancing operational responsibilities with the demands of managing change.
- The goal is to ensure that these managers are supported without overwhelming them with complex, formal change management training.



Key tasks



Understanding Managerial Readiness and Coaching Needs

An important aspect of supporting managers in leading change is recognizing their varying levels of comfort with change leadership. Some managers naturally engage with their teams during change processes, while others may lack people skills or be resistant to change. A coaching approach can help managers assess their starting points and provide targeted support for their needs.

Coaching vs. Process Support

While some managers respond well to structured processes, others may require more emotional engagement. Providing a clear framework with actionable steps can help managers who prefer process-oriented approaches, while a coaching model can address those who need more personalized guidance.

Facilitating Self-Discovery and Ownership

In the discussions, tools like self-assessments and even AI-driven platforms (such as ChatGPT) were suggested as ways for managers to identify their own concerns and learning needs. By allowing managers to reflect on their strengths and areas for improvement, they can take ownership of their development in leading change.

Balancing Change and Leadership Development

Change professionals are increasingly being asked to support broader leadership development, but there is concern about losing focus on core change management responsibilities. The conversations suggested a balanced approach, where change practitioners coach managers

specifically on how to handle change, while HR and Learning & Development can address more general leadership gaps through broader training programs.

The Role of Change Agent Networks

When leaders are resistant to change or lack the necessary skills, change agent networks can be an effective solution. These networks, consisting of individuals who are more engaged with the change process, can drive grassroots-level adoption and facilitate communication and buy-in across teams.

Engaging Resistant Leaders

Engaging resistant leaders is another critical challenge. Change practitioners can help by emphasizing the effort required for effective communication and suggesting alternative team members who may act as intermediaries. This approach helps to ensure that the necessary change interventions are still carried out, even when key leaders are not fully on board.

Managing Multiple Layers of Change

Modern organizations often face multiple, simultaneous changes, which can be overwhelming for employees. Managers are tasked with helping their teams navigate these multiple changes, while also assessing where their teams are in the change process. Tools like ADKAR (Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, Reinforcement) can help managers track progress and identify where interventions are needed.

Contextualizing and Prioritizing Change

Given the complexity of managing multiple changes, it is crucial to prioritize and understand dependencies between different changes. Using human-centered design approaches, managers can better understand the impact of changes on their teams and reduce feelings of overwhelm. By giving teams personas and visualizing their workloads, managers can contextualize changes and improve communication.

Empathy and Communication in Change Management

The discussions emphasized the need for empathy when managing change, especially in environments influenced by new technologies such as AI. Understanding how changes affect people's workloads, stress levels, and perceptions of their roles is crucial. Clear, empathetic communication is necessary to ensure that employees feel supported and not overloaded by the various changes occurring within the organization.

10. Conclusion

The discussions consistently reinforced the idea that while operational managers may not always have formal training in change management, they can be supported through coaching, structured processes, and self-assessment. Change professionals can help by focusing on specific change leadership competencies, while HR can address broader leadership training needs. Engaging resistant leaders, using change agent networks, and managing multiple changes with empathy and understanding are key strategies for navigating the complexities of change in modern organizations.

Ultimately, the success of change management efforts hinges on providing operational managers with the right tools, guidance, and support—without overwhelming them—so they can lead their teams through change effectively.