

BIG TALK

How to communicate with and manage employees during change.

By John Ely


Change happens. Okay, let me apologize in advance for using such a worn-out cliché, but really, change is all around us—all the time! If we tracked and documented all the changes in our lives, we would be amazed.

As I write this article, I'm thinking back over the last two years, and the changes in my personal and professional life have been profound. And this motion will never stop. What's important is that we embrace it, realize it is coming, and continuously plan for its arrival. Change is that relative that keeps showing up at your door, so let's get used to him.

When communicating a brand or culture change to employees, don't start by training them to adopt new practices and procedures. Take a step back.



LISTEN TO THIS FEATURE
at www.astd.org/TD/TDpodcasts.htm



During times of radical change, managers or executives are doubly tasked with the duties associated with the change and communicating its effects to staff.

During times of change, it's paramount that we are able to relate with our employees. During times of radical change, that becomes even more of a challenge, because managers or executives are doubly tasked with the duties associated with the change and communicating its effects to staff.

Just like a messy divorce and custody battle, it's easy to lose sight of what is truly important. During times of unexpected, unwanted, and unpredictable change, emotions often run high because resistance to the different or the unknown is an omnipresent aspect of human nature.

As with a custody case in which parents debate what is best for their children, businesses must remain focused on what is best for their customers. It is this primary objective that employees need to embrace from the very beginning of any organizational change.

While managing workplace change is often difficult, there is a silver lining. Change can represent an opportune time for executives and employees to re-evaluate the culture or brand.

Begin any change, especially a merger or acquisition, by pulling together key executives to talk about brand messages—the promises you make to your customers. Don't discuss the rose-colored version of your brand, but what your customers

are really experiencing. This is also a good time to get feedback from your employees. Here are some questions that need to be answered during this phase of change:

- Does a brand exist at all, and if so, what does it say?
- What is the brand promise to customers?
- Are we really keeping those promises?
- Is there a consistent and unified brand message throughout the entire company?

After getting the answers to these questions and adjusting the brand as needed, executives can then build a communications campaign for different audiences starting with the most important audience—the employees.

People first

While executives are sometimes eager to share the details of an organizational change with the external audience, I can't stress enough the importance of educating your own team first. Your own team can make more of a statement than any amount of advertising can, just by delivering on your brand promise, exceeding expectations, and creating legendary customer experiences.

When communicating a brand or culture change to employees, don't start by training them to adopt new practices and procedures. Take a step back. Take time to

answer employees' questions about the change, while focusing on the benefits. Like most audiences, employees want to know what's in it for them.

You should also emphasize the importance of employees' roles in delivery. Explain that you can only convey the new brand messaging with their help. Make employees feel like a valued part of both the transition process and the customer's experience. You'll be amazed at their motivation and the quality of communications and service they'll deliver in return.

Once the brand message has been communicated to employees, then you will need to provide the tools necessary for employees to properly deliver on those brand promises.

Show and prove

For many employees, delivering legendary customer service as part of the brand promise is not a natural skill. There must be a plan that encourages and measures changes in behavior. The following are a few tips to consider:

Invest in training. A comprehensive training program devoted to customer service offers many advantages by assuring that all employees are getting the same message and skills. Employees need to be taught what is expected of them and how they need to execute legendary service. Set standards with the expectation that they will be followed.

Training also shows a commitment to the employee. I remember another economically challenging time in the early 1990s—the company I worked for had to make some hard choices in terms of the workforce. During the necessary layoffs, they also enacted a training program for those of us who survived, and this gave us some sense that we were preparing to come out of the economic slump fully armed to take on the competition. This measure simultaneously boosted workplace morale.

Set an example. Employees learn customer service skills from management. It's important for them to see management interacting with customers in a positive and personable manner. This enthusiasm will be contagious. Too often managers are dealing with the multitude of operational issues rather than providing service to customers and working with the staff.

Practice and reinforce training. Training is critical to the success of your operation, but the training alone will not help to achieve customer service objectives. Training must be reinforced and coached. Investing in training without a reinforcement strategy could severely diminish the return-on-investment.

Create a positive and supportive environment. When employees like working for a company, it shows. Being positive and supportive will help create an atmosphere where employees like to come to work and take care of customers. This translates to greater customer loyalty and a more profitable business model.

Employee attrition is a risk during all organizational change, but investing in training is an important step for keeping turnover to a minimum. Providing an effective training program sets clear expectations and gives employees the tools they need.

It also shows employees that you are willing to invest in their professional development and that you want them to succeed. Consistently survey employees on their job satisfaction, and correct areas of concern.

Delivering

While reducing employee attrition is the best way to ensure a consistent brand message during times of change, a small amount of turnover is inevitable. Employees who stay should be rewarded for their loyalty. Communicate to them the opportunities that exist when others leave the company by means of promotion, increased responsibilities, or widening job scopes.

It is also these employees who will help orient new hires. Seasoned employees not only teach new employees the technical aspects of their jobs, but will help convey the corporate culture and internal brand.

During times of change, delivering on your brand promise should be foremost. While it's common for employees to be distracted and anxious, investing in training will help them be less concerned about their future and more concerned with your customers. **T+D**

John Ely is senior vice president of marketing for Signature Worldwide, a training and business solutions company dedicated to helping clients create legendary experiences for their customers; www.signatureworldwide.com/pr.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

T+D welcomes your comments. If you would like to respond to this article, or any article that appears in *T+D*, please send your feedback to mailbox@astd.org. Responses sent to the mailbox are considered available for publication and may be edited for length and clarity.



YES!

I want to subscribe for only \$99, (\$165 Outside the U.S.) to T+D magazine—12 monthly issues that keep me at the forefront of workplace learning and performance.

TD0833

Order Information

Name: _____

Title: _____ Company: _____

Address: _____ City: _____

State/Province: _____ Zip/Postal Code: _____

Country: _____ Email: _____

Phone: _____ Fax: _____

Check One: [] \$99 (USA) [] \$165 (Outside the US) [] VISA [] MasterCard [] Amex [] Discover [] Check (USD) (Payable to T+D)

Card Number: _____ Expiration Date _____

Signature: _____

Fax this form to 1.703.683.9591 OR Mail to: T+D, P.O. Box 1567; Merrifield, Virginia, 22116-9812, USA

Order online at store.astd.org
Phone: 1.800.628.2783 (1.703.683.8100 outside the US)

Orders processed within three business days.
If you have questions, please contact subscriberservice@astd.org

Prices valid through 12/31/2008. If you should wish to cancel your subscription for any reason, you will receive a refund on all unmailed issues. Your subscription to T+D may be a tax deductible business expense. Please allow 6 to 8 weeks to receive your first issue.

T+D is published by the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD)

010859.63250

