

Reaching the Tough Crowd During Change

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The tough crowd—you know them. They're almost everywhere we turn—at home, school, work, sporting events, or even volunteer groups. In change initiatives, it's even tougher to influence these individuals to be part of a solution. We usually choose avoidance—declaring 'That's just Joe being Joe,' allowing them to pitch tantrums or demonstrate passive aggressiveness, while bringing others down along the way.

If confronted, some in this camp feel they are falling on their swords of loyalty to the tried-and-true ways of the past, or that everyone else is drinking the corporate Kool-Aid. Have you ever stopped to think of the costs incurred when a major project is stalled due to behavior of internal critics, those feeling victimized by change, or others politically motivated to somehow sabotage progress?

While interpersonal communication is an age-old challenge, adequately planning *how* to communicate change is still underestimated as an effective tactic. Simple, persuasive messages can be delivered for a small investment, even without a well-staffed communications team. As a comparison, consider the costs of endless meetings debating on whether or not the project status is yellow or red. While this is going on, your tough crowd—and your entire audience—is creating their own truths which may manifest into impenetrable walls of defensiveness.

Consider two of the usual suspects and tactics to chip away at those walls.

1. The Critic. Proceed with caution.

We may wonder how these folks got hired, but only the most scrutinizing of interviewers can reveal certain undesirable traits. Critics have a 'no' or 'it won't work' for just about everything, but depending on their expertise and status, they can still be leveraged in a productive way. For example, let them lead a piece of the change that's important to them. If this seems manipulative, it is. But when orchestrated the right way and for the right reasons, it can work wonders. When other team members see critics playing a role that supports change, it can gain hefty momentum in the new direction.

But, remember to exercise caution! The critic may sense this maneuver and become defensive. Be prepared to have a direct conversation stating their influence or negative effect on others, and that they are expected to behave in a way that supports the strategic decision, whether or not they accept a leading role. If they still push back, one of the most powerful lines delivered to an audience full of employed critics was "...You know what? We're going to pay you to try."

2. The Victim. Coach ‘em up!

“What are we going to do? The sky is falling!” You might view victims of change as those who’ve been around too long or don’t have the capability to change, putting their efforts into fearing for their job or telling others how they’ve been wronged. While this may be true for some, most victims have no boundaries of age, background, or rank in the organization. However, some of them may share the common behavior of becoming emotional.

Yet, like critics, victims can still be big contributors—at least when happy. Listening and one-to-one coaching are often the ideal solution. Sometimes people need the safety of a trusted individual just to vent or be heard. Use this opportunity to reinforce what is known—not speculation or rumor.

So you’ve identified and engaged some of the tough crowd, but what about everyone else? Your wider audience—even with early adopters and the best of intentions, still need clear and effective communications to make the transition. It’s here where the WIIFM (What’s In It For Me?) approach comes into play.

WIIFM? vs. WEOM (What’s Expected of Me)?

Explaining the personal benefits of a change is important, but it doesn’t necessarily ensure commitment or buy-in from those impacted. So consider a more realistic approach when communicating benefits and the organization’s future state.

1. Communicate the “WIIFM”, but also the “WEOM” to succeed. Give them a destination and the support path to get there. Like children, adults need security and want to know how to do what’s expected of them—even though they will rarely admit it.
2. Be real about the challenge ahead. Change won’t be easy so let people know it’s OK to fail—but not to stop trying.
3. Avoid language or tone that may be perceived as buttering them up for the pain coming down the road. Show confidence in the decision to change and be stern about the importance of everyone’s participation.
4. Recognize effort and celebrate wins. People usually want to do their best and to be recognized for their contributions. Leaders must demonstrate that they’re interested in the work being done to achieve success.

Throughout change transitions leaders have opportunities at every point of engagement to share the right words—including strong, clear direction and “why statements.” The results can be far more powerful than announcement emails from the top of the organization. From staff meetings to water-cooler chats to one-to-one reviews, state and restate how and when benefits are expected to play out in their respective area(s), and the associated behaviors required from their teams to reach the new goals. If we ask ourselves how we would truly prefer such changes to be communicated, we’d likely want something along the lines of “give it to me straight.”

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A. J. Holley joined Changepoint to lead the development of a new Organizational Change Management solution to help customers manage the human element of change--a core challenge to any project or business transformation. Holley has over 15 years of experience leading organizational development and change management initiatives, and shares best practices and valuable strategies for project managers to apply to make communication a more calculated and strategic tool for project management success across a business.

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