

Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change

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Rebuild Trust

If you have ever watched people learning to swim, you've no doubt observed that crucial moment when they push off the edge and free of the teacher's hand and set forth on their own. Without trust in their teacher, it would be impossible. "I won't let you sink," she says. At that moment, with fear balanced against hope, it is trust that makes the difference. Lacking the trust in their own ability to swim, they fall back on trust in their teacher.

It's much the same with transition management. When people trust their manager, they're likely to undertake a change even if it scares them. When they don't feel that trust, progress isn't likely to occur. The good news is that you can build such trust; the bad news is that you can do it only very slowly. It behooves you to get started right away.

There are two sides of trust: the first is outward-looking and grows from one's past experiences with a particular person; the second is inward-looking and comes from one's own history, particularly from childhood experiences. The level of trust any person feels is fed by both of these sources. You have control over the outward-facing one, so start there. The technique is simple – simple to explain, anyway: *start being trustworthy*.

Trustworthiness is encouraged by a number of actions that are within your power to take:

1. *Do what you say you will do.* Don't make promises you can't or won't keep. Most people's trust problems have been learned from untrustworthy actions in the past.
2. *Listen to people carefully and tell them what you think they are saying.* If you have it wrong, accept the correction and revise what you say. People trust others whom they believe understand them.
3. *Understand what matters to people and work hard to protect whatever is related to that.* People trust those who are looking out for their best interests.
4. *Share yourself honestly.* Hiding shortcomings may improve your image, but it doesn't help build trust. Admitting an untrustworthy action is itself a trustworthy action. A lot of mistrust begins when people are unable to read you.
5. *Ask for feedback and acknowledge unasked-for feedback on the subject of your own trustworthiness.* Regard it as valuable information to reflect on. It may be biased, and you don't have to swallow it whole. But check it for important half-truths.

6. *Don't try to push others to trust you further than you trust them.* Your own mistrust will be communicated subtly and will be returned to you in kind. Trust is mutual or it is very shallow.
7. *Try extending your trust of others a little further.* Being trusted makes one more trustworthy, and trustworthy people are more trusting.
8. *Don't confuse being trustworthy with "being a buddy."* Being a buddy for a purpose is an untrustworthy act. Besides, trust doesn't automatically come with friendship.
9. *Don't be surprised if your trust-building project is viewed a bit suspiciously.* Asking people to let go of their old mistrust of managers and of you in particular means a significant transition. Their mistrust – justified or not – was a form of self-protection, and no one readily gives up self-protection.
10. *If all of this is too complicated to remember and you want a single key to the building of trust, juts remind yourself, "Tell the truth."*

As to what you can do with the inner face of mistrust – which goes back to people's childhood – the same advice holds true. The difference is that if a person's history has reinforced mistrust, you will make even slower headway than combating mistrust you earned by your own actions. But you can make headway with even the most mistrustful person, so get started. Every hour that mistrust continues makes transition more difficult to manage than it has to be.

Unload Old Baggage

Managers sometimes find themselves fighting old battles when transition starts. These may even precede the manager's tenure – the layoff back in '73 that was handled so badly; the promise about seniority rights that wasn't kept when the contract was renegotiated; the repeated statements three years ago that the plant wouldn't be closed and it was.

At times like this you feel like yelling, "You're not going to bring that up again, are you?" or "You're not blaming me for that, are you?" The answer, of course, is "Yes". Transition is like a low-pressure area on the organizational weather map. It attracts all the storms and conflicts in the area, past and present. This is because transition "decompresses" an organization. Many of the barriers that held things in check come down. Old grievances resurface. Old scars start to ache. Old skeletons come tumbling out of closets.

In the short run, this can complicate an already complicated situation. But in the longer run it can have a positive aspect. Every transition is an opportunity to heal the old wounds that have been undermining activity. If leaders have lied in the past, this is the time to tell the truth and to rebuild credibility on the basis of honesty. If people have been dismissed callously in the past, this is the time to terminate people with dignity and fairness and to start building the values of concern and respect for them. If employee concerns have been disregarded in the past, this is a time to begin listening. It is never too late to become an organization that manages its people well. For that reason the old scar and the unresolved issue are great gifts. They represent opportunities for organizational enhancement.

Distinguish between Current Losses and Old Wounds

Feelings are feelings, and you have to accept them. But some feelings are reactions to the present and some are triggered by the ghosts of past losses that have never been properly dealt with. This relation between the present and unresolved issues from the past is called “resonance” because the current issue activates the past one as one string on a piano or violin can set another vibrating.

When present situations resonate with painful experiences in the past, they cause far more pain than they otherwise would. Knowledge of this is sometimes all you need because it helps you to feel less frightened. It enables you to say, in effect, “The pain I’m feeling isn’t caused by the present situation. That situation isn’t as big a threat to me as it feels. It has just touched an old wound.” Remind yourself that that was then, this is now.

But sometimes even that isn’t enough when the pain (whatever its source) is too great. Your past makes you particularly vulnerable to certain kinds of losses in the present. Recognizing the resonance in such a case is valuable because it makes clear that only by working on the old pain and finishing personal unfinished business will you get relief. That is the time most people seek professional help.

Your organization’s employee-assistance program is a good place to start, or consider a pastoral counselor or a psychotherapist. If you have friends who’ve had a good experience with professional help, ask their advice. Finding someone you’re comfortable talking with is more important than which license he or she holds. Testimony from a satisfied customer is your best lead, in these matters as in most others.