

Organizational Change - Dealing With Manager Angst

By Sharone Bar-David, LLB MSW

It's finally happened. After months of negotiations, deliberation and secrecy, one company has swallowed another to form a bigger, better organization. For those who've done the acquiring at the top of the hierarchy, it's time to celebrate. Many of those in the new company may also be feeling a certain level of excitement mixed with apprehension as they consider the possibilities that they anticipate will follow. For the rest of the employees – on both sides of what was once the bargaining table – the emotional rollercoaster is about to begin. For the organization, this undoubtedly means reduced productivity and employee retention issues that will make an impact on the bottom line. HR professionals can help by paying special attention to middle managers, a group that is often overlooked. These managers are also largely affected by organizational change on multiple levels, and yet, as the key drivers of projects, continue to have a big influence on the employee population at large.

New challenges for managers

Following an acquisition or merger, managers quickly find themselves in a bind. The employees they lead are experiencing a whirlwind of emotions that range from initial excitement to denial, sadness and upset. These issues are reflected in their performance, and generally result in reduced competency. It's not uncommon for managers to experience a great deal of frustration. They are sandwiched between the employees that they have hands-on relationships with and the upper management to whom they report. They usually don't have any decision-making power in terms of the larger issues of the integration, and yet must continue to articulate the company's expectations and 'round-up the troops' who are far from enthusiastic. To a large extent, senior management expect 'business as usual', while for the most part, the front-line employees are in a state of ambivalence. This is certainly middle management's greatest challenge. Sadly, most managers are lacking the tools to understand the human side of change management, including the framework and training to identify that their employees are grieving and resisting what is inevitable.

Dealing with their own issues

At the core of all of these simultaneously occurring events are the emotions that the managers themselves must personally contend with. There are those who may be termed "the celebrators", and initially buy into the company's vision while perhaps seeing opportunities for themselves ahead. It's not unusual for these individuals to become impatient with those who don't demonstrate the same level of excitement. However, the integration of two companies is a difficult process and unfortunately, over time, the initial celebratory attitude gets battered and it is the celebrators that fall the hardest. For the managers who don't buy into the company's vision, many find they become resentful towards senior management, and find it challenging to continue to play the role of cheerleader for their teams. These complex dynamics may result in loss of these managers to the organization as they are highly susceptible to leaving the organization following integration.

In general, managers and employees are working in tune to a physiological 'fight or flight response'. This means that in an increasingly demanding environment, stress levels and hormones become elevated and the body moves into 'survival mode'. As a result, it is difficult to think straight and one's creativity becomes compromised. Middle managers are as prone to this effect as front-line employees, and yet are being asked to perform at a high level, including contending with new processes, people, technology, location and a new company vision. The results can be negative consequences for the organization without intervention and support.

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Impact on the organization

The truth is that those who become disillusioned and cynical don't give their 100%. They may also develop a semi-exploitative relationship with the company in terms of their attitude: "you are making decisions I don't agree with so I will give less of myself in return". As a result, the organization loses momentum at a time when it's needed most. It becomes a lethargic company where everyone is their own 'general', takes care of themselves – and not really business. The organization will also likely suffer the loss of talent, as those who become disillusioned or unhappy will move on to a company where they feel they will be appreciated. As for the managers who are trying to give their 100% and perhaps even keep the 'celebratory' spirit alive, their ability to juggle all the competing expectations is seriously compromised. Without intervention the consequences will be stalled projects, stressed employees at risk for increased absenteeism and continued employee and manager turn around.

How HR can provide much-needed support

The integration of two companies doesn't have to lead to disaster. Here are some simple recommendations for HR professionals:

1. Provide managers with practical tools to understand the human dimension of change, such as in-house orientations and workshops as well as written materials.
2. Actively seek out managers and acknowledge that they're in a difficult situation. Let them know that you are available to be a sounding board if they need to talk 'off-line'.
3. Identify the 'celebrators' and develop a plan as you would to retain any other employee. This could include a reward plan for a given period (eg. one year) that recognizes individuals in middle management based on small accomplishments, and rewards them accordingly. This will acknowledge this group and send a powerful message about their value to the organization.
4. Find someone above them to foster them and help put the common 'disappointments' into perspective. This individual will hopefully become someone the manager feels they can turn to when disillusionment makes its impact.
5. Consider training for middle manager groups to create an informed workforce able to articulate frustrations and concerns and develop collective solutions. Corporate training is also an opportunity for them to debrief what they're observing and experiencing first-hand.
6. Refer managers to the EAP if one is available. The EAP should be recommended as a resource for those who need to share their experience in a confidential setting when the organization's structure might not otherwise permit it.

A new business day

As time passes, the road to complete integration will become smoother. When examining all of the elements that need to be considered in the integration process, it's easy to overlook the emotional impact it may be having on your employees at all levels of the company. However, by placing special emphasis on managers through frequent communication, recognition programs and training, your workplace will slowly begin to show signs of improved productivity and effectiveness.



Sharone Bar-David, LLB, MSW is President of Bar-David Consulting, a company offering REAL™ solutions for creating respectful workplaces. Bar-David Consulting now offers the REAL™ Program for Abrasive Leaders, a unique service designed to help turn around abrasive managers' behaviour within a short period of time.

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