

CHANGE MANAGEMENT

Research: To Get People to Embrace Change, Emphasize What Will Stay the Same

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Common wisdom in management science and practice has it that to build support for a change project, visionary leadership is needed to outline what is wrong with the current situation. By explaining how the envisioned change will result in a better and more appealing future, leaders can overcome resistance to change. But our research, recently published in the *Academy of Management Journal*, leads us to add a very important caveat to this.

A root cause of resistance to change is that employees identify with and care for their organizations. People fear that after the change, the organization will no longer be the organization they value and identify with — and the higher the uncertainty surrounding the change, the more they anticipate such threats to the organizational identity they hold dear. Change leadership that emphasizes what is good about the envisioned change and bad about the current state of affairs typically fuels these fears because it signals that changes will be fundamental and far-reaching.

Counterintuitively, then, effective change leadership has to emphasize continuity — how what is central to “who we are” as an organization will be preserved, despite the uncertainty and changes on the horizon.

This is a straightforward and actionable notion that we put to the test in two studies. The first study was a survey of 209 employees and their supervisors from a number of organizations that announced organizational change plans (including relocations and business expansions, reorganizations, structural or technical changes, product changes, changes in leadership, and mergers). The focus was on how effective the leadership was in stimulating employee support for the change, measured through supervisor ratings of employee behavior. As predicted, results showed that leadership was more effective in building support for change the more that leaders also communicated a vision of continuity, because a vision of continuity instilled a sense of continuity of organizational identity in employees. These effects were larger when employees experienced more uncertainty at work (as measured by employee self-ratings).

In the second study, we tested the same idea using a laboratory experiment so that we could draw conclusions about causality. 208 business school students participated in the study, and the context was potential changes in the school's curriculum. They received one of two messages allegedly from the dean of the business school. One conveyed a vision of change for the curriculum, and the other conveyed the same vision of change but also conveyed a vision of continuity of identity. Independent of which message they were exposed to, students received one of two versions of background information that suggested either low uncertainty or high uncertainty about change outcomes. We then assessed their sense of continuity of identity and their support for the change as expressed in actual behavior: help in drafting a letter to persuade other students to support the change. The results of this second study were similar to those of the first: Support for change was higher when the vision of change was accompanied by a vision of continuity, because in this case people's sense of continuity of identity was higher. Again, the effects were stronger when uncertainty about the change was higher.

The implications of this research are straightforward. In overcoming resistance to change and building support for change, leaders need to communicate an appealing vision of change *in combination with* a vision of continuity. Unless they are able to ensure people that what defines the organization's identity — “what makes us who we are” — will be preserved despite the changes, leaders may have to brace themselves for a wave of resistance.

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