

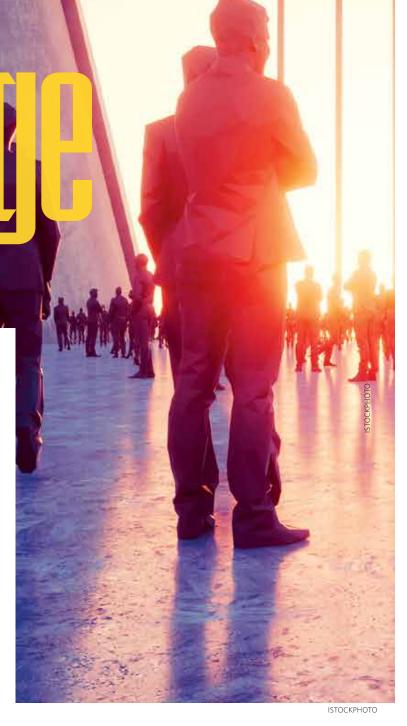
A Contrarian View on

If you want employees to embrace change, stop believing that most change initiatives fail.

BY KATE ROCKWOOD

hange is hard. This is the common understanding in corporate culture and in life. Whether chatting with a CEO about a sales strategy or a colleague about a healthy lifestyle plan, we tend to harp on the notion that altering the status quo is fraught with struggles. The subtext of these conversations is that failure is a very real possibility—maybe even a probability.

The statistic most often cited is that 70 percent of all change initiatives fail. That figure can be traced back to an influential 1993 book, Reengineering the Corporation, in which engineer Michael Hammer and consultant James Champy posited an estimate that as many as 50 to 70 percent of change efforts do not achieve their intended dramatic results. A Harvard Business Review article repeated the brutal fact that 70 percent of change initiatives fail in 2000. This not-at-all-scientific figure has been erroneously repeated countless times since. Today, it is practically corporate gospel.





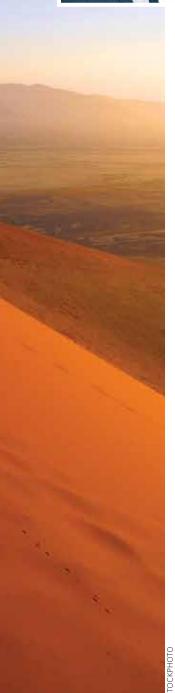
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-Nick Tasler



challenges and change objectives. Employees often are left without small pieces on which to focus. "The disconnect is that top-level leaders talk about workers' need to be agile, but the message that's conveyed to them is that management is clueless," Mr. Tasler says. "The employees who have to execute the work think, 'Every three months there's some new idea and some new joker coming in with a new system.' They have no idea what to do, so they don't do anything." That's why creating a sprint list is critical, he says.

To prove his point, Mr. Tasler points to a seminal study by psychologist Salvatore R. Maddi. Dr. Maddi followed a large group of employees at Illinois Bell as deregulation rocked the formerly unassailable company in the 1980s. While layoffs rained down and ingrained workflows evaporated, the remaining employees took two different paths.

About two-thirds focused on the big-picture chaos and were rendered incapacitated, hamstrung by worry and strife. These people developed medical problems, watched their home lives deteriorate and suffered physically and psychologically. But about a third, Dr. Maddi noted, worked right next to these poor souls but were better adjusted. That is because they focused on small steps they could take every day to do their job and help their customers. This helped them ignore the swirling turmoil.

The Bell employees who fell apart engaged in what Mr. Tasler calls worry walls: self-made barriers we construct to separate us from the uncomfortable uncertainties associated with change. By fixating on the worst possible outcome while simultaneously obsessing about the good old days, people build up a psychological wall that prevents them from seeing a future.

If an organization is embarking on a major transformation initiative, Mr. Tasler recommends that managers ask "and-then-what" questions to prevent employees from catastrophizing to the point of paralysis. By voicing their worries (e.g., "What if we lose our biggest client?") and thinking about what would happen next, workers can enter a mindset conducive to small-step actions instead of unproductive paralysis.

Executives should celebrate small victories to push the change process along, Mr. Tasler says. He points back to the recent University of Chicago studies: While participants suffered from a negativity bias, the researchers found this bias was easy to flip with the right kind of management. Simply by reminding them that most people improve with effort, researchers found that the participants more quickly noticed changes for the better.

Provide a Purpose

After framing a transformation clearly, breaking it down into manageable goals, guiding employees through their inevitable worry walls and celebrating small wins, there is one final step toward effecting successful change. Managers must imbue the process with meaning and purpose. That way, when things get tough—and they almost certainly will—people have a reason to persevere. Mr. Tasler says heroes in almost every story, from Simba in *The Lion King* to Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars*, endure a journey to a lonely and scary place. But they always adapt and emerge stronger, braver and wiser.

The same can hold true for employees, whether they are facing an organizational chart reshuffle or merger. Knowing there is a purpose beneath change is key. Time spent in the scary space—Mr. Tasler calls it the belly of the whale—drives adaptation. "And when we get out," he says, "we're ready to embrace the opportunities still ahead regardless of what we left behind." **IQ**