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Change Management Insights

How to Manage the Unknown that Comes with Constant Change

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Constant change has become a day-to-day reality for most organizations. Leaders and their teams must take on multiple changes while delivering on their quarterly and annual goals. They must also adapt to their volatile business environments, quickly adjusting goals and reprioritizing initiatives to stay competitive.

Many people struggle when faced with unanticipated changes because their past experience doesn't translate well to their new circumstances. They lack a tested map to guide them through new, complex and unknown situations.

Without familiar reference points, people can default to hasty responses, ignoring the structured decision-making process they would normally use. They either instinctively select a course of action that "feels" right or go with the first option that appears credible. Both approaches are high-risk and can lead to costly mistakes and setbacks.

The best approach to managing the unknown is to make it 'known' by quickly defining what it is, identifying options and selecting the one that will give you the best result within your organization. Asking the following four questions will do so and help you work through any unknown situation you face:

1. Is this important?

Focusing your efforts on the highest-value activities is an essential skill for managing change. Every situation can seem important based on its newness, which can trigger panic and desperate responses. They can also distract people from their work, causing confusion, delays and additional costs.

Assessing the level of importance provides context. Does this situation pose a risk to executing key strategies or honouring the company's mission? If not, delegation, delay or no response may be the best course of action to take.

2. What do I need to know?

Information leads to definition, which leads to creating options and evaluating them. Identifying the information you need to know frames the situation and starts to build perspectives about it.

Determining what information exists and what needs to be sourced is the first step to building a fact base upon which to create and test options. Answering this question may lead to new knowledge sources that can directly impact the number and types of response you have to choose from. The more options you have the more educated and confident you become.

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3. What experience can I learn from?

Tapping into existing knowledge held by others is often skipped in the interest of speed. Locating people who have insights and knowledge on similar situations is the next best thing to having it yourself.

Tapping into the experiences of internal and external resources allows you to assess risks and unforeseen effects of different responses. They also can provide advisory support in the future.

4. What works and what doesn't?

An organization's culture and capabilities influence what leaders and their teams will support or reject. They are important considerations when assessing options because what gets supported gets done.

Cultural elements such as importance of hierarchy, process versus results orientation and competitive or collaborative relations influence the effectiveness of responses to change. Considering options through these lenses will lead to a better response and execution of it.

Combining these four questions creates a simple framework for responding to new situations. It can help you move forward when the best (or any) path isn't clear. It might even become your tested map for managing the unknown.

Phil Buckley is a senior change management professional with over twenty-five years of experience enabling leaders and their teams to drive performance through change across global businesses in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Visit Phil's blog, Making Change with Confidence.

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