



Lead Teams

Handout 10

Dealing Effectively With Employees In The Neutral Zone

DEALING EFFECTIVELY WITH EMPLOYEES IN THE NEUTRAL ZONE

After the organizational change has taken place and the dust has settled, there is still a serious adjustment problem for the employees. Organisations can quickly implement change. Employees usually adjust more slowly to the change. During the Neutral Zone the employees are gradually adjusting to the organisation's change and it is critical that leaders take specific action to assist the employees in moving toward acceptance.

- **Involve Employees in Planning Implementation.** Staffs are often expected to do more with less. Front-line employees can often figure out better than anyone else how to reduce inefficiencies, errors, waste, roadblocks and unnecessary red tape, while increasing quality and client or customer satisfaction. Try to use their creativity and insights, both to achieve management goals and to help employees feel needed!
- **Clarify New Roles, Responsibilities and Performance Expectations.** Don't underestimate the sense of upheaval and confusion employees may experience when many of the old ways of functioning, which provided their sense of organizational identity, are suddenly "reinvented". If their new roles are yet to be worked out, say so and tell them how and when this will be done. The unknown is one of the greatest sources of fear.
- **When Possible, Look for Rules, Policies, Procedures, Reports and Approvals Which Can Be Eliminated.** This is really a part of organizational renewal or transformation. Think about this from the customer's or client's point of view. What could be done to make things go faster, smoother and more hassle free for those people the organization exists to serve? What temporary policies and procedures might be appropriate **until the dust settles?** Get all your staff involved in generating the answers!
- **Provide Training and Support for the Changes to Succeed.** Another tremendous source of fear is doubt about whether one can succeed in the new roles and responsibilities.
 - Line up the necessary training
 - Provide ongoing, personalized coaching
 - Specify what results you expect
 - Show patience with the **learning curve**
 - Follow-up frequently in a non-threatening manner
 - Encourage feedback from employees on how the changes are working
 - Be prepared to make needed adjustments.

- **Keep Employees engaged – Show That They Are Needed.** In most organizations this will be no problem. But in the middle of a change, if certain procedures, products or services are being discontinued, some employees may experience a temporarily lightened workload. Far from being a welcome relief, this can be excruciating to employees who are already insecure about their jobs. Plan projects and provide training, but keep them productive!

To help employees move through the stages of Transition to Beginnings and beyond, we need to appeal to the rational, practical part of their minds which can plan, solve problems, see opportunities, etc. But strong emotions form a kind of **wall** surrounding the rational part of a person and **getting through** often requires that we facilitate their **letting go** of these emotions.

Instead of imagining a brick or stone wall, think of a huge, circular, inflatable wall, too high to see over and too slippery to climb. The **air** which inflates it, is, of course, emotion. To get over this wall, the air needs to be let out carefully. If it builds up with no release of pressure, there is the risk of an explosion. On the other hand, if you **dig in** too impatiently you may pop it like a balloon! In either case, there may be a harmful, emotional outburst. You cannot, for example, just demand that employees be open with you or else!

This is why it is a good idea, especially in the weeks just following a major change, to start every meeting, group or individual, by inquiring how people feel, thereby allowing for a gradual decrease of pressure. In some cases, a skilled facilitator is recommended.

Getting employees to share their feelings is, however, another matter. Many of the feelings connected with grieving such as depression and anger, are often taken as a sign of **poor morale** or **bad attitude**. Employees may feel displaying or discussing them will open them up to punishment of some kind or even put them on the next layoff list! The key is to be an empathetic, understanding listener whom employees feel they can trust with their feelings. Remember:

“People don’t care what you believe until they believe that you care!”

“Many a man would rather you hear his story, than grant his request.”