



Mobilizing People for Change

~ Jill K. Wachholz

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Given the turbulent environments in which we operate, it's vital to understand how to best mobilize people to commit to important changes.

Just saying, "Do this" or even "Do this please" rarely produces sustained, optimum results. People may go through the motions at first, but then quickly resort back to what's comfortable and familiar. While it's fairly easy to "cut and paste" changes into documents, cutting and pasting changes into people generally requires more than a few quick clicks. Champions of change are usually not the same people as those who follow-through and implement it. "So if you don't have their buy-in, it's really going to be a long road to hoe," says Chris Musselwhite, author of Dangerous Opportunity: Making Change Work.

Best Practices for Enhancing Commitment

1. Care about People's Concerns

A new strategy. Stricter cost-cutting measures. Technological advances. When organizations undergo change—even welcome ones—a variety of feelings get stirred up, from excitement to exasperation. As a change leader, it's important to expect a variety of reactions and be willing to address them. It's also vital to be trustworthy, because people tend to follow credible people more than they follow logical plans. As a group of AVMA participants proclaimed at a recent workshop I facilitated, "They won't care how much you know 'til they know how much you care!"

How can you show you care?

- **Make yourself accessible.** Don't close your office door or bury yourself in emails – get out and talk with people face-to-face as much as possible, both one-on-one and in meetings.
- **Encourage people to discuss their reactions; listen and address their concerns.** Experiencing reluctance is natural. Perhaps people truly value the organization and just want to be sure the changes are well constructed, or maybe they're experiencing a sense of loss over something precious which may seem in jeopardy. Inadvertently, change initiators may actually promote resistance. "If people are discounted or not listened to," cautions Musselwhite, "they may become entrenched in their views." So welcome their input. "In any change project, you'd better hope you've got some people who are asking tough questions and forcing you to think through the details. Instead of trying to get rid of it, think about how you can manage it and learn from it, while at the same time build support for the eventual implementation."
- **Ask "how's it going?" during implementation.** It's common for unexpected hurdles to arise, but people are often reticent to discuss them for fear of repercussions. Use a non-intimidating, supportive tone to learn what is and isn't working and to set the stage for collaborative problem-solving. Express appreciation for people's efforts.

- **Realize you don't have to have all the answers.** It's not your job to predict the future or fix everything single-handedly yesterday. Be honest about given constraints, and together marshal resources and find the best solutions.

I recently spoke with some change leaders who said, "We had a strategy meeting but nobody spoke up—they just sat there with their arms crossed." When I asked if they had encouraged open dialogue about reactions, they said, "No, we wanted to keep it positive." The reality is that you can't leapfrog over people's feelings. Take the time to uncover concerns and people will be far more willing to roll up their sleeves.

2. Communicate effectively

When people first hear about an initiative, they often react by hoping it'll all disappear. Two-way communication is imperative to wake people up and stir them into action. While there are many important aspects to consider, some of the most critical are:

- **Convey a clear necessity to change.** Describe the rationale or "burning platform"—the factors that have prompted the change. What's expected to be gained or lost? What might occur if the status quo is maintained? Try to engage others by using stories, images, or demonstrations which are memorable, rather than relying only on statistics which hold little meaning for your audience. Prepare people for the change by informing them early. Reinforce urgency by informing them often.
- **Answer need-to-know questions.** For example:
 1. How is this change relevant to me?
 2. What will be different, and what will remain the same?
 3. How will roles and responsibilities shift?
 4. How will I be trained and equipped to succeed?
 5. How should I re-prioritize my work load?
- **Communicate a compelling vision.** Paint a picture of the future in such a way that it comes alive and makes people want to be part of it. Grab colleagues together to clarify your change project vision. (See below.) Make sure you let people know which important values that will be upheld. For example, education remains an important mission for most associations, even though it has evolved to include advances in technology. Pay less attention to choosing the perfect words, and more attention to getting the desired response—committed action. Remember, what a vision does is more important than what a vision is.

Conversation to Clarify Your Change Project Vision

1. What ideal are you/your organization seeking to attain? What do you want people to mobilize for?
2. What will it look and feel like when you arrive or succeed? Paint a vivid picture or describe key aspects of "a day in the life".
3. What core purpose & values are aligned with this vision? Why are they important (to you, others in your organization, those you serve, the community at large)?
4. How will you get there? How do you want people to work together to make the vision a reality?

- Use language that makes the change appealing. “Change” can carry negative connotations. What do you really want to mobilize people for? For progress? Greater effectiveness? Enhanced value for members? Be specific.

3. Collaborate with stakeholders

In field research I conducted at AF’s 2003 Annual Meeting, two of the top five guidelines participants cited for how to effectively lead change were about collaboration: “actively involve all people” and “conduct idea generation with all stakeholders.” Although it may take more time and effort upfront, the payoff of collaboration comes in the form of greater buy-in and follow-through.

By “collaboration”, I don’t mean going through the motions so people have the illusion of playing an important role. It’s about actually letting them shape what’s to come. For this to work, the change leader needs to believe that stakeholders are smart and be open to the valuable perspectives they bring. This doesn’t necessarily mean everyone will get their way, but that their views are respected and considered.

Review the various phases of the change process, and consider ways to engage appropriate staff, volunteers, members, or partners. How do you make sure people are on the same page? Write the page together.

For example, if there is lack of alignment on the need for the change, why not bring a cross-section of stakeholders together to conduct a thorough scan of what’s happening inside and outside the association? Look at relevant facts, trends, opportunities, and warning signs that impact your rationale.

During transitions, it’s often difficult to embrace the new without saying farewell to the old. I recently worked with an executive team that was about to have a welcoming celebration for a new leader. The problem is that they hadn’t yet said goodbye to their current leader, whom they adored and would greatly miss. We quickly put together an acknowledgement session, inviting stakeholders to express appreciation for all the leader had done.

If you’re conducting test pilots during the implementation phase, it’s wise to begin where you’re most likely to succeed. By gathering data from multiple perspectives, you’ll get a clearer sense of which area has the greatest readiness.

4. Cultivate a learning climate

One of the key motivators for today’s workers and volunteers is the ability to learn new skills. By becoming a catalyst for learning, you’ll meet individuals’ desires to grow and build momentum for the initiative. Together with your stakeholders, create an environment where learning flourishes.

- Build confidence by mining the gold from past experiences. Ask: “When have you been through a similar situation? What did you learn from that which we can apply now?”
- Demonstrate a positive, opportunity-orientation.
 - Ask “What can we learn from this change process?” Identify technical skills as well as leadership traits such as flexibility.
 - Shift problem-focused language to solution-finding language. By doing so, you’ll open minds to creative options. For example, “It’s not in the budget” becomes “How might we find the resources to accomplish this?”
- Provide relevant training, coaching, and feedback. It’s important to challenge and stretch people, but not stretch them so far that they feel overwhelmed.
- Periodically conduct debriefs to identify lessons learned. Rigorously discuss:
 1. What did we intend to happen?
 2. What actually occurred?
 3. What did we learn? What worked? What might we do differently next time?
 4. Who should we tell?
- Reward and publicize key lessons and best practices. This provides others with clear targets for their own efforts.

- Expect temporary drops in performance. This may be hard to hear, but the truth is that when people leave their comfort zones to learn something new, setbacks are common. Make it safe to discuss mistakes so people can learn from them rather than be tempted to hide them.

On Mobilizing Volunteers

Leading volunteers through a change project presents unique challenges. After all, if they don't like the new direction, they don't have to go along with it. While building trustworthy relationships and demonstrating personal integrity is important in all leadership situations, according to Musselwhite it's particularly important when working with volunteers. "Be aware of why they are involved—what they want to get and what they want to give, because their currency isn't money. It's critical that they don't feel manipulated, so be straightforward and clear about where you stand with things, and hypersensitive to the way you communicate."

The Process of Change

Current State:	<i>Where are we now?</i>
	A shared understanding of history, important values, and people/processes comprising the status quo.
Need or Disruption:	<i>What has triggered the need for something different or better?</i>
	Planned or unplanned challenges, either obvious or obscured. Data indicates the Current State is over or is no longer adequate.
Transition:	<i>What do we do in the midst of ambiguity?</i>
	A period of limbo or chaos, during which people are challenged to let go of the past, set up temporary structures, and explore new possibilities.
Vision:	<i>Where are we headed?</i>
	A picture of the desired or new Future State, developed and communicated.
Goals & Plans:	<i>How do we intend to get there?</i>
	Specific objectives and action steps outlined to attain the Vision.

CLOSE

Like traveling into unknown territory, there are many ways to make the journey through change. Look around. Are you and your change partners walking in unison toward the same destination, or scurrying about with haphazard focus? Who is leaping... sitting on the fence...or perhaps stuck in a rut? Are shoulders slouched with heads lowered, or are shoulders back, with heart and minds open? How people approach change becomes *contagious*, so keep alert to the signals being sent. "Mobilizing People for Change" requires paying attention to what's happening and why, and being intentional about how you'll progress moving forward.

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