

Bill Guertin

Change: Get On The Train, or Get Off The Tracks

Is your office or workplace resistant to change?

Some offices love the adrenaline rush of “newer”, “faster”, and “ever-changing”. In advertising agencies, new technology companies, and anyone involved in Web-based commerce, change is their life.

But for most people, change of any kind is difficult. It’s gut-wrenching because it’s, uncertain, uncomfortable, and different.

Many employees long for their lives to be comfortable, predictable, and in a certain order. Change that order, and they’re likely to chop off your hand in the process. “What do you think you’re doing?” they’ll say. “I’ve done it this way for years!”

If you’re a supervisor of any kind, I’ll bet you’ve been there, and I’ll bet it was recently.

As a team member undergoing change, you have a choice to make. Yes, I know you’re uncomfortable, but the world is going to continue to change, whether you agree with it or not.

Hopefully you have a supervisor that is supportive and helpful in the transition, but there is a simple truth to change: either get on the train, or be flattened on the tracks.

In fact, the railroad metaphor is particularly appropriate.

Back in the early 1900’s, the railroads owned the monopoly on transportation. The owners of companies like the Union Pacific, Pennsylvania, and Atchison Topeka & Santa Fe Railroads were lighting Cuban cigars with hundred-dollar bills.

They didn’t like change, either. In fact, they wanted everything to stay just as it was.

Automobiles were just coming into existence at this time, and the buzz about this new means of transportation was sweeping the country. In 1904, the first motorized trucks, called “delivery cars” by the Ford Motor Company, rolled off the assembly lines. According to the historical documents preserved by the Model T Ford Club of America, a total of 1,000 “delivery cars” were built between 1904 and 1905, selling for \$950 each.

The railroad owners were so wealthy they could have bought all of those trucks without blinking an eye. But what they mistakenly thought was that they were in the railroad business.

What they were really in was the transportation business.

Today, the American Trucking Association estimates that over 85% of all goods and services in the United States are transported by truck. And where are the railroads, the captains of industry from 100 years ago? Most of them are bankrupt today, because their leaders failed to see that change was necessary. They failed to look at the trends. And they failed to respond to those trends.

Had the railroad owners changed their thinking, today they might own a transportation empire the size of UPS, General Motors, and United Airlines combined. Instead, they're a crusty reminder of why change is truly necessary for growth.

If your group is having a difficult time with change, business expert Nido Qubein suggests that the secret to changing successfully is to make sure the change doesn't come all at once, but in planned, well-controlled steps.

The three steps, or stages, of change he suggests include:

- Softening – unlearning the old habits that have become entrenched and antiquated;
- Reshaping – the implanting of new ways of doing things that are more modern, creative, efficient, or necessary for growth; and
- Stabilization – when the new ways of doing thing have become as regular and habitual as the previous “old ways.”

Each stage has its own challenges, but each one is critical in a positive change experience, and should be followed in order. It's not right, for example, to attempt to reshape something before you've softened the group to changing the old ways.

Remember that change is going to happen; it's simply a matter of whether it will happen with you, for you, to you, or in spite of you.

If you have employees that are finding change difficult right now, share the railroad story with them. Let them know that you're not changing simply for the sake of change, but that there are good reasons behind what's being done. Communicate those reasons, and answer their questions.

It's a fact that most people fear change as a threat to their way of life, even if it's not.

And as a manager or leader, understand that as much as we'd like people to accept things right away, all new things take time to be absorbed.

The railroads learned their lesson the hard way. Fortunately, it's not too late for most of us.

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