

Coalition Building and the Change Process

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Karen is a new leader who oversees two diverse work units. One unit is administrative, while the other deals directly with customers. The collaboration between the units is palatable, but in order to increase morale and maximize profits, they need to be in much better synch with each other. Karen was bothered by this situation until she came up with a brilliant idea. In her opinion, her idea would streamline processes and make communication between departments easier. She was brimming with such enthusiasm that she could hardly wait to implement her idea. So that is what she did – implemented her idea.

The first step Karen executed was to meet with the roughly 100 team members who work with the company's customers. With great fanfare she outlined the new processes and communication structure. She vibrantly articulated how this would simplify their jobs and help them to better connect with their administrative colleagues. The silence that greeted her at the end of her presentation dumbfounded her. More than just silence, there were visible grimaces. She was in a conundrum. She shook it off and told herself that once the team got used to the new system they would love it. Karen then turned her focus to the administrative team. Certainly they would embrace her idea since it was going to save them time and paperwork. She gathered the five person administrative team and laid out her plan. Silence. Actually, more than silence, Karen received pushback regarding the prescribed changes. A dejected Karen left the meeting shaking her head with confusion as to why her great idea was met with such unanticipated rejection. She called her executive coach and began the process of determining what went wrong.

So what should Karen have done differently? The answer lies in three little words: Build a coalition. **From a workplace perspective, a coalition is a group of team members who possess the credibility or charisma to greatly influence their peers.** In the process of influencing their peers, a coalition can ease the pain and quicken the acceptance of implementing important changes. **In a nutshell, when faced with influencing a large group of team members, seek to create buy-in with a small group of people first.**

Karen possessed three of the four key ingredients needed to drive the change process: She developed a great idea; she was bursting with enthusiasm; and she had the work ethic to make things happen. The element that was missing was strategy. You see **when we are talking about major changes we need to realize that there is a strategy to change.** Further, part of the strategic planning process is to determine if a coalition should be built around the proposed changes. The strategy of whether to build a coalition or not really revolves around a series of questions pertaining to who to involve, determining the best means of driving the coalition, and the means to communicate with the coalition.

Questions & Rationale about Determining Who to Involve in a Coalition:

1. Do I need to build a coalition with *internal* stakeholders?

Rationale: Sometimes in order to enable change we need the buy-in of superiors, peers, direct reports, or others in the organization with which we have limited connection. If any or all of these groups hold the key to the successful implementation of your ideas, you will want to involve them in your coalition building plan.

2. Do I need to build a coalition with *external* stakeholders?

Rationale: If, in order to enact positive change, buy-in from people who interact with internal stakeholders is needed, then a coalition with this group may be wise. Note: external stakeholders may include customers, vendors, or strategic allies.

Questions & Rationale about Determining the Means to Create a Coalition:

1. Should a Focus Group or Facilitated Roundtable take place?

Rationale: Karen should have used her facilitative leadership skills and met with eight key customer contact team members prior to meeting with the entire group of 100. This would have allowed her to run her ideas by an influential group and address their concerns in real time. She may have adjusted her ideas or approach to the broader team based on the reaction of the small coalition. In addition, her strategy may have resulted in a coalition that carried the torch for her ideas. In turn, the coalition formed by Karen may have positively influenced their peers to at least be open-minded to the changes proposed by Karen.

2. Should casual meetings with selected individuals take place?

Rationale: In certain situations, having a one-on-one meeting with a key stakeholder allows for candid discussion of discrepancies related to the proposed changes. Adjustments to the idea may be made as needed. In the process, a key ally in the change process may be created.

3. Should a survey be crafted and distributed to internal and/or external stakeholders?

Rationale: In certain situations the questions contained in a survey can help to tee up the upcoming change. Also, the results obtained from a survey can be invaluable with regard to confirming or reframing your approach to the issue(s).

Questions & Rationale regarding Follow Up Communication with a Coalition:

1. Should I communicate success milestones face-to-face?

Rationale: There is a hierarchy to communication and in it face-to-face interaction reigns supreme. It allows leaders to tap in to the body language and tone of voice of meeting participants. In other words, we are exposed to the maximum amount of communication possible when meeting with people in person.

2. Should I communicate success milestones and general information via email?

Rationale: If the coalition desires fast feedback with no required meeting commitment then email is the ticket. Tip: be certain to run your correspondence by a collaborative ally to ensure that your communiqué reads in the manner you intend.

3. Should I hold regular teleconferences in order to share follow up information?

Rationale: While not as personal as face-to-face communication, a teleconference is typically more kind to time constraints that coalition members may experience.

Note: Follow up with coalition members is important because it positively reinforces their participation, sets the stage for their continued support, and increases the odds that they will support new ideas that you present in the future.

Bottom Line: When considering a significant operational change think strategically about how the initiative will be introduced. If appropriate, build a coalition of support around your ideas and proposed actions. Nurture the coalition with positive feedback and solid communication after the roll-out. The result will be increased acceptance with regard to change, and broader support that will enable the changes to stick.

Works Cited

Van Dyke, Doug. "Coalition Building and the Change Process." *Leadership Simplified*. N.p., June 2012.
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