Managing a successful restructuring

Most employees are able to remain flexible when new products, services or processes are introduced but struggle when a major organizational change, such as a restructuring or merger, is announced. Fear of the unknown makes everyone anxious but some people react with negative behaviors such as angry outbursts, apathy, negativity, lack of cooperation, resistance and even sabotage. Unless managed effectively, these behaviors can spread, damaging productivity and morale and hindering the transitional process.

Preparing for change

Dealing with the many emotions and behaviors that may arise as a result of a significant organizational change will be easier if you know how each person on your team is likely to react. However, the most important reactions to deal with are your own. You may not personally like or approve of the changes but employees need to see you being optimistic and focusing on the opportunities the change will bring. Any negativity on your part will increase employee resistance and further hurt morale and productivity.

Managing change

Some major organizational changes, like restructurings, may have resulted in layoffs or job changes, so asking employees to embrace the process may not be realistic. However, you can help their teams cope and remain productive through the process with support and reassurance, openness and honesty, clarity and discussion.

To do this, try the following:

- **Talk and listen to as many of your staff as you can**. Don't disregard their feelings. Give them the chance to vent their frustrations, anxieties, grief, and anger.

- **Give people time to adjust**. Be prepared for productivity to dip and stress to increase during the transition process.

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- **Communicate.** Poor or delayed communication causes the rumor mill to go into overdrive and it becomes harder for managers to undo the misconceptions and regain control of the process. Don't worry about knowing all the details, your staff will initially want to know the rationale behind the changes and how it will affect them.

- **Focus your people on short-term objectives, deadlines and assignments**. Long-term strategies can come later.

- **Make sure your team members are informed of the resources available to them**, including those through their Employee and Family Assistance Program.

Coping with change

Restructurings are extremely stressful for everyone, but especially for managers who are often caught between the needs of senior management and those of their team. It is therefore important for team leaders to find healthy ways to remain resilient.

Try the following:

- **Have a support system.** Getting through tough times, professionally and personally, is easier when you have people around you with whom you can share feelings, discuss problems and receive advice.

- **Find healthy ways to deal with stress**. Avoid over use of alcohol, food, nicotine or other substances. Instead, go to the gym, take a walk, meditate, have a massage or simply take some time to read a book or listen to music.

- **Take care of yourself.** A healthy diet, regular exercise, plenty of sleep and time for relaxation and fun helps keep both your mind and body ready to deal with stressful situations and events.

- **Continue doing what you do best**. Organizational changes are disruptive, distracting and draining. Try to remain focused on your job and the goals of your team.

- **Seek professional help if you are having difficulty coping with change**. Don't be afraid to ask for help. Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can provide you with resources and support.

Lastly, stay positive. Focus on the advantages of the change and transition could provide for both your and members of your team.

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Workplace strategies for positive mental health

Increasing workloads, rapid technological change, shifting market demands and lack of work-life balance are taking a psychological toll on employees – and a financial toll on organizations. Mental health issues cost the U.S. employers more than $23 billion annually. However, those costs are much higher when hidden costs related to presenteeism (workers who are on the job but not functioning well because of physical or mental issues), replacement of resources and personnel, overtime and the effects on the morale of other team members are factored in.

Mental health issues are the leading cause of short and long-term disability in North America. However, it's not only North American companies that are being affected. The World Health Organization has stated that by 2020, depression will be the leading cause of disability worldwide.

The impact of employee mental health on organizational success is clear. But what can organizations and managers do to support the psychological health of their people and the economic health of their business?

Supporting mental health
One North American study found that 80 percent of workers experience stress on the job and 30 percent feel extreme stress. More disturbing is the fact that 26 percent feel they are often burned out. For businesses, employee stress and burnout not only result in increased absenteeism and disability leaves, but also increased errors, accidents, interpersonal conflicts, and benefit costs as well as decreased productivity, innovation and customer service.

What exactly is causing this stress? According to one U.S. study, 46 percent of respondents cited workload, 29 percent blamed interpersonal issues, 20 percent said juggling work and personal responsibilities were the cause of their stress and six percent worried about job security. Approximately half said they needed help managing their stress and 42 percent felt their coworkers needed help.

As a result, more and more organizations are focusing on creating workplaces that support the psychological health of employees.

Psychologically healthy workplaces
A psychologically healthy workplace has many components, including:

- Fosters trust in managers, supervisors and senior management
- Provides employees at all levels with a clear understanding of the organization's vision and strategy
- Clearly defines employees' duties and responsibilities
- Allows people to voice their opinions on subjects that concern them
- Recognizes good work and service
- Finds ways to have fun as a team
- Manages workloads
- Promotes work-life balance
- Encourages respectful behaviors

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- Has conflict resolution practices in place
- Provides professional training and learning opportunities
- Has workplace programs in place to help reduce the stigma of mental health issues
- Provides resources, such as an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), for those seeking help

How many of these does your workplace have in place?

Supporting employees

There is no blueprint for creating a psychologically healthy workplace because every workplace is different. The first step for any organization or manager is to understand their employees – the demographics, job demands, and professional and personal stresses – and then find unique and innovative ways to support them. One company that has long led the way in creating a psychologically healthy workplace is Microsoft. Aside from offering flexible hours and great health benefits, they provide free gym memberships, a volunteer and gift-matching program. Also their head office in the Seattle area provides a free shuttle service (with Wi-Fi) to transport people to and from work, environmentally sustainable on-site cafes and kitchens as well as a spa, soccer field, bank, dry-cleaning service, salon, retail shops, and 11 restaurants.

Most organizations don't have the resources or space to provide such extensive services but even small initiatives such as flexible hours or telework can demonstrate an organization's concern for the well-being of its people. Major employers including Google, Nike, and The New York Times give their employees access to nap rooms in order to help them rest or relax during a busy or stressful day.

While workplace programs are important, managers who know what to do when employees are in distress are the real key to any successful workplace mental health strategy.

The role of managers

Forty-four percent of managers have had no training on how to manage employees with mental health issues. Managers want and need, more workplace training in order to bridge this gap.

This training should include:

- Identifying conflicts and distress in the workplace
- Conflict resolution skills
- Recognizing what behaviors contribute to a toxic environment
- Encouraging appropriate and respectful workplace conduct (no raised voices, ridiculing others, bullying or intimidation)
- Understanding where to direct employees for further support and information

Employee health is organizational health

Both organizations and their managers need to remain adaptable and flexible in maintaining a psychologically healthy workplace. North America has a multi-generational and culturally diverse workforce and a one-size-fits-all approach to organizational health and productivity no longer works. Programs must be continually assessed and adjusted to meet changing demographics and needs.

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