



# Successfully Leading Change and Managing Disruption

**With a People-First Lens**

## **Contact Us**

Phone: 780-945-6134

Email: [info@wellnessworkscanada.ca](mailto:info@wellnessworkscanada.ca)

Scotia Place, 10060 Jasper Ave

Suite 2020 Tower 1

Edmonton, Alberta T5J 3R8

Change is inescapable for organizations and the way it is approached will play a major role in its success. As the pandemic has shown, change can wreak havoc on employee mental health and the company's overall health and performance if not managed well. This resource breaks down what change and disruption is and what is needed to drive success for all stakeholders involved.

### **Defining Change and Disruption**

Change is the process of carrying an organization through a path to reach a desired outcome while also providing support and dealing with any setbacks that may arise so that the people and the organization can thrive. Change can come in two forms, either internal or external and the difference is mostly regarding how much control you have. External changes involve driving forces that shape change such as environmental, social, economic, and political factors. An example here is a global pandemic. Internal changes, which you typically have more control over, are changes that happen within the organization, for example, the implementation of a health and performance strategy. For leaders, the management and execution of change is extremely important as it can influence employees health and performance and overall outcomes of the organization.

For change to occur, there needs to be a successful combination of management and leadership. Change management consists of the processes and tools embedded in the overarching plan to minimize any issues that may arise with the

change. While change management and a plan for change is needed, change leadership is the real driving force. It involves empowerment of individuals to bring about change while bringing everyone's energy towards the same goals. It includes all of the dimensions of effective leadership practice which are vision, values, strategy, empowerment, and motivation and inspiration<sup>1</sup>. Additionally, something not always mentioned, but of extreme importance, is that leaders also need to lead with a people-first lens. A healthy, successful change requires effort and engagement of numerous diverse individuals<sup>2</sup>. This includes consideration of how employees will be affected by the change and how they are feeling throughout the change process.

It is important to keep in mind that not every change can be planned. There are many instances where your team or organization may undergo disruption that can throw employees for a loop. For example, the sudden call for work from home at the beginning of the pandemic. Luckily, there are many ways to manage these changes and it still includes change leadership and management.

## 1. Create a Relatable, Inspiring Vision or Guiding Principles *with* Employees

**a. Planned Change:** Use a people-first lens and engage people in the process to ensure you develop a vision and/or guiding principles that resonate with employees. This may include conducting focus groups, surveys and/or interviews. Ensure that your vision and/or guiding principles for change is meaningful, inspiring and ethical<sup>3</sup> and it aligns with the values of your employees and the organization.

**Unplanned Disruption:** Try to be as clear as possible about the disruption and how it will affect employees. Although not all answers may be known, try to communicate to the best of your ability. Provide your team with mental health support. For example, distribute resources and information on how to properly use the resources. Additionally, try to create a psychologically safe environment. This can occur by opening up, starting conversations and asking employees what they need from you. Additionally, foster social connection within the workplace if possible. Even just creating an online channel to share ideas about something not work related can make employees feel connected.

**b.** It can be helpful if the vision creates a sense of urgency<sup>4</sup> to convey importance. Make sure the end goal is and desired outcomes are clear.



- i. Include and explain the what and why aspects of the change<sup>5</sup> and how it will benefit the organization as well as the employees.
- ii. Focus on the change goals<sup>6</sup> and process.
  1. Plan the change effort to be incremental to allow for feedback from employees along with enough time to make the changes.
  2. Communicate the information at the right time and often enough. Often change projects are under communicated resulting in employees making up their own stories about what is happening. Make sure leaders walk the talk and use these tips provided by Kotter<sup>7</sup>;
    - a. “Keep your messages simple and jargon-free
    - b. Use metaphors and analogies to paint a vivid picture for employees
    - c. Repeat, repeat, repeat – ideas only sink in after they have been heard many times
    - d. Explain seeming inconsistencies – if you don not, it undermines credibility
    - e. Allow for constant feedback”
- iii. Give employees the opportunity to provide feedback as much as possible and make sure they feel heard.
  1. This could include conducting town halls with a safe environment for anyone to ask questions or make suggestions, conducting surveys or having anonymous suggestion boxes while communicating back what you heard and what you will be doing about the suggestions. It may even include conducting casual conversations to gauge how employees are feeling.

**\*Remember: Planned change may be exciting for those who are doing it but it could be seen as threatening to those who are most affected or who do not understand why it needs to happen. Therefore, it is important to include all levels of the organization and communicate the change effectively.**

## 2. Motivate, Empower and Inspire Employees

- a.** Continue to engage, engage and engage employees in all phases of change, not just the execution phase.
  - i. Employees who are engaged and invested in the change are more likely to contribute. Refer to 1(iii) for examples on how to engage employees.
- b.** Celebrate short term wins.
  - i. This creates a positive atmosphere for the organization.
  - ii. Motivates employees to continue the change and can have positive implications for the overall change strategy.
  - iii. Short-term celebrations can result in positive emotions that may lead to an elevation in individual performance during the time of change.
  - iv. Celebrations can also buffer the negative effects of change by enhancing resiliency<sup>8</sup>.
- c.** Recognize individual success to increase motivation.
  - i. Recognition can be informal, occurring during weekly meetings or in weekly emails and can come from leaders or peers.
  - ii. Formalizing recognition so there is consistency and fairness in the reward system can also help to celebrate and recognize success.

## 3. Focus on an Emergent Strategy Perspective to Continue the Change

- a.** Focus on the continuation of the change outcomes once the movement is over.
  - i. Ensure that there are policies to continue the movement to warrant future success.
  - ii. During onboarding, make it routine to inform new employees of new policies, processes or systems.
- b.** Evaluate, innovate and modify as needed. Use the perspective of emergent strategy to always be open to innovate and improve. Sharing this perspective, gain insight from multiple levels of the organization.
  - i. You may wish to use a SOAR methodology to identify strengths, opportunities, aspirations and results<sup>9</sup>.
  - ii. Create a psychologically safe environment when soliciting feedback so that employees feel safe to contribute, be vulnerable, or even challenge current processes<sup>10</sup>.
  - iii. Continue to engage employees and collect feedback to make sure that the initiative remains successful. For example, once the change is solidified in the organization, semi-annual feedback from employees will be useful to determine if the outcomes are still working for the organization and what changes could be made to continually improve.

These three steps will guide you to successfully lead your organization through change and disruption. The key concept to remember is that you need to include individuals from all levels of the organization throughout the entire change process with psychological safety. Feedback and communication are also essential for successful change.

## Quick Tips to Drive Successful Change

Consider the following questions at every stage of the change process to use a People-First Lens.

- How will this change impact employee well-being?
  - Stress levels? Physical health? Psychological health and safety?
- Will this impact employees' ability to do their job?
  - Workload? Productivity? Engagement?
- How will this impact our organization's success?
- How can we support employees through the change process to support our people's and the organization's success?

Have any questions? Want more support? We are here to help! Email us at [info@wellnessworkscanada.ca](mailto:info@wellnessworkscanada.ca)

Looking for support for your organization?

Check out the following resources available at [resources.wellnessworkscanada.ca](https://resources.wellnessworkscanada.ca)

- **Evidence Informed Articles**
- **Loads of Resources**
- **Workplace Training** on topics including:
  - Resilience
  - Thriving Through Disruption
  - Social Connection
  - Mental Health First Aid
  - Improving Productivity Through Health
  - And more!

Thank you to Eve Olson for contributions to this resource.

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