

## Harness Momentum for Transformational Change

by Pamela Fay

Have you ever seen an inconsiderate motorist cut off an 18-wheeler and watch the truck driver try to slow down? Usually the maneuver is accompanied by an angry blast of an air horn and, you imagine, some fairly strident language, as the trucker tries, unsuccessfully, to make a seamless transition to a lower gear. It's not so easy to stop a truck.

Change – the kind that transforms a traditional brick-and-mortar into an e-business – is particularly challenging for large firms. Like an 18-wheeler, large companies find it difficult to turn on a dime. Resistance takes on a life of its own, building momentum that overtakes change initiatives. Just because change is a good idea, does not mean that it will be embraced. Change is, in fact, loss of the familiar.

Why is it particularly difficult for large companies to change? The problem may lie in the unstoppable momentum created by large companies. However, the solution may be there as well.

### **The momentum of large companies.**

Organizations don't change; people do. If this is true, it should be easier to launch a change initiative in a 500-person firm than a 5,000-person firm. Yet, large groups of mobilized employees have successfully transformed companies like Charles Schwab, which migrated from a traditional discount to online brokerage business, by leveraging unstoppable momentum.

Good change strategies rally tremendous support. Large companies create armies of change agents that push change across the organization. The sheer size of the organization produces as many informal leaders as sanctioned ones. These informal leaders have tremendous influence, generating a groundswell of support through the exponential power of their networks. Simply put, it's the "they tell two people" method to building momentum.

Companies that undergo successful transformation focus as much on process as they do on outcome. In other words, they reward effort, learning and continuous improvement to create a culture of innovation – one that embraces and leverages change. Small successes create the climate for larger ones, each building upon the other as change spreads rapidly through the firm.

Momentum can cause a large firm to stay the course even as the ground shifts beneath them. However, it can also be used to mobilize groups of employees to support transformational change. Managers can leverage company momentum to engage employees and help them understand how to succeed in the new environment. Here's how:

### **Initiating conversation.**

Absent real information, the rumor mill of a large organization is relentless. Once rumors gather momentum, no elementary mass communication effort will stop them. Management may be in such a hurry to meet real or imagined deadlines that they do not want to invest the time required to talk to employees. So what happens? Employees make up the answers and productivity suffers. The cure is more costly than the prevention.

To avoid approaching communication from a defensive stance, make it a process, not an event. Managers cannot bat information over the fence and watch the runners come home. Rational arguments focus on positive outcomes but do not create the change imperative since they leave people out of the process. Employees want to understand what change means. This requires that they participate in conversation rather than be talked *at*.

Communicate with employees face-to-face in small, intimate groups. Approach communication early on and with clear messages, not hype. How can management know that they are communicating, rather than hyping, a change initiative? When the message is met with resistance, they will know that communication is working. Management should anticipate and even welcome honest resistance. It helps them understand the impact of the change and how to help people through it.

### **Creating buy-in.**

There is more to creating buy-in than simply delivering a message. Silence should not be taken for agreement. It may mean, instead, that the audience is in shock. Thinking, reasoning, independent humans want to have a voice. If they do not, they experience a lack of control. This is especially problematic in large companies where employees feel that their vote doesn't count.

Real buy-in is the result of active involvement that lets people believe that they are a part of the decision and responsible for the outcomes. We have only to examine the U.S. Presidential Election 2000 to see that this is the case. The public quickly grew weary of the spin, and had little tolerance for the inefficiency of Florida's manual recount. All were delighted, however, to realize that individual votes *do* count and few were willing to circumvent any process that honors this tenet, regardless of which candidate wins.

Employees, too, want to trust that fair decisions are being made. Trust is key to effective buy-in. It is created in an environment that encourages honesty and treats opinions with respect. Inside of a trusted environment, employees are more willing to share what they know, even when they disagree with a particular decision. Continental Airlines created that type of environment when it successfully emerged from its second bankruptcy in the 1990s.

### **Demonstrating success.**

Management may exhibit evangelical zeal around a change initiative. Employees, however, recognize a sales job for what it is – *The Emperor's New Clothes*. Many change initiatives promise benefits that may or may not materialize. *The Emperor's New Clothes* effect is intensified when communications are cloaked in meaningless clichés and hyperbole. With little substantive information, employee concerns spread through a large firm like wildfire in a dense forest.

Truly effective communications address issues with actionable strategies. Employees may be concerned, for example, about not having the skills they need to perform in the future. This can be addressed by building company-provided and employee-driven training requirements into new evaluation measures. Clear evaluation criteria tell employees not only what is expected, but they also provide more ways to measure success.

Employees know how to succeed playing the game the old way. They are not quite sure what to do when the playbook is tossed out the window. *What are the rules? Who wins?* Transformational change is facilitated when employees understand the new guidelines and what really counts at the end of the day. They *will* spread the word and create momentum.

Harness momentum to initiate conversation, create buy-in, and demonstrate success and a large company can support dramatic transformational change as well as any small company.