

Managing change often about managing fear

By IAN HARVEY

It's not change that disrupts workplaces, attendees at the **HRPA** 2016 Conference in Toronto heard during an early bird breakout session. It's the resolute fear which comes with it.

Motivational speaker Denise Ryan peppered the room with a high energy, interactive presentation around how to conquer those fears, both at the management of change level and as employees. She noted there are several proven steps and processes which can help soothe those fears and embrace change.

In fact, Ryan said, based on her experiences, accepting change and learning to adapt have become the starting points of some of the best moments in her life.

"People don't like change," she said. "We know that. Some 86 per cent of people in one survey said they felt stress from change on the job and said they needed help.

"Interestingly, some 42 per cent said they were fine but their co-workers needed help. And 14 per cent said change had made

them feel like striking co-workers — and that's only the ones who admitted it."

Today's workplaces have become more stressful in some aspects, she said, simply because of the way work itself is changing.

Sometimes that change and stress creeps up unnoticed. Open offices are much more the norm and collaboration is the buzzword of the day, though there is growing evidence for being able to shut out the world and dive into the required work without interruptions.

"Cal Newport has a great new book on this called *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World* and I highly recommended it," she said. "Sometimes we do need to do deep work."

Other changes are suddenly thrust upon the staff, she said, such as layoffs during a downsizing or the announcement of a merger or company sale. Human resources professionals are most often at the heart of change management, she said, and it's not always a comfortable place.

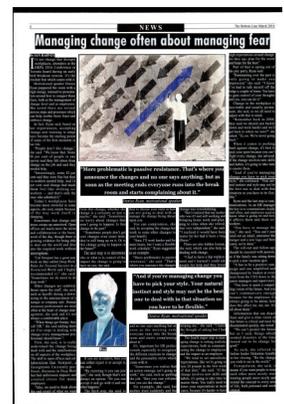
"When things get bumpy, they call HR," she said adding there are five steps in dealing with change every management professional should know."

First, she said, is to really understand the change being dealt with and the ramifications on all aspects of the workplace. The shift to open offices and collaboration that Newport, a Georgetown University professor, discusses in *Deep Work* has had unforeseen impacts and created stress for many employees.

"Also, we need to think about the end result of what we want from this change, whether the change is a certainty or just a maybe," she said. "Sometimes we worry about changes that aren't going to happen. Is this change in the past?"

"Sometimes people don't get over changes even years later, they're still hung up on it. Or is this change going to happen in the future?"

The next step is to determine who or what is in control of the impact the change is going to have on you, she said.



If you are in control, then you can either reject it or accept it, she said.

“By rejecting it you can just quit,” she said, though that’s not always an option. “Or you can accept it and go with it and see what happens.”

The third step, she said, is *then* to choose your style in how you are going to deal with or manage the change being thrust upon you.

You can compromise, she said, by accepting the change but work in some other changes to your benefit.

“Sure, I’ll work harder and for more hours, but I want a flexible work schedule,” Ryan suggested as an example.

“More problematic is passive resistance,” she said. “That’s where you announce the changes and no one says anything but as soon as the meeting ends everyone runs into the break room and starts complaining about it.”

It’s important for HR professionals especially to recognize the different reactions to change and the personality styles which come with it.

“Sometimes you realize that an action strategy isn’t going to work,” she said, such as quitting the job. “But you can reframe how you see the change.”

For example, she said, her mother died suddenly and the change was overwhelming.

“But I realized that my mother who was 65 and still working and bringing home work and planning to relax when she retired, was very independent,” she said. “I realized it would have been worse for her had it been a long illness.”

There are also hidden lessons, she said, which can also help in

dealing with change.

“I had to have a hip replacement and I learned I could ask people for help and they loved helping me,” she said. “I hated the thought of asking but I had to.”

The fourth major step in managing change is setting realistic expectations, both in communicating the change to employees and the impact as an employee.

“We tend to set unrealistic expectations, like we’re going to lose 20 pounds in the first week of that diet,” she said. “If the change involves new skills and habits, it’s going to take time to master them. You really need to lower your expectations in most cases, because it’s harder to have high expectations around change. As they say, plan for the worst and hope for the best.”

Part of that is opting out of the pity party, Ryan said.

“Ruminating over the past is only going to make you depressed,” she said. “I know I’ve had to talk myself off the ledge a couple of times. You have to gain control of your thoughts and yes, you can do it.”

Change in the workplace is inevitable and usually permanent, she said, so we all need to adjust with that in mind.

“Remember back in 2008, they said we should just buckle down and work harder and we’d get back to where we were?” she asked. “Er, no. We’re never going back.”

When it comes to pushing back against change, it’s best to pick your spots because you can’t fight every change, she advised. If the change involves new skills and habits, it’s going to take time to master them.

“And if you’re managing change you have to pick your

style,” she continued. “Your natural instinct and style may not be the best one to deal with that situation so you have to be flexible.”

Ryan said the last step is communications. As an HR manager the key is to communicate clearly and often, and employees need to know what is going on and how it affects them and their co-workers.

“You have to manage the fear,” she said. “You can’t just send out an email, announce the merger and a new logo and then yawn, we’re done.”

The roll-out and follow-ups should be executed with passion, as if the family was sitting down to pick a new vacation spot.

“It has to be a positive campaign and one amplified and championed by leaders at every level from the CEO down to the junior managers and supervisors.

“You have to paint a compelling vision of the future. And you can’t communicate enough because for the employees it’s always going to be about, how does this affect me, me, me. It’s all about them.”

Information that can dispel fears and give a clear vision of that future is critical and must be disseminated quickly, she noted.

“We can’t predict the future but as I said, things which seemed disasters at the time turned out to be change for good.”

As such, she referred to Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi in her closing: “Be the change you wish to see in the world.”

Extrapolated, she said, it means if you want people to treat each other more nicely start treating people more nicely and extend the concept to every area of life, both personal and work related.



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