7 mistakes leaders make when introducing change

How to break from the pack and navigate your own successful path

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7 mistakes leaders make when introducing change...

...and the actions you can take to avoid them

The road to good intentions is paved with hell—especially when you try to influence people to join you on a change journey.

Face it. Your change effort could become road kill. Many employees are confused, angry or in denial about the change. Others you’re trying to convince don’t report to you. And they didn’t sign up to re-learn something they already know how to do from someone who isn’t their boss.

What do you do? You must steer clear of the seven most common mistakes around influencing people to change.

Instead, you need to get on a clear, credible path …without the drama, delays, and distress so often associated with change.

**Executive summary: 7 common mistakes around change**

Based on Connect’s experience with change and change initiatives, leaders often make these mistakes.

*Mistake #1: Introduce the change in isolation*…without putting it in context and painting a positive vision for the future.

*Mistake #2: Focus on facts*…either ignoring or discounting emotional issues.

*Mistake #3: Treat everyone equally*…without recognizing the different impact on the various stakeholders, as well as their diverse interests.

*Mistake #4: Tell and sell*…rather than listen and then make a clear, compelling and easy-to-comprehend “ask.”

*Mistake #5: Edit—and re-edit—your words*…instead of getting out and spending more time with employees in informal exchanges.

*Mistake #6: Discount details*….not recognizing that the finer points add up.

*Mistake #7: Keep moving*…without taking a pause to acknowledge and celebrate the milestones you reach along the way.
What should you do to avoid these mistakes? Here are Connect's points of view and some suggested actions.

**Mistake #1: Introduce the change in isolation.**

*Instead, add context and an inspiring vision.*

By linking your change messages to your business strategy, you connect the dots. Otherwise, people may think you're making a random request—the change du jour. You need to show that the change is a business critical imperative.

Also be sure to describe where you're going and why the journey will be worth it. Be positive, painting a picture that looks appealing and intriguing. Don't try to motivate with fear as that will cause people to switch to analysis/paralysis mode, rather than move into action.

Don't worry if you don't have all the facts. It's better that you fill the information void than provide an opening for people to come up with their own stories, interpretations and speculations.

Once employees start to understand the rationale and put things into context, they can start to relate the change to their daily job. They now know the importance to them, their department, their customers, and the company.

If people’s business acumen is low, look for opportunities to bolster it in the context of the change. This will help them better understand the reasons for the change.

Remember, we live in a snack culture…so make your messages bite size.

**Mistake #2: Focus on facts only.**

*Instead, speak to both the emotional mind and rational mind that co-exist in each of our heads.*

According to neuroscience, which is the scientific study of the nervous system, each of us has internal conflicts within our brain—between the emotional mind and the rational mind. The rational mind is often ready to consider adopting change, while the emotional mind generally prefers staying with the status quo. This internal conflict makes change hard, whether you consider yourself a change junkie or change averse.

So in addition to facts, acknowledge emotions. Make a point to label them, such as fear, frustration or pain.

Show people the problem. Don’t just tell them about it. For instance, give warehouse tours where employees can see products that have been tagged during the last five annual inventories. Even if these old products aren't coated in dust, the five stickers on the boxes are proof that inventory is aging and needs to turn over.
Also, talk about the change in smaller chunks to make it less scary. If people can believe they can take baby steps on the journey, they’ll start to feel a sense of accomplishment and be willing to continue.

**Mistake #3: Treat everyone equally.**

**Instead, recognize differences.**

The change will have different impacts on the diverse stakeholders. Furthermore, interest levels vary by individuals. Embrace those differences by tailoring messages to address the interests and needs of your key stakeholders. Then figure out the best way—and places—to connect with them. One size communication does not fit all.

In Connect’s experience, people tend to treat everyone equally for one of two reasons. Either it’s easier and faster to communicate the same to everyone. Or, they have adopted the practice some experts advocate in this open environment in which we now work: Everyone has access to the same information so why bother to segment?

Yet it is still necessary to tailor messages. People are so overloaded with information and job duties these days that they’re likely to tune out unless they quickly recognize what’s in it for them to pay attention now. So the messages need to resonate to their needs and explain the WIIFM (what’s in it for me).

**Mistake #4: Tell and sell.**

**Instead, listen and make a clear, compelling, easy-to-comprehend “ask.”**

We’re dealing with information overload and higher levels of complexity in an always connected, time-starved work environment. So even when the information coming at us is clear, we often don’t take the time to receive and decipher it accurately.

As a result, we misunderstand, miss handoffs and have to spend valuable time trying to get projects and relationships back on track.

As a leader, by listening first, you can gain insights, ideas and good will from your various stakeholders. As a result, you’ll be better positioned to increase your credibility and also craft a clearer, more compelling and easier-to-comprehend “ask” to your overloaded stakeholders.

By practicing inquiry and advocacy, you’re also better positioned to cut through the clutter to get people to notice your request to do something differently.
Mistake #5: Edit—and re-edit—words carefully for printed prose.

*Instead, focus more on informal exchanges and talking your walk.*

As the saying goes, actions speak louder than words—especially words in an email or other written message that people may skim, if they even bother to review it.

When you talk informally with people, you'll convey your passion about your change initiative with your voice and gestures. You'll make a stronger emotional connection than you will with words on a computer screen, bulletin board or piece of paper. And you'll be able to engage people in a conversation.

So take time to make sure your words and actions match, and you're practicing what you preach about the change initiative. This includes how you're spending your time, budget and other resources. Do consider what you want to say in informal settings yet don't become so preoccupied with self-editing that you don't listen to or observe others.

Mistake #6: Discount details.

*Instead, recognize that the fine points add up and deal with them.*

Errors, inaccuracies or inconsistencies can haunt you. People will think the change you're introducing is not ready for prime time and use it as an excuse to avoid getting on board.

Or, they'll talk behind your back and either intentionally or accidentally sabotage your efforts.

So take time to plan and make sure you've covering all the details and get support as needed. For example, if you're leading the initiative in addition to doing your day job, be sure you have a strong project manager in the trenches as well as credible wingmen surveying the landscape. That way you can have confidence that you're dealing with the devil in the details.

Mistake #7: Keep moving.

*Instead, pause to acknowledge and celebrate the milestones you reach along the way.*

Recognition is one of the best—and easiest—tools for motivating people. When you take a few moments to recognize positive acts, you realize several benefits. For instance, you rally everyone around the action and behavior you're striving for, which reinforces that behavior. You also give hope, optimism and confidence that you and the team—immediate and extended—will soon achieve more successes, including more significant wins.

So take time to give positive feedback, recognize the milestones you've hit, and celebrate successes, however tiny or big. This acknowledgement provides positive reinforcement that you're on the right path to achieving success.
What now?

By taking steps to avoid the seven mistakes described here, you improve your chances of successfully reaching your change goals. You also will increase your odds for success by having a sound change strategy, a comprehensive project plan, a strong team, other influence tactics and oh yes, outside expert assistance….from Liz Guthridge and Connect. (For more information, keep reading—or skimming.)

Keep in mind that well-planned and executed communication and involvement strategies can’t save a flawed change initiative. However, the absence of good communication and involvement can put any change initiative at risk and on the road to failure.

So what’s my “ask”—my call to action—for you?

If you found value in this report, please:

1. Forward the report to others who could benefit.

2. Contact me at liz.guthridge@connectconsultinggroup.com or 510.527.1213. Take advantage of my no cost, no obligation conversation about your change challenge and how you can get on a clear and credible path to change. We’ll explore your current situation, challenges and opportunities.

   We also can review Connect’s Change Playbook. It’s designed to help leaders develop change champions inside their organizations. You’ll improve your change skills, while also developing go-to change leaders who can make sure the change sticks.

Connect’s Change Playbook serves as a change immersion program with personalized support, expert guidance, and other tested devices to keep you moving forward on the path to change while also building greater change capabilities among your team. We can discuss if it’s the right fit for you and your organization.

Liz Guthridge, Connect’s founder, is a seasoned change coach and consultant. She has years of experience turning change initiatives from exercises in frustration to success stories.

To find out more and set up your session, call Liz at 510.527.1213 or e-mail her at liz.guthridge@connectconsultinggroup.com.

For more information:

To find out more about Liz and Connect, including the clients we serve, case studies and articles and other free stuff, visit our website at www.connectconsultinggroup.com.

To take advantage of the no-cost, no obligation consultation, either email Liz at liz.guthridge@connectconsultinggroup.com or call her at 510.527.1213.