

Six ways managers can support employees through change

By Andrea Bassett

McKinsey research indicates that “70 percent of change programs fail to achieve their goals, largely due to employee resistance and lack of management support.”ⁱ

That means as a manager, you and your team can make or break a change project. This article focuses on six communication methods that help managers support their teams through change, even if the change management plan isn't perfect. And unless today is your first day at work, you know there's no such thing as perfect change management!

Fortunately, what's in your control is how you communicate with your staff and bosses. Being open, direct and kind sets the stage for success, even in imperfect scenarios. Keep reading for tips on how to do just that, featuring some useful phrases from or modified from Meryl Runion's book, *Perfect Phrases for Managers and Supervisors*.

Six ways managers can support employees through change**1. Support the change in the best way possible**

Some changes you won't like but as a manager, your job is to support the change without giving your team or bosses mixed messages. That doesn't mean lying; it means figuring out what you can say that *is* true.

With your team, you can say:

- Management has decided to make this change, and as part of the management team, I support it.
- I understand your frustration. Let me explain why this change is necessary.
- I know this is difficult. This is what was decided, and this is what we're going to do.

To your boss, you can say:

- There are some things I need to tell you about how this change is perceived that's affecting the implementation.
- I don't want you to be blindsided, so I'd like to give you a heads-up about trends I see.

2. Communicate, communicate, communicate, communicate, communicate

Prosci, a change management research and training organization, says that employees need to hear key messages about a change five to seven times.ⁱⁱ From you, their direct manager, they want to hear about how the change affects them, why it's happening, what's in it for them and why they should get on board. Remember that two-way communication—also known as talking—is essential because it allows employees to ask questions and feel heard.

3. Address resistance to change

Resistance to change is normal—even for managers—and everyone knows it. Instead of pretending it doesn't exist, address it head on with neutral language.

Helpful phrases for team meetings:

- Resisting change is normal! We all do it to some degree, even me. My goal is not to defeat resistance. My goal is to help us all move through the resistance, accept this change and become more productive as a result.
- I know some of you are resisting this change and I understand that. We must implement this change and I need you all behind it. How can we do that?

Sometimes an employee says everything is fine, but you know that's not the case. This quiet resistance can be more difficult for managers to deal with than the boisterous kind. Take your quiet resister aside for a firm yet kind conversation.

Diffuse hidden resistance with this:

- When I asked you about this, you said everything was fine but when you go back to work, it's obvious things aren't fine for you. What's going on?

4. Ask the right questions

Have you ever been in an info-session that wrapped up with, "Anybody have any questions?" After a perfunctory pause, the session ends with no questions asked because nobody wants to be "the only one" with a question. Get around this by asking open-ended questions and embracing the awkwardness until someone breaks the silence.

Try these:

- What questions do you have?
- What are your concerns, if any?
- What needs to happen for you to get on board with this?
- What help do you need to successfully integrate this change in your role?

5. Set the team up for success

One thing people are quietly afraid of during change is not being good at their jobs after the change. You can set people's mind at ease by normalizing this. Let them know about the training they'll receive, that a post-change performance dip is coming and how long you expect it to last. Even better, ask your team how long *they* expect it to last.

If you like graphs, do an image search for "implementation dip change management" and show your team (and your boss, as necessary) that there's always a performance dip. Good change management minimizes the dip but won't eliminate it.

6. Give meaningful thanks

It's fun to celebrate a project implementation with a team lunch and a toast to a job well done. People like that, but what they *love* is specifics. "Great job" is too superficial to be meaningful. Instead, explain exactly what someone did well, even though it takes longer and may seem impossible with a particularly difficult employee.

Imagine how good your team would feel if they each got a thank you card like this:

- Jane, thanks for making the transition to the new system a success. I remember you had your doubts. Who could forget that first team meeting?! I really appreciate how you brought your concerns to the table and did the training (twice!) so you could be the go-to person for questions when the system went live with clients on the line.

Cards may be old-fashioned, but people hang on to them—sometimes for years—because real gratitude is cherished and builds strong relationships.

As a manager, many aspects of change initiatives are outside of your control. Fortunately, how you communicate with your team is within your control and makes a big difference.

Resources for managers

Helping Employees Manage Change

This [Great West Life article](#) focuses on how managers can support employees through change in a psychologically-safe way and includes tips on managing accommodations for employees experiencing mental health issues.

Perfect Phrases for Managers and Supervisors by Meryl Runion

The phrases in this book are designed to help managers navigate difficult conversations with employees, colleagues and even bosses. Why figure it all out yourself when you can have these perfect phrases at your fingertips?

People-focused change management tips for managers

Prosci is a change management research and training organization that believes “organizations do not change, people do.” Read their advice for managers and supervisors in this article: [Manager/Supervisor's Role In Change Management](#).

About the author



Andrea Bassett is an executive ghostwriter specializing in writing thought leadership content for executives in the corporate wellness, benefits and professional services industries. Connect with her on [LinkedIn here](#).

This article was commissioned for People Corporation’s mental health microsite: <https://pcpeoplecare.com/>

ⁱ <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/leadership/changing-change-management>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.prosci.com/resources/articles/change-management-communication-checklist>