

People accept change better when they have a say in it

I was reminded recently of a lesson every leader needs to learn while speaking with Toni Pergolin, president and CEO of Bancroft in Haddonfield, N.J. Clearly, she had learned it.

Here is the lesson, in the form of a paradox: If you want employees to say “yes,” you have to allow them to say “no.” If you create the right circumstances, the result will be buy-in, not griping. Let me tell you how Pergolin learned this lesson at Bancroft.

Bancroft offers a range of programs, supports and services for children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, including autism and acquired brain injuries. Pergolin told me about standing in front of her 60 managers unveiling a vision for the organization that would require their sacrifice and discipline. She was fearful that her managers would turn away from the challenges it entailed and would feel put upon.

“Instead,” she told me, “they said, ‘We get it! Now I know where we’re going!’”

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They were excited about working with me to create the future of the organization.”

When an organization is imperiled, many leaders beat the drum for change far too loudly — or not loudly enough. The key is to hit just the right volume. In Bancroft’s case the organization needed to increase revenues, and to do this, staff would have to work more efficiently, support more residents, and squeeze every dollar, all while elevating the quality of care. Pergolin’s question was every leader’s question: How can I create a sense of urgency without scaring everyone?

A common approach to effecting organizational change — the approach Pergolin initially took — is to gather staff in darkened rooms and show them slide after sobering slide about the organization’s troubled finances. Some say to themselves, “Gee, I sure hope our leaders solve these problems,” feeling no personal responsibility. Others go into self-protective mode.

In Pergolin’s case, during her first attempt, her staff grew concerned that her plans for change would so funda-



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mentally alter the organization that they would no longer feel proud of it. As she sensed staff resistance setting in, she knew she had to take a fresh approach.

She had been speaking with consultant Hadley Williams of Media, who asked, “Has it occurred to you that what seems to be staff resistance is actually grief?”

“The moment he said this,” Pergolin told me, “I realized that, inadvertently, by doing what seemed to make common sense — telling people what would happen if no change occurred — people were becoming convinced that I was setting about to change the organization beyond their recognition and about to do so without their input, buy-in and involvement.”

Williams recommended creating a draft of a vision statement that was both exciting and incorporated the changes Pergolin needed to see the organization undergo. Then, on Pergolin’s behalf, Williams engaged all stakeholders — residents, residents’ families, management, supervisors, board members — in a dialogue about that vision that permitted them to say “Keep this,” “Change that.”

“I was fearful that people would be turned off by this because, frankly, creating a vision this way seemed laborious and everyone at Bancroft was so busy. But they were very excited about being a part of creating the future. When they seemed to be saying, ‘no!’ they were really saying, ‘I love this place, let’s preserve what’s good while we change what isn’t working.’”

The end result was a shared vision, not just Pergolin’s. “After I presented the final version to my 60 managers and supervisors, the one we all created together, I got emails all day long praising the vision and thanking me for involving everyone in the process. I was delighted with the feedback.”

The usual approach to organizational change is for leaders at the top to simply announce a new direction. When this entails sacrifice or loss, the inevitable result is employee resistance, even when change makes sense. It’s a paradox: if you want people to say “yes,” you have to allow them to say “no,” in the context of really listening to their concerns. As people feel heard, they open up to change.

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