

Adapting to change in a changing business environment

Supervisors' job responsibilities are changing. As both individuals and members of an organization's managerial team, supervisors need to prepare themselves to adapt successfully to a rapidly changing business environment. This article presents a number of tips supervisors can use to deal with change, to the betterment of their organization and their own careers. As a supervisor, the primary measures you can take to adapt to change include:

- Becoming aware of your situation
- Understanding change
- Building your skills and knowledge

Become Aware of Your Current Situation

What is going on now in your job? If you don't know, you must take steps to find out!

- What is the mission of your unit?
- What is the purpose of your job?
- What are your key responsibilities and assignments?
- What does your supervisor expect of you?
- What obstacles stand in your way?
- What resources do you have at your disposal?
- How well are you performing?
- How do peers and managers view the importance and performance of your unit?
- What changes are coming?

If you are unable to answer questions like these, you should begin immediately to “do your homework,” for you are in a prime position to be overwhelmed by unexpected forces of change.

People often miss important information when they employ selective perception, habit, and specialization to keep themselves from being exposed to ideas they might not want to hear. While this is human nature, it is not a good strategy for handling change. Instead, supervisors should face their fears and broaden their sources of information to explore new ideas. By increasing their awareness of change through a willingness to take in new information, they will have a distinct advantage over those who tend to isolate themselves.

While you are gathering information, try to spot the trends which may be signaling change on the horizon. Look for seemingly isolated facts that may “fit together” like the pieces of a puzzle. When you think you have spotted a trend, you should investigate it in further detail. Don't just react to change; anticipate and prepare for it.

Understanding Change

Compare your reaction and a small child's reaction to thunder. You ignore it, but a child may be anxious and seeks assurances from the nearest adult. It's only human to fear the unknown—confidence comes with understanding. From long experience, you know that thunder is a natural phenomenon that cannot harm you. The child does not yet understand it. That is why an important step toward coping with change is understanding it: what is happening, why, and how.

Is your department being reorganized? Are you worried about the impact on you? That's natural. But don't fall victim to rumors, speculation, or the inclination to assume the worst. Wait for your

boss to explain why the reorganization is being done, how the new department will work, and what specific changes will result. It is likely that the changes represent an improvement of some sort. If your manager does not explain the change to you, ask about it.

Flexibility and a willingness to embrace change will make you a more valuable member of your organization—one who can reliably deal with many different opportunities and circumstances. You may not like all the changes that are occurring, but you can be sure that if you resist them, you will not prosper. It is fine to voice your opinion and make suggestions, but it is also important to appreciate that competition and technology are constantly combining to force top management to reevaluate company operations. It is helpful to look on changed circumstances and the challenges they present with the attitude of a new employee and, as a new employee would, take on these challenges enthusiastically and with a desire to learn all you can to perform well.

When you recognize the possibilities created by change, you're more prepared to exploit them. You will find change as not something to fear, but as something to welcome and turn to your own advantage.

Build Your Skills and Keep Learning

Adapting to change frequently requires the effective use of all your acquired skills. In some cases, adapting to change will call for the use of other skills as well—skills which you might not yet have mastered, or even begun to acquire! In a fast-changing work environment, skills also become obsolete. To be prepared to deal with change successfully, it is important to build as many skills as you can before their use becomes essential for organizational survival. You don't want to be caught short in a crunch.

You can never stop learning if you want to maintain your value in the job marketplace. Nor can you wait for your employer to send you to seminars or pay for additional education. You need to take responsibility to educate yourself. Doing so will help you keep your skills current, and it will demonstrate an initiative for self-improvement that makes you a more visible and viable candidate for a promotion or new assignment.

You may also want to consider making lateral moves to learn new skills and become a well-rounded employee. Read trade magazines and attend conferences, when possible. Take refresher training in your area of competence. Enroll in a college course that interests you, even one not given for credit. See if your professional association offers training sessions and workshops. Look into correspondence or distance education. If circumstances allow, pursue an advanced degree. If college is not an option, broaden your reading and personal study. Join others with similar interests to form a discussion group or study team. Read a technical manual or recent review of research in an area of interest to you.

This is the one of the most important tips for adapting to change, because it places you ahead of the curve: anticipating change and implementing it before many people think to adapt. It is important to keep your learning skills fresh; learning how to learn is also too valuable a lesson to allow it to atrophy over time. The bottom line is, the more you know how to do and the more current your skills and your ability to apply them effectively, the more valuable you are to an organization.

Other Tips

Aside from these major efforts, you can also take smaller measures to ensure that you are compatible with change and adapt easily to it:

- **Embrace Technology.** Embrace technological change and learn how to use it for your own benefit. Don't run from new technologies; try them! Some people are afraid to try new technology for fear of looking foolish or old fashioned in front of others—particularly younger people who are more technologically adept. If you are uncomfortable with new technology, try it out in the privacy of your own home, or in the presence of trustworthy friends and teachers.
- **Increase Your Speed.** Greater opportunities come to organizations that can respond quickly. Customers value speed in providing services and delivering orders and are sometimes willing to pay extra for a quick response. Employees who are fast and flexible generally reduce costs by minimizing their expended time on a project. As a supervisor, you need to continuously review how you can reduce the time spent on work, either in increments or in quantum leaps. Always look for breakthroughs, especially in information technology, that will allow you to get more done faster and with fewer people.
- **Learn to Live with Ambiguity and Uncertainty.** Most people do not like ambiguity or uncertainty, which are major sources of anxiety, but they are also facts of life in this fast-changing world. Often you will have to make decisions without having all the facts you need or knowing with any certainty what will happen. But, if you are willing to accept ambiguity and uncertainty and not let them prevent you from trying new things, you ultimately enhance your value to the organization. Learning to improvise and adapt to different and unexpected situations will give you important skills that will help you progress in your career.
- **Act like an Entrepreneur.** Entrepreneurs are always concerned with doing their best and getting the most out of their employees. Why? Entrepreneurs behave this way because it's their company, their responsibility to keep customers satisfied, their reputation, and their money. These factors provide them with powerful incentives to perform at a high level. An entrepreneurial attitude can also serve supervisors and employees well. Having an entrepreneurial attitude can provide you with the extra push to cut costs, improve productivity, and go out of your way to keep customers satisfied. As change continues and organizations begin to use more outside contractors, you may become one yourself. An entrepreneurial attitude will help prepare you for that possibility.
- **Adding Value to the Organization.** The organization should always be able to make a profit on your work. If you add value, you bring in a return on your work that is higher than your cost to the organization. If that is not the case, your job is in peril. This is especially true today, when organizations are eagerly looking for ways to cut costs. Always ask yourself whether your activities add value or add costs for the organization. When someone asks what you are contributing, be able to provide specific examples of what you do and the difference you are making.
- **Know Your Niche.** As a service provider, your job is to provide services to customers, whether internal or external. You need to understand your customers' needs and then go out of your way to fulfill them. It is therefore important to keep in close contact with the customers you serve. As their needs change, make sure you are aware of those changes and continuously improve your provision of services—in terms of reliability, quality, and cost. If there is any key to job security, it lies in taking care of those who depend on you.
- **Be a Fixer, Not a Blamer.** In any organization, there will always be problems that arise from changing circumstances. In noting these problems, some people get the reputation of being complainers rather than problem solvers. Those who complain and blame are not

helping themselves or the organization. There are two difficulties with playing the blame game.

- **Most problems are due to common causes**, meaning no one person or event can be identified as the cause.
- **Don't treat these problems as though there were an identifiable cause**, which gets in the way of solving them.

To become a fixer, you should identify the source of the problem and suggest direct actions to deal with it. The person who blames doesn't solve problems; the person who fixes does, and becomes a valued member of an organization as a result.

Conclusion

Organizational change is not optional to keep pace with business. All organizations, at one time or another, face substantive modifications to some aspect of their business. Supervisors can prepare themselves to adapt successfully to a more rapidly changing business environment by following a variety of tips, as outlined above.

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