

Insight

Organisational Change – The Forgotten People

It's a sad state of affairs that many organisations will be looking to shed staff in significant numbers in these times of unprecedented change. Whatever label you attach to it be it, be it restructuring, downsizing, consolidation, transitioning (the list of euphemisms is endless) there is of course a massive human cost attached to this. It's not just the livelihoods of employees which are at stake but of course their families, so whatever way you look at it we're all likely to be affected in some way.

Some reports suggest that this time we are going to see it on a scale unimaginable in living memory. Whilst that remains to be seen, I'm sure most business leaders will agree this is a strategy which needs to be planned meticulously to ensure not just organisational survival but the chance to thrive moving forwards.

Whilst many articles will focus (quite rightly) on providing tips and advice for supporting the people you are reluctantly "letting go", instead I'm going to focus on the people you continue to employ. Paradoxically these can become the forgotten people in the whole process, but actually they are the most important as far as your future is concerned...

Big 5: Hints & Tips

1. **Morale & Motivation**

When organisations go through this process there is bound to be a high degree of uncertainty and insecurity for everyone. This requires professional management. Get it wrong and your company can suffer the negative consequences for years to come in terms of de-motivation, disengagement, apathy and general staff disgruntlement. What if you haven't been through this as a business before? You may have the expertise to ensure the processes and legalities are adhered to but that's only the administrative part of it. What techniques do you need to employ to ensure that your company morale remains buoyant and unaffected? You have to reassure people who are naturally going to be nervous and on edge about their future prospects. No amount of PR or spin will convince them if it isn't delivered from the heart and in the correct way.

This is the foundation of everything that follows...get this wrong and you're facing an uphill struggle. You have to "gauge the temperature" of your organisation – not through a survey, but by getting out there amongst the people. Be visible, put yourself in the firing line. This can be an uncomfortable experience but it gains you respect. How many times have we heard stories in the past of companies hiring a group of faceless "consultants" (hatchet men) to come in and do the dirty work for them whilst the senior executives have faded into the background?

2. Clear Leadership

In these extremely challenging times, clear leadership has never been so important. How you communicate and execute the organisational changes sends a very powerful message about the identity of your business. Most people can accept pretty much any degree of change provided it's delivered with integrity and in a professional way. The key is to involve your employees as much as possible and explain the rationale behind it. Provided it's done fairly (and there is no room for politics and favouritism here) most people will come to terms with the need to change. This is all about putting the best possible team of people out there on the pitch to guarantee your success. You have to be future-focused and look to promote how you are going to develop the business. Position it as an opportunity and reinforce why they are the people to take you on that journey. What value does each individual add to your business? Ask yourself and them that very question because moving forwards every penny counts.

3. Employee Engagement

This is a great opportunity to re-evaluate your organisation – examine what works well and what doesn't. Encourage your staff to have their say and make some changes for the better. Many companies do employ more people than they really need, so it's a great opportunity to get your housekeeping in order and become leaner, more efficient and more effective. People respond positively if their ideas are listened to and can see them result in demonstrable changes to the business. This is the time to re-connect people with your organisation. Their reaction will tell you a lot about how much they want to be part of that journey.

All organisations have politics to varying degrees. Some people are regarded and valued more or less than others and not always for the right reasons. In times of adversity you will find out who your good people are. The ones who are intrinsically motivated and are prepared to go that extra mile for you no matter what. Not the ones who are just in it for themselves with a senior sponsor giving them a helpful push up the corporate greasy pole. This is the time to identify the people of "real value" and most importantly, to tell them so!

4. Customer Experience & Culture

Due to the very nature of the social media grapevine these days, it is extremely likely that your customers will hear about changes in your organisation. As a result, they will form an opinion of your business. Customers are extremely sensitive to your organisational culture because sub-consciously they relate to your values, beliefs, ethics and what your company stands for. This isn't always obvious as most buying decisions are made subliminally due to personal preference. Ask yourself though why you prefer to buy particular brands? Often, it's because they reflect your personality, lifestyle and how you want to be perceived. Therefore, it's vital to ensure that your organisation's personality or identity (culture) doesn't get lost or damaged in this period. Continuity and doing the right thing are key here. Ultimately customers are inherently selfish. They will ask themselves "what will these changes mean to me? How will I be affected?" That's why it's critical that you deliver strong benefits statements at all times. Communicate clearly how these changes will improve, not just consolidate your service.

5. Your USP (Unique Selling Point)

Some organisations can perform very well in an economic downturn, sometimes even better than usual. It's not all doom and gloom and there will be some big winners in this. To be one of those, it's critical that you involve your staff and review your USP. With markets contracting and less supplier choice, the best-run organisations will rise to the top. The key is to really think long and hard about your true differentiators. Many organisations quote their USP's which set them apart from their rivals but are they really "unique"? For it to be truly unique NO other competitor organisation can offer it. Therefore, generalist statements like "our people are what make us special" don't convince your target audience. You have to explain specifically why they do so and why your competitors don't offer the same expertise and be able to provide evidence of it. This is a great opportunity to be really creative but also reflect introspectively about why your company has been successful in the past and what it needs to do differently to succeed in the future.

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