

4 Steps for Improving Change Management Conversations

When people are stuck or resistant in their thinking, they change their mind and learn better from self-discovery than from others telling them what to do.

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The retiring director of a government agency asked me to coach his leadership team to see if I could help them better cope with the transition to a new leader. He said he felt they were stuck, unable to move forward. A new leader will have his own agenda, but the vice presidents should be prepared with proposals and plans.

The first thing I did when I met with the team was to ask each of them to tell me what was going on for them.

One by one, each person told me how horrible the situation was, and how upset they were that their director was leaving. As a result, one person was going to retire. Another one was putting all projects on hold. A third hinted he might look elsewhere for work. The rest had similar stories.

When they were done, I said, "I hear you feel a great loss with the director leaving. I hear you are afraid of what will happen with a new leader. I hear that you are frustrated because you don't expect the board to make good decisions and they aren't asking for your input on the organization's future. This is all understandable. You enjoyed working with a good director for years. But let me ask you, out of all that you shared with me, what do you know to be absolutely true in this moment?"

They all stared at me for a long while until one man said, "I guess all we really know is that John is leaving."

"Okay," I said. "It is unfortunate you don't know what will happen next, but based on what you know to be true, what do you think you need to do either for yourself or the agency?"

Again, after a long pause, the head of Human Resources said, “I think we should shore up our succession planning so we can deal with any leader.”

The team enthusiastically agreed. I asked them how I could help. We began making plans. The energy in the room moved from stagnation to excitement.

When people are stuck or resistant in their thinking, they change their mind and learn better from self-discovery than from others telling them what to do. Their emotions create blind spots and inertia. You need to break through these blocks if you want your team to commit to moving forward. This is done through first acknowledging what is triggering the emotions and then asking clear questions that make them stop and examine their own thinking.

Whether you are a leader or you teach leaders to manage change, practicing the following steps, as outlined in the book, [“The Discomfort Zone: How Leaders Turn Difficult Conversations into Breakthroughs”](#) (Berrett-Koehler, 2014), will decrease the time it takes for people to move from change resistance to change acceptance.

1. **Inquire about how they feel and show you understand.** Ask about the desires, disappointments, and fears they are expressing. People need to feel their concerns are important before they will be interested in exploring what is next. Do not discount what is at the source of their feelings. Use your emotional intelligence to help identify what they think they are losing as a result of the decision to change (control, predictability, credibility, safety, acknowledgment, respect, freedom, purpose).
2. **Use reflecting and questioning to help them explore their limiting thoughts.** You can’t help people step out of their boxes until you help them see the box they are living in. Inquire about how they see their role, what they fear could happen if they acted differently, what they doubt will occur, and what they think they will not be able to do. Acknowledge their views before asking them what else could be possible. Allowing them to think out loud will help them explore, examine, and hopefully change their beliefs and behavior.
3. **Quiet your judgmental brain.** Refrain from jumping in and giving the person advice. You are their thinking partner in this conversation, not their manager or mentor. When you ask good questions that make people stop and think about their thinking, they are building on *what they know* instead of hearing *what you know*.
4. **Make sure there’s a plan or commitment for what’s next.** Ask the person to specify what they will do and when. Even if they say they have to take some time to think about what they discovered, ask how they will do this. Always end with a clear next step.

Don't worry about doing these steps perfectly. **Your team wants you to be present more than they need you to be perfect!**

The process helps people feel cared for and respected, which opens their brain to learning and seeing the world around them in a new way, more easily accepting the changes they face.

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