

For Immediate Release

Avoiding the Commitment Dip: Seven Ways to Keep Your Employees Focused on and Committed to Change

During any change initiative, there's a point when employees' focus and commitment falls off. A survey by OnPoint Consulting reveals the steps high-performing leaders take to get things back on track . . . before it's too late.

New York, NY (February 2007)—Companies large and small spend millions of dollars each year in order to make change initiatives a success. And yet the results are frequently dismal—changes fail to achieve their objectives, and leaders are left wondering what went wrong. Managers blame change-phobic employees, and employees say leaders didn't manage the change effectively. If you're responsible for driving change, you find all the finger-pointing frustrating and, frankly, unhelpful. If only you could pinpoint where the failure originates, perhaps you could head it off at the pass.

Here's some good news. A survey conducted by OnPoint Consulting shows the real source of the problem, and it's not *getting* employees' support for the change effort—it's *keeping* their support and commitment at high levels.

“Most managers know they have to clarify the purpose of the change, develop a transition plan, and get employees committed to the change effort right up front,” says Lepsinger, president of OnPoint Consulting (www.onpointconsultingllc.com) and coauthor (along with Dr. Gary Yukl) of *Flexible Leadership: Creating Value by Balancing Multiple Challenges and Choices* (Jossey-Bass/A Wiley Imprint, 2004, ISBN: 0-7879-6531-6, \$44.00). “And many of them appear to do a pretty good job at first. But in the first month after the big kickoff, a trend among both top performing and less successful companies reveals itself: employee commitment and support for the change begin to trail off.

“I call that point the ‘commitment dip,’” he adds. “It's where employees' support for, clarity about, and commitment to change fall off, sometimes dramatically.”

But here's the difference: top performing companies detect this dip and quickly take action to get back on track. Less successful companies take longer to reverse the trend—and even if they are able to do so, many times their recovery does not stick. *In*

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fact, the OnPoint research found that if an organization does not take corrective action to get the change initiative back on track in the first one to three months, there is little likelihood that it will achieve its objectives or realize its full potential.

Based on its research, OnPoint provides guidelines for what you as a leader can do to avoid the commitment dip and implement successful changes at your company:

Be forthright about the change and its impact. Many leaders are hesitant to discuss a change with employees. Sometimes it's a misguided attempt to "protect" them. Sometimes it's because they feel they won't be able to answer all the questions. In either case, not discussing a change with employees is a mistake. In fact, 64 percent of OnPoint survey respondents said that open and honest communication from leaders, even when they don't have all the answers, would make change easier. The overall message appears to be that people want leaders to be accessible and to engage in what Lepsinger calls "change talk."

What is change talk? It simply means using questions like *What do you see as the pros and cons of the change?*, *What is your perspective of the importance of the change?*, and *Do you feel confident that you can successfully make the change?* to keep the lines of communication concerning the change open with your employees. "Change talk gives leaders an opportunity to engage in discussions that might otherwise be difficult to initiate or sustain," says Lepsinger. "It's a good way to evaluate people's level of change-readiness and to clarify key issues. We've also found that this dialogue will help move your people to the next level of readiness."

Model behaviors that support the change. In other words, "walk the talk!" Be sure your leaders do not revert to "old" behaviors. If employees perceive that there are two sets of rules and behaviors—one for them and one for senior leaders—the change will lose credibility and be seen as less important. "It is not enough to just say the right thing or even enthusiastically communicate the benefits and the business case for the change," says Lepsinger. "Employees want to see those words backed up with behavior. That is how they judge how effectively someone is leading and managing a change. In order to be successful, everyone involved in the change should be 'walking the talk.'"

Get middle managers on board. Conventional wisdom (as well as the advice of many consultants and academics) emphasizes the importance of getting the senior team on board. But one big difference between top companies and less successful ones seems to be the extent to which *middle*-level managers feel involved in and integral to the change process. OnPoint's research shows that the involvement level of mid-level managers in the top performing and the less successful organizations is similar at the initiation of change. However, top performing companies are more effective at *maintaining and increasing* mid-level manager involvement in the first three months than are the less successful organizations. At the one- to three-month mark, top performing companies experience a sharp increase in participation and engagement of middle-level managers,

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while the less successful companies remain fairly constant over time, with a slight drop-off at the ten-month mark.

Don't put your plan on automatic pilot. Many companies do a lot of work on the front end to put a plan in place that clearly communicates the objectives and prioritizes them so that employees know what they should be doing when. They assume when they lay out the work to be done all they need to do is switch on the automatic pilot and say, "Go," and employees will stay committed to the plan and carry out the change. Companies that do this will find that they aren't achieving the change objectives they planned for. "Planning, by definition, is working toward an unknown future state. When you're making your plan, you know what you would like to happen and you can predict some of the problems and obstacles that might pop up, but once you're in it, you will discover what you are actually up against and the plan will have to be adjusted," says Lepsinger. "That's why you must treat your plan as a living document—one that you keep coming back to and revising as you learn and discover unanticipated problems and opportunities."

Set realistic objectives and milestones. Regardless of how often you revisit and revise your plan, your change won't be successful if you aren't realistic about what can be accomplished in the time available. Don't set employees up for failure by asking them to bite off more than they can chew in the first critical few months. If they feel overwhelmed or pressed for time in getting certain goals accomplished, they will lose enthusiasm for the effort. Thinking big is great, but not when it endangers your change implementation. As your employees reach realistic goals and milestones, they will become more positive about the change and will see its benefits. "As we've mentioned, our research shows that things will get worse before they get better during the first month," says Lepsinger. "Targeting unattainable goals certainly isn't going to speed up your successes. If anything, it'll frustrate and demoralize employees during those first few critical months, and the time and energy you've spent preparing for the change will have been a waste."

Don't underestimate the resources required. The overcommitment of existing resources to too many initiatives or the underestimation of what it takes to accomplish the stated change objectives is a primary cause of change initiatives' failing to meet their intended outcomes. Keep in mind that your employees have regular jobs aside from the work they'll do to make the change a success. If you don't provide them with the resources they need to be successful, they either won't be able to commit themselves to making the change successful or they won't be able to do their jobs well. "Eighty-two percent of the people at top performing organizations we surveyed said that the availability of adequate resources is a key element in successfully achieving change objectives," says Lepsinger. "Without the proper resources, your employees will quickly become frustrated."

Maintain enthusiasm and excitement among your employees. Think about what's going on during the first month of the change. Senior-level managers are pumping up the troops, traveling from office to office promoting the change and making sure everyone is

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on board. Banners, buttons, and other promotional materials are circulating to ensure that the change is on every employee's mind. After the first month, though, those senior-level managers return to their day-to-day jobs, and employees can lose focus on the task at hand. To keep employee enthusiasm from waning, continuously celebrate your company's successes and communicate the benefits of the change to your employees so that they stay motivated and continue to perform at a high level. Devise a reward system so that your employees benefit when they successfully meet objectives or reach set milestones.

"You have to keep the change in front of your employees at all times—not only during that first month," says Lepsinger. "It's another reason why you can't put your plan on automatic pilot and why leaders need to model behaviors that support the change for the *duration* of the initiative, not just at the kickoff."

Managing change comes up on almost every list of organizational and leadership success factors. Yet, despite the amount of time and money that has been invested in educating organizations and training leaders in the tools and skills to effectively manage change, the results have been uneven at best. OnPoint's survey provides the first step in showing these companies where the problem is and what they can do to make their changes more successful.

"It is possible to avoid the commitment dip," says Lepsinger. "Follow our prescriptives and you will keep your employees highly committed and focused on making change in your organization a success."

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**FLEXIBLE LEADERSHIP:
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Richard Lepsinger is president of OnPoint Consulting and has a twenty-year track record of success as a human resource consultant and executive. He was a founder and managing partner of Manus, a human capital consulting firm, which he grew to over \$4 million in revenue and sold to Right Management Consultants in 1998. At Right, Rick was the managing vice president of the Northeast and Eastern Canadian Consulting

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Practice, where he was responsible for fifty-five professionals and grew the region's revenue from \$7 million to \$20 million.

The focus of Rick's consulting work has been on helping organizations close the gap between strategy and execution. He has served as a consultant to leaders and management teams at Astra-Zeneca, Bayer Pharmaceuticals, Citibank, Coca-Cola Company, ConocoPhillips, Eisai Inc., GlaxoSmithKline, Goldman Sachs, Johnson & Johnson, KPMG, Lehman Bros., Merck & Co., the New York Stock Exchange, Northwestern Mutual Life, PeopleSoft, Pfizer Inc., Pitney Bowes, Prudential, Siemens Medical Systems, Subaru of America, and UBS among others.

Rick has extensive experience in formulating and implementing strategic plans, managing change, and talent management. He has addressed executive conferences and made presentations to leadership teams on the topics of leader effectiveness, strategy execution, managing change, performance management, 360° feedback and its uses, and developing and using competency models to enhance organizational performance.

Rick has co-authored three books on leadership, including *Flexible Leadership: Creating Value by Balancing Multiple Challenges and Choices*, (co-author with Dr. Gary Yukl) published by Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, *The Art and Science of 360° Feedback*, (co-author with Toni Lucia) published by Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, and *The Art and Science of Competency Models*, (co-author with Toni Lucia) published by Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer.

He is also the author of several book chapters, including "Performance Management and Decision Making" in *The Handbook of MultiSource Feedback*, "The Art and Science of Competency Modeling" in *What Smart Trainers Know*, and "Using 360-Degree Feedback in a Talent Management System" in *The Talent Management Handbook: Creating Organizational Excellence by Identifying, Developing, and Promoting Your Best People*, as well as numerous articles on leadership and organizational effectiveness. His most recent article, "Why Integrating the Leading and Managing Roles Is Essential for Organizational Effectiveness," appeared in *Organizational Dynamics* and is one of its most frequently downloaded articles.

For more information, please visit www.onpointconsultingllc.com.