

Selling People on Change

In my *ISHN* article last month, I entertained the notion that participation in an effective safety process is not selfless nor altruistic, but self-serving. It provides an opportunity to avoid the undesirable state of apathy or helplessness and fuels a basic human motive – the need to feel in control and competent.

The challenge is to convince people that a particular safety process needing their participation will help to prevent injuries and that they have the knowledge, resources, skills, and interpersonal support to perform the required procedures. Believing a process will work is response-efficacy, and believing one can perform the process effectively is self-efficacy. Both of these belief states satisfy the basic human need of competency.

This article starts with this basic premise that people want to participate competently in worthwhile endeavors, and addresses the challenge of soliciting participation in a new process. In other words, how should you introduce change? What should you tell people to get them on board and overcome active resistance.

I addressed this issue in my *ISHN* article in September 1995. There I identified five levels of participation: 1) the leaders or innovators who are totally involved, 2) those who want to participate but need a little direction and support, 3) those, usually the majority, who are neutral or nervous about the change and need prodding and encouragement from others, 4) the passive resisters who are critical and untrusting of something new imposed on them, and use apathy and cynicism as excuses to remain uninvolved, and 5) the active resisters who view change as a threat or a loss of personal control, and might exert measures to stifle the participation of others.

A key point is that the active resisters stick out and attract attention. Non-participants use them to rationalize their own commitment to stay in their comfort zones. Managers aim their attention on these individuals, sometimes with the administration of punitive measures. But this only builds resentment of the system among all resisters, and makes it less likely they will join the change process. For some, such disciplinary attention only fuels their desire to exert independence and resist control, leading to vigorous recruitment of others to oppose change.

In that article, I suggested a focus on the participants rather than the non-participants. If possible, active and passive resisters should be ignored. Recognize and support those willing to try the new process. Encourage those totally involved in the process (Level 1) to help people who believe in the change but are not yet totally immersed (Level 2). Then these two groups can work with the majority (Level 3) who need direction, support, and examples to follow.

When the change becomes the norm, the passive resisters (Level 4) will feel the peer pressure and fall in line. Some active resisters (Level 5) may never participate, but at least they will become passive and harmless to the status quo.

Here I'd like to add to my earlier discussion on participation and resistance by addressing the basic concerns people have when a new process or procedure is introduced. If these concerns are handled up-front, the proportion of individuals in the five levels of participation defined above might be skewed in favor of more involvement. In other words, by anticipating and dealing with the critical issues people have about change, it's possible to start out with more participants and fewer resisters.

Why is the Change Needed?

This is perhaps the most obvious issue to address, but it's often overlooked. It's critical to explain the rationale, theory, or principles behind the change. Answer the question: Why is the new approach better than the old way? This is the education part of your presentation.

In my Nov. 1996 *ISHN* article, I discussed the difference between "education" and "training." When training programs only teach step-by-step procedures, they can be perceived as a top-down "flavor of the month." Educating people about the principles or rationale behind a new safety policy, program or process enables understanding and critical thinking. It also allows for the customization of procedures for particular work situations.

What's In It For Me?

Let's face it, everyone plays this radio station -- WIIFM -- What's In It For Me? Change implies uncertainty, meaning people aren't sure what the consequences will be for them. The familiar routine can seem more pleasant because the inputs and outputs are certain – no surprises.

So it's important to clarify the costs and benefits of a new program or process. Don't let people speculate on how a particular change will affect them. Be forthright about the extra effort or adjustment involved in making the change work, and emphasize the positive consequences that can be expected. Focus on the potential and probable benefits that will be added to the workplace as a result of the change. If you can't define additional positive consequences to gain and/or negative consequences to avoid with the new or added process, you'll have a difficult time

motivating participation. I'm talking about providing outcome-expectancies, as discussed in my *ISHN* article last May.

What Will I Have To Do?

This is the all important implementation question. People want to know what they will need to do differently after the change. Do they have the knowledge, skills, and resources to accomplish their role in the change? It's important to convince potential participants the new responsibilities are within their capabilities. If they don't currently have the ability to perform competently, assure them they will be taught the relevant procedures. This is the issue of self-efficacy and competence addressed in my *ISHN* article last month.

Who Else Will Be Involved?

This question targets the issues of collaboration and teamwork. To what extent does the success of the new process depend on input from others inside and outside the work culture? Do we have to depend on support from people we don't know, or people we have little influence over?

This is the issue of personal versus interpersonal control. You need to explain the degree of coordination and cooperation with others needed for success. And if interdependent support is needed, it's useful to suggest ways to make that happen. The more cooperation needed from people on different work teams, the less personal control perceived by individual participants and the more uncertain the success.

How Will My Participation Be Evaluated?

People are naturally concerned about accountability. They want to know how their performance will be evaluated. As I covered in my *ISHN* article last month, people

want to participate competently in worthwhile endeavors. But feelings of competence are influenced by the relevant accountability system. Thus, potential participants are concerned about the methods used to observe and rank performance. Will the external measure of competence be objective? How much of my effectiveness score will be determined by factors outside of my immediate personal control? If participants feel an evaluation is unfair, will there be opportunities to offer another perspective or perhaps suggest another approach for holding them accountable. This leads to the final concern that ought to be addressed when introducing a new process or procedure.

How Can We Make the Change Better?

If you convince your audience that change is called for and their participation is needed, then anticipate concerns for ways to customize and refine the new process. In fact it's often best to avoid giving specific step-by-step procedural instructions. Instead, present a vision for breakthrough improvement and a general structure or set of guidelines for accomplishing the desired change. But leave plenty of room for individuals and work teams to derive specific procedures. Customizing a process for one's own work area allows for creativity and cultivates ownership, while also providing for the most suitable procedures for a particular situation.

It's important to encourage continuous refinement of a new safety process. When people gain competence at performing a task they believe is worthwhile, they will develop new and better ways to succeed. Make it clear from the start that this is expected. The start of something different is only the first phase of continuous improvement. Indeed, change is a constant. And the more people participating, the better each change.

In Conclusion

This article followed up my *ISHN* article last month on participation and change. It reviewed five levels of participation which I proposed in a 1995 *ISHN* article, and then suggested six issues or concerns that should be addressed when introducing an organizational change, such as a new safety process. By providing reasonable answers to these questions, you'll maximize the initial support for the change. You might also stimulate constructive interpersonal conversation which can lead to beneficial peer influence.

Watch for those who display immediate interest and commitment in your initiative. These individuals are the innovators who have dramatic positive influence on the rest of the workforce. Be aware also of the need to develop feelings of competence among potential participants. Many might like the new plan but be unsure of their ability to handle the change. Give these folks all the education and skills training they need.

What about the resisters? Leave them alone. Don't give them opportunities to dig in and become more committed to their contrary opinions. Give them opportunities to receive training and participate in the new process when they decide it's worth their effort. That will happen soon after the participants recognize the change is beneficial, and get involved in continuous improvement. Peer pressure is often the best way to get more participation in a worthy process.

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