

CHANGE MASTER SERIES

Organizational change: dealing with naysayers

By Edmond Mellina



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Organizational change: dealing with naysayers

You recognize the shudder down your spine: the naysayers are circling around your change initiative. You have seen them before, with their powerful ability to wreck the best planned projects and most committed managers.

As a change leader, how can you best deal with naysayers?

Expect them

Woodrow Wilson, the 28th President of the United States, once said: “If you want to make enemies, try to change something.”

A cohort of cynics always accompanies organizational change, so don't be surprised by it. Expect them, ready yourself and your team for the challenge.

Don't let them bring your spirit down

Change is not for the faint of heart. Hopefully you have accepted your change leadership role knowing that in advance.

The apparition of the naysayers constitutes an important challenge. Dig deep into your determination and rally your positive thoughts. Don't let them bring your spirit down, which is most certainly what they are trying to do. It's a resistance tactic, so don't give them such an easy victory.

Furthermore, your followers are watching closely your reaction. Lead with courage, conviction and stamina.

Assess their ‘Momentum Quotient’ (MQ)

To paraphrase George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, “some naysayers are created more equal than others.” The key to survival for the change leader is to assess the respective Momentum Quotient (MQ) of the naysayers – i.e. the level of influence they exert on the organization.

If a naysayer has a Low MQ, don't even bother. Simply keep moving, as nobody seriously listens to them. Instead, concentrate your time and energy on the High MQ obstructionists. Like the champions of the change, they are very important influencers – albeit negative. However, they often require far more effort to manage.

Obviously, formal power brings influence. Therefore, you must work on naysayers who have a powerful title on their business cards. However, do not limit your assessment to formal influence. In any organizations, there are people who exert a great deal of influence on their peers without holding formal titles of authority. They are the true opinion leaders.

Uncover the attitude drivers of the high MQ naysayers

The first step in dealing with High MQ influencers is to uncover what is truly driving their negativity.

Meet with them, ask them lots of open questions, and listen carefully to their answers. As you do so, keep in the back of your mind the pyramidal model we described in a previous article (“Circling the pyramid – building lasting commitment to change”). Use it as a checklist: Do they feel they aren't sufficiently involved? Are they unconvinced by the rationales for the change? Do they lack excitement because the proposed change fails to resonate with their passions and values? Is it that they don't have confidence in the organization's ability to see the change through? Or are they worried they will lose as a result of the change?

Convert, purge or quarantine

Now that you have uncovered the reasons behind the negativity, see if you can alleviate them. This will create the necessary conditions for the influential naysayers to change their position.

For example, if the primary issue is a lack of confidence in the probability of success, talk won't change their attitude. Actions and results will. If necessary, strengthen the change management team with respected players. Consider bringing some of the naysayers into the change leadership team. Most importantly, quickly deliver short term results as proof of concept and as evidence of your determination.

Turning an influential cynic into an advocate represents a great coup for any change leader. When people see it happening, their own doubts about the project flatten. Indeed, if the powerful rebels are now convinced, who are they to denigrate the change?

However, it is not always possible to convert influential naysayers. This is when the change leader has to act with courage, either by purging the obstructionists, or at a minimum by quarantining them to avoid collateral damage. That's the price to pay for the survival of the initiative and the sanity of its leadership team.

In conclusion

This year marked the 100th anniversary of Albert Einstein's theory of relativity. The scientist did poorly in elementary school and failed his first entrance exam at Zurich Polytechnic. His theory triggered deep controversy among the scientific community of the early 20th century. Yet, Einstein revolutionized physics and became one of the greatest scientists in human history.

Moral: the world belongs to those who overcome naysayers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Edmond Mellina is president of ORCHANGO – a provider of innovative and proven learning programs especially developed for organizations in transition. With its flagship Change Master Program, ORCHANGO is known for world-class change management training.

Edmond is internationally recognized as an expert in the field of change and transition management. He is the creator of the ORCHANGO Change Management System™ and the ORCHANGO Learn-and-Execute System™.

Edmond's articles have appeared in leading business publications around the globe; the media regularly interview him as an expert source.

As a speaker, Edmond addresses audiences on change management, leadership development, multicultural teamwork and the art of influence.

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