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Shaking Off Change Fatigue

A large financial services company recently called us in to discuss a pressing change communications challenge. What could they do to shake off Change Fatigue and get their organization inspired and motivated again? What a great question--many companies are facing the same challenge right now.

From the late 90's through early 2000, this company had benefited from growing revenues, and expanded their staff and facilities, benefits and outside resources. But going into 2004, they have worked through poor financial performance, massive layoffs, cutbacks of 401k contributions, facility closings, and outsourcing-even offshoring-of IT jobs. As a result, the morale of the remaining staff was terrible.

Now, every time the company announces a new initiative, the reaction is less than enthusiastic. Once, the mood of the company was positive, spirited, committed and enthusiastic. But now, the organization is tired after so much bad news, cynical about the future, distrustful of management, and wary of changing their habits. In a nutshell, the employees are taking a wait and see attitude, everyone still wondering if they will be the next to go. And, as the economy improves and more jobs become available, the risk grows that disillusioned employees will take off with the company's intellectual capital and know how, and create even more problems.

Is your organization also suffering from Change Fatigue? Is your company depressed? Are there pockets of unhappiness? Is a culture of skepticism taking hold and spreading? What can management do? How can you stop this from spiraling and paralyzing performance?

Obviously, economic recovery and improved financial performance will help. But apart from improving the bottom line, what else can management do? The first step is for senior management to seriously demonstrate commitment to their employees. They must show them that their morale is strategically important to the company's future, and that they are committed to improving the situation.

Some additional suggestions for effective change management communications and shaking off Change Fatigue:

- Be proactive. Develop a clear plan to communicate the status of the key issues that affect employee morale. Make it clear how positive behavior in support of the business objectives will improve the situation. Let employees know that they can help and enroll staff to contribute to the solution.
- Keep the lines of communications open, between the CEO and every employee, and between middle management and their staff. You need to convey a feeling that managers are really accessible, and that they care about their employees' feelings.

- Focus on issues that matter most. Explain the facts contributing to each problem, what options you had for resolving them, and how you reached your decisions. Most important, your communications should emphasize what actions and decisions mean to the employee, in a relevant and honest fashion. If you don't have an answer, say so. Never lie, never duck answering.
- Establish a regular, scheduled communications calendar that people can rely upon: for instance, an email from the CEO the first Tuesday of every month at 4:00, or a weekly Monday voice mail message. Name these events to lend them importance, so that people look forward to them and seek them out. The Ford Motor Company calls an important news announcement a "Blue Letter," while the President of the United States talks to the people every Saturday in radio "Fireside Chats."
- Use your regular communications sessions to provide updates and progress reports on each of the core topics that matter most. Remember to stay on point.
- Make sure the message and communications are meaningful and relevant, and conveyed them in a way that resonates with employees. Avoid premiums like t-shirts and hats, and don't go over the top with gimmicks like sky writers or parachutes dropping down with banners. Your medium should reflect your serious message: it's OK to have some fun, but you need to strike the right balance.
- If possible, encourage small CEO interactions and meetings. Employees should hear first hand what the company is doing, and learn why decisions are being made and how they will impact people as individuals. Prepare and rehearse key talking points and reinforce these points frequently during the sessions.
- Create a place on your intranet where people can retrieve factual information, and see what management has to say on the issues and what they are doing about them. Update it regularly. If you withhold honest, factual information the rumor mill will work overtime to fill in the gaps and create a new problem.
- Avoid unscheduled and untimely news jolts that scare the organization or can be taken out of context and misinterpreted. Manage the implications of the news, just as you would an external PR campaign.
- Conduct research and seek out employee feedback on the major issues that affect them, their attitudes and their behavior. The research should be hands on, conducted by senior people to demonstrate that they care about the situation and are committed to improving it.

If you would like to explore your specific Change Fatigue situation and how to address it, let us know. We will gladly assist you. And if you know a company that would benefit from our help, please pass this email on to them and ask them to visit our web site at www.inwardconsulting.com

Thank you for your time. Do you have issues you would like us to address in our regular emails? If so, please drop us a line and we will be happy to share our ideas with you.