Forward Motion Coaching Newsletter
Vol. 2, No. 7, July, 2006 **Barbara Bissonnette, Certified Coach**

Managing Change: Perception is Reality

That change is a fact of life does little to mitigate people's usual reactions to it, namely fear, suspicion, and resistance. That's why it's critical to have a plan for communicating and managing during transitions, whether they are planned (such as expansions, mergers, acquisitions) or the result of legislative mandates, breakthrough technologies, changing customer needs, and other unplanned events.

Perhaps the most important thing to keep in mind is that people's perceptions *are* their realities. If change is perceived as a loss of some kind, individuals will react to it quite differently than if it's perceived as a positive occurrence ripe with new opportunities. Even a promotion can be "negative" if the individual doesn't perceive himself as having the skills, resources, and support necessary for success in a new role.

Whether you're managing change on a scale as grand as a company sale or as localized as a new department structure, here are some tips for smoothing the transition from what is to what is to be.

#1: Communicate clearly, precisely, and regularly about what will happen in association with the transition. Make sure that people understand the reasons for the change, and how it will benefit both them and the organization as a whole. Allow people to ask questions and voice concerns, and be realistic and honest in your responses.

#2: Building trust is crucial, so avoid speaking in absolutes unless you are positive that current conditions are stable. After a round of post-merger layoffs, one vice president prematurely announced that there would be no more job losses. A few weeks later, when additional redundancies became apparent, several more people were let go, creating distrust of the management team and (inaccurate) rumors about further cuts to come.

#3: Be sensitive to individuals or groups that may see themselves as losing something because of the change, such as authority, influence, advancement potential, or status. Talk to people about their anxieties and seek ways to communicate their value to the organization now and in the future. Endeavor always to understand the situation from another person's vantage point (senior managers, for instance, might relish the challenge of extracting value from an acquired company, while rank and file employees will likely be concerned about job security and benefits).

#4: Be on the lookout for new or anticipated problems associated with the change. It's important that people don't end up with too much or too little to do. Resentments and frustration occur when individuals don't have the information, technology, budgets and other resources they need to accomplish their objectives. It may be necessary to create interim systems, procedures, or jobs until the transition is complete.

#**5: Set clear goals and performance expectations**, and develop benchmarks for measuring success. Clarify job responsibilities and give people the authority to take action. There will no doubt be mistakes as people adjust to new roles and systems so keep expectations realistic and give timely feedback about what's working and what's not.

#6: Offer incentives and rewards in recognition of people's performance and their value to the organization. At one firm, people who put in significant overtime to deliver a new product were rewarded with unexpected bonuses. Although it should go without saying that incentives must be achievable, at one company bonus packages tied to unreachable goals set off a wave of management departures.

Finally, never underestimate the influence that people in leadership roles have on the outcome of any transition. In times of change people become hyper-attuned to the verbal and nonverbal messages that leaders send, as well as to what they pay attention to and reward. People “buy in” when they are engaged by a compelling vision for the future that also aligns with their self-interests.

* *

* *