Grief: The Underbelly of Change

A big raise, a colleague relocating to a different office, and training on a new client onboarding system... all three of these items have one thing in common: change. Initial reactions run the gamut. A big raise may mean you rally the troops for a celebratory happy hour, while losing an office mate may involve shedding a few tears as you imagine lunches without your work pal. Though the tone and type of change is different, all require leadership to prepare for employee reactions. A surprising fact? Changes at work result in a grieving process as employees leave behind the past and embrace a new normal. To better support employees, leadership can familiarize themselves with the grief cycle.

The word "grief" may carry a heavy meaning in your mind. It is natural to associate grief with a major catastrophe or death. Smaller changes, whether positive or negative, involve grieving as well. There is no doubt that a long sought-after promotion is exciting. You have imagined this day for quite a while and worked hard to reach this professional goal. Forbes author, Brian Gorman, points out "There are endings associated with every new beginning." A new promotion will impact the relationships developed in your prior role. Your colleagues may become your direct reports. You are now the one who is responsible for the success, or failure, of your team at the end of the day. Things are changing and it is perfectly normal to grieve for the end of an era.

The Kübler-Ross Change Curve was developed by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in 1969. The model outlined five stages of grief: denial, anger, depression, bargaining, and acceptance. The stages are not always linear; grievers may straddle multiple stages at one time or bounce around. Think back to the last time you were given a new directive by management at your job. How did you react? It is important to note that employees are not trying to be argumentative or avoidant as they approach acceptance; rather, they are relying on subconscious coping strategies to deal with new information that upsets the apple cart.

Leaders and managers are wise to be patient with employees who may need more time to warm up to a new idea. Try altering your communication plan to cater toward these individuals. For example, trying speaking to particularly "angsty" employees individually ahead of the formal announcement will help decrease their resistance. A little bit of preparation can go a long way in progressing to acceptance.

360 Feedback: Help Me, Help You

In Corporate America of days past, the entire feedback process consisted of a once-a-year conversation led by your boss. The goal was to keep it short and painless – like a shot at the doctor's office. Since then, a series of bells and whistles were added to make it more frequent, more detailed, and more inclusive. One of those enhancements was the introduction of the 360-degree review. In short, this tool removed from the manager onus of owning all your feedback by requesting feedback from a wide swath of colleagues. Your peers, direct reports, and senior colleagues may have more daily contact with you and thus were able offer new insights.

Your company may benefit from a 360-review process. However, before rollout, set the tone for this process to avoid common user errors.

Focus on development. You review restaurants on Yelp or are asked to complete a short survey after calling customer service at your bank. Feedback has become mainstream in all parts of our lives. It is important to clarify how 360-degree feedback will be evaluated and used. Hesitant users may resist because they are not comfortable with their performance being "dinged" by a colleague. So, instead of integrating this as a part of performance reviews, introduce it as a tool that employees can use for development. The feedback is for their knowledge only – they choose how/if to integrate it into their new mode of operation and whether they would like to share with their manager. This provides a layer of security and empowers the employee to own their development!

Encourage face-to-face delivery. One of the rabbit holes some companies fall into is overreliance on technology for feedback. Similar to social media, some individuals will add comments in an anonymous forum that they would not dare say in person. Feedback is actually an exercise for both parties as it encourages participants to think and prepare to share comments. This is valuable in and of itself! Do not let in-person feedback die because of a fancy 360 system. Encourage people to identify themselves in their feedback and meet to discuss the feedback. This is a part of building a healthy work relationship.

Offer post-review coaching. So, now what? You have a good process in place, but employees are doing nothing with the information. As a result, the organization is getting sick of requests for feedback. The best laid plans – development comments and live conversations included – can go awry if employees do not feel it is adding value. The truth is many employees need support to implement a development plan. This is where performance coaching comes into play.

A qualified coach can help employees interpret the feedback as a whole and aid in converting this into clear, developmental goals.

Employee development is part art and part science. The field will continue to change as employee expectations and business needs evolve. In response, companies need to be flexible to innovate, try new things and be open to rethinking when the plan doesn't work. Setting the tone for future 360-degree reviews can help ensure that employees know what to expect and participate openly.

Mentorship Starts with Mentees

Successful business leaders often thank their mentors publicly for the impact they had on their career. Strong mentoring relationships are proven to help mentees (the employee seeking mentorship) in numerous areas, from increased job and company satisfaction to higher pay and more rapid promotion. Additionally, mentees report stronger communication and confidence outside of work. So, it is likely no surprise to hear that most Fortune 500 organizations include mentoring programs as a company benefit. However, a mismanaged mentoring program staffed with disengaged employees results in little benefit and can do more harm than good! Something must change. While many options are available, a good place to start is by asking mentees to be intimately involved in the process of seeking mentorship.

Mentorship programs of days past were often managed by Human Resources. HR dutifully identified mentors and assigned them to mentees. This "sit and wait" approach meant that mentees had little skin in the game. If a mentorship placement was not fruitful, they could just ask for a new assignment. This hands-off approach meant that an intermediary was responsible for collecting the very nuanced needs of the mentees and then recruiting mentors who hopefully had the time and skill set to support them. This coordination involved very little input from the mentee who, in theory, knows best what areas in which they are looking for support. Think of it this way... would you have someone else select your college course list for the semester or curate your Spotify playlist? Likely not. You would take recommendations from others but make decisions on your own. Why not apply the same mentality to mentee involvement?

Additionally, evidence shows that the most fruitful mentoring relationships are created naturally. They are not orchestrated by a third party and don't start with the question, "Will you be my mentor?" Statistics show that less than 15% of mentor relationships start with a formal request like this. They likely result from interaction on a project, a committee, or client engagement. In theory, your need for mentorship will change as the mentee develops. Today, you are looking to polish your public speaking skills. Next month, you are seeking feedback from individuals who attended a graduate program you are eyeballing. Your needs change, thus, you will look for different types of mentorships. Identifying and finding ways to network internally and externally are the most important parts of seeking mentorship.

Subpar mentoring programs can be damaging to employees. And let's face it, no one will be as invested in their professional development as they are! So, let's get mentees involved early and often in the role of identifying and seeking mentorship. It is a lifelong skill that will empower staff to advocate for their needs and support their growth. HR and management can get involved in supporting the mentorship programs in other ways, such as offering training on how to be a good mentor and how to network internally.

Water Cooler Talk Goes Online

Does your daily work routine today differ from pre-pandemic times? If you asked workers whose main work location moved from a busy office to their home address, the answer is likely a resounding "Yes!" You lost regular occurrences that may not have seemed special at the time, but now they are gone, they suddenly have more meaning. It is the little things, like grabbing a piece of cake and singing an off-tune round of happy birthday for a colleague, or rehashing your weekend with an office neighbor, that now seem meaningful. "Water cooler" talk is one of those items. Can companies figure out a formula to recreate water cooler talk in a virtual environment?

Water cooler talk is a seemingly old school term referring to the casual social interactions and work small talk that take place spontaneously when you run into a colleague from down the hall while grabbing a snack or cup of coffee in the office kitchen. The interactions were casual, and topics ran the gamut from personal to work. These happenstance meetings where genuine conversations with a colleague you may or may not talk to on a regular day naturally contribute to building trust – an important part of a healthy culture. This was also the birthplace of many innovative ideas, a fact embraced by the late Steve Jobs. Apple invested $5 billion in 2017 to build out the common area and café at headquarters. The cost makes sense when you consider that water cooler talk leads to new ideas and increased profit.

There is no doubt that corporate America is investing in technology. To put it into perspective, the number of Zoom users increased from 10 million pre-pandemic to 300 million in April 2020. One would assume that this results in more virtual collaboration, but these online playgrounds have their limits. While water cooler time was unsupervised, chats and conversations in a virtual platform may be visible to all in the group, including your boss. This was a concern of those trying to recreate this vibe using team collaboration sites like Slack. Additionally, virtual interactions like Zoom or Miro or any number of online social tools require planning. Everyone needs access to the technology, a link or app to join, and a time to connect. It removes spontaneity from the formula. The original water cooler involved none of the above, and that was a part of the magic.

The casual interactions that take place when you pass people in the halls or in the break room can no longer be taken for granted. The good news is that leaders are searching for a virtual solution to the water cooler conundrum. And surprisingly, your office kitchen is a difficult vibe to translate online and requires a bit of effort to fine tune.