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Key Strategies for Managing Change in Your Practice

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External influences such as lower cost competitors, technology and now a pandemic can have a dramatic impact on a healthcare practice, resulting in the practice owner reviewing their business strategy. This allows the practice to take advantage of its key competitive advantages and ensure it survives and thrives. This also requires the practice to make changes to its business model.

Workplace change can involve restructuring a healthcare organisation or private practice, which can include increasing the use of technology, modifying the skills/knowledge base to create greater efficiency, and outsourcing functions, all of which will have an impact on employees. The ability for practices to survive and thrive through times of change is greatly influenced by the workplace culture (particularly the individual and collective mindset of leadership and staff), and whether people are open to growth and ready for a shift.

In business, innovation is a positive way to describe workplace change as it has a shiny and new appeal. Indeed, one definition of innovate is 'to make changes in something established, especially by introducing new methods, ideas, or products'. There is a range of business lingo used to discuss workplace change, such as "diversify", "review", "restructure", "merge", "upscale",

"downscale", "expand", "downsize", "develop (or re-develop)" and "transform".

Through many years of HR consulting, my team has observed that, regardless of the terminology, workplace change can steer the culture towards triumph or trouble, depending on how the process is managed. We often see clients diving right into implementing workplace change when, all of a sudden, the change management conversation crops up as an afterthought with inadequate planning. Factoring change management in too late can cause:

- A rough transition
- A lack of advocacy
- A vague change vision
- Overall resistance
- Workplace conflict
- Decreased sustainability of the change required

Having an effective change management strategy not only helps employees adapt, but it can also create stronger bonds between employers/practice owners/senior managers and employees by taking everyone on the journey.

Here are four key strategies that healthcare leaders and practice owners can implement to pave the way for effective change management.

1. Create a Change Impact Statement

Identify who will be part of your change management team and, together, clearly identify your business reasons for change. For example, COVID-19 restrictions may have created a significant downturn in your practice which requires a review. Creating your Change Impact Statement will involve a combination of big picture visionary thinking and strategic planning skills.

Your Change Impact Statement will be an important resource for decision-making and communications throughout the process. It should include an assessment of how the changes are expected to affect your key stakeholders.

2. Communication and Consultation

Staff are key stakeholders in a practice. It is important to consult with staff by listening to their feelings and ideas, and identifying any personal impact. Using the example of COVID-19 restrictions, it would be appropriate to consult with employees to hear their ideas and concerns regarding flexible working arrangements or workplace health and safety.

You should also have a communication plan that supports the change process. Regular, transparent updates will help to mitigate fear and build trust. This is important as the more you communicate, the better your staff will adapt to the changes.

When communications around change are occurring, we can all hear a consistent message, but each team member may react

> ## The ability for practices to survive and thrive through times of change is greatly influenced by the workplace culture

differently. Change can be easy or exciting for some, and challenging or daunting for others. The role of leadership is to be aware of this and check employees' understanding/comprehension of what's happening, and their reactions and emotional responses.

The Bridges Transition Model, for example, describes three main emotional phases of transition, with accompanying management tips:

- **Ending:** People feel it's all come to an end. A sense of letting go. Things won't be the same.

  Tip: People need to receive recognition for past achievements so they can close that part of their career or life before moving forward.

- **Neutral Zone:** People have let go of the past and are starting to be introduced to the new process, system, structure or change. Slightly unsure of what to do. People are moving out of their comfort zone. This time of transition can be ambiguous.

  Tip: Leadership needs to communicate regular updates, train and coach, and set short term goals for the team to focus on.

- **New Beginning:** People have started to feel comfortable with the change. Systems, processes are becoming routine and the team is becoming focused on the new direction.

  Tip: Recognise when people achieve goals. Communicate to the team about where success is occurring. Continue to encourage the team.

Gauging staff understanding/reaction and addressing people's concerns is not about judging or telling people where they should be, but rather working to get them onboard. Help your team members through the change process by discussing the benefits. Keeping employee morale high with a culture of strong communication, feedback and employee recognition can work wonders in ensuring that your change initiative leads to a positive outcome.

3. Support

The potential impact of workplace change on the mental health of employees cannot be underestimated. Transition is a major stress trigger. According to Kate Berardo's 5Rs of Culture Change, the main areas of stress around cultural change are:

- Routines
- Reactions
- Roles
- Relationships
- Reflections about ourselves

Workplace stress is becoming widely recognised as a significant workplace health and safety risk factor. Under various legislation, employers are legally responsible for ensuring that the working environment does not cause psychological or physical injury or worsen an existing condition. Employers are therefore obligated to provide appropriate employee support throughout the change process.

Identify what avenues of support are available to help your staff adapt to the change. Key avenues of support may include:

- Identified change agents within the team, whose role is to collect feedback from staff members and make recommendations to leadership regarding the types of support needed
- Managers or contact support officers, who are trained and knowledgeable in the organisational policies, culture and employee support resources
- Employee Assistance Program (EAP) providing confidential counselling, psychological support and educational resources
- Staff training programs to provide upskilling and support the professional growth and development of your staff

Make sure you communicate regularly with staff regarding what support is available and how they can access it. Some people may be unable to adapt, regardless of the support that has been put in place. Most staff members, however, will benefit from having access to a range of support options, which will all assist in maintaining positive, high performing teams throughout the change process.

4. Review

Assessing your results, implementing corrective actions and celebrating your successes are all key components of reviewing the change process. Gathering evidence to show your successes (or shortfalls) of the change process can be carried out by:

- Collecting feedback from users (anecdotal or survey)
- Carrying out compliance audits on new processes, systems and job roles
- Reviewing areas of resistance and working through your strategies
- Identifying areas of success for the project (make these visible in the organisation to reinforce the change)

Done well, reviews and self-assessments of your change management strategy will promote continuous improvement of your processes and culture.

Organisational change is usually motivated by either a need to adapt (for example, to meet new regulatory requirements or to weather the economic climate), or by a vision to evolve and improve. It might be a combination. Whether you are getting ready to diversify, restructure, redevelop or innovate, a thoughtful change management strategy is the best practice place to start.

About the Author

Anna Pannuzzo is the Director of WorkPlacePLUS, OTA's preferred HR provider. OTA members can receive professional support for addressing complex HR issues such as restructuring, bullying and harassment claims, industrial audits, employment agreements, and more.

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