Canadian Management Centre®

Helping Your Team Overcome Change Fatigue

COVID-19 brought many changes to the workplace. Our work as well as our personal lives changed with the increased level of uncertainty. A lot of us simply felt exhausted with so many adjustments that needed to be made. Simon Terry's tweet echoed with many of us: "Change fatigue. Resilience fatigue. Agility fatigue. WFH fatigue. Video-conference fatigue. Online schooling fatigue. Restriction fatigue. Conflict fatigue. 2020– the international year of fatigue."

Dealing with so much change and managing people who are simply exhausted requires resilience and resolution. We at Canadian Management Centre gathered some useful tips and best practices for you to help you navigate these tricky times.

1 Evaluate your team's readiness for change

Change of any magnitude can be unnerving. The first step to manage change and the exhaustion that comes with it is to assess the readiness of your team. Managers must really invest time in knowing their team members well and cultivate a culture of trust so that when an uncertain situation arises, their team knows who to go to first. This way change management becomes an easier task than an overwhelming challenge.

"Today's average employee can absorb half as much change before coming fatigued as they could in 2019"

– Gartner, Top Priorities for HT Leaders 2022

When you know where your team is at while dealing with change fatigue, you are better able to meet their emotional and professional needs. For example, a good place to start is to pay attention to small day-to-day changes in your team's workload because of the change.

Ask yourself: How well are they responding to these changes and how can you help them be more effective and less overwhelmed?

2 Understand and honour your own needs

When trying to deal with a difficult situation, many times managers tend to overlook their own discomfort with the change. It is a good idea to sit with yourself and try to understand how you feel about the change, no matter how small it is. Comprehending the implications of change and how it impacts you personally and professionally prepares you as the manager to influence others effectively. This can also be useful when you communicate with the team; you will have clearer answers and a roadmap to success when managing everyone's needs.

Ask yourself: What fears, worries and concerns need to be addressed at a personal level and what support do I need at this time?

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3 Acknowledge change and the discomfort that comes with it

When we have an uncertain situation on our hands, our first impulse is to find a quick fix to the problem. Psychologists call this "anxious-fixing" where we exhaust ourselves even more by trying to find an instant relief solution.

Many times, we forget to pause and reflect on how the change is impacting us. As leaders and managers, we might run the risk of inviting more panic and fatigue if we don't allow some time for our team to manage their emotions and discomfort. It is a good idea to create outlets for them to share their concerns, ask questions and feel all the feelings. This technique is also helpful outside of COVID related changes. A Gartner's study suggests that smaller changes like being assigned to a new manager are 2.5 times more exhausting.

Therefore, managers and leaders might need to acknowledge the unease that comes with change, big or small, and give space to manage anxiety, curiosity, and fatigue.

4 Adopt the mantra, "I am a person who is learning _____"

While trying to figure out uncertain situations, it is helpful to deal with change through a growth mindset. We do not have answers and solutions for every new challenge that comes our way. Neither can we sit and feel helpless when times are tough.

Instead of having self-defeating thoughts, you and your team can benefit by adopting the mantra, "I am learning to ____" or "We are a team learning to __". This instantly shifts the perspective of the entire team towards learning to deal with change together. They feel less lonely and more supported when you as the manager model this mindset.

5 Make plans from which you will deviate

Our brains like to follow past patterns and trends to find solutions to problems. When faced with a brand-new challenge, our brains require more focus, more energy, and more information to come up with ideas. We get stuck in analysis-paralysis with so many possibilities, so many ways to solve a problem.

Teams can tackle analysis-paralysis by planning what they will do when something happens. Doing this without a set agenda, lets teams spend time brainstorming many ideas and possible solutions without exhausting themselves to find one perfect answer. Managers can use this technique to allow for flexible planning to minimize frustration and anxiety when plans shift, and new challenges arise.

6 Invest in healthy team rituals

Studies reveal that habits and rituals help to minimize stress levels. This is especially helpful in times of uncertainty. Rituals, even if we believe they don't work, simply help us feel that we are in control of our life and reduce feelings of unease and discomfort.

However, incorporating rituals in teams and organizations collectively can be challenging, even impossible at times. Teams can reflect on what matters most to them together and then find ways to integrate small rituals to help achieve their goals. For example, starting each meeting with a breathing exercise or sharing an inspiring story might help teams facing high stress situations. This small activity not only lowers anxiety but also build healthy team relationships; a key to workforce resilience.

By using these strategies, managers can minimize feelings of exhaustion, provide support and be empathetic during difficult times.

Sources:
Gartner: Top Priorities for HT Leaders 2022
Harvard Business Review: *Managers, What are you doing about Change Exhaustion?*

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