

The Surprising Key to Getting the **RETURN TO THE OFFICE RIGHT**

BY SCOTT MAUTZ



Yet another wave of change is upon us as we head toward the return-to-the-office phase of this foul pandemic.

While there is no standard answer as to what that will look like, everyone agrees on one thing: It means change. There's no going back to exactly the way things were before.

And there's one other certainty. Nothing can catalyze, or paralyze, an organization quite like change. It's a truth that has been continually reinforced over the past year in particular. One client I keynoted for pivoted brilliantly at the beginning of the pandemic, reinventing the categories it competes in, the services it offers, and how it offers them. Another shuttered its doors. For good.

Now, as we prepare to head back to the office in some form, reentry is mixed with reinvention and plenty of reservation. All ingredients for the dish that is never-ending change. And the key to success with the latest wave of change may surprise you. It's the same success driver with any wave of change, and it lies with the backbone of any organization: the middle manager. That's right, anyone who has a boss and is a boss, who must lead up, down, and across their organization.

Plain and simple, the change that needs to happen now simply won't be executed well without the mid-level players leading the way. It's the middle managers who are closest to top brass that pass down change, who are in the best position to help them formulate change, who might create change themselves, and who are closest to those below that must live the [often emotionally charged] change.

As we enter this next phase of dealing with the pandemic, it's the middle managers who must provide direction, carry themselves as strong change leaders, keep employees focused, and role-model resilience. I'll share some key steps here to help you do each of these things, drawing just a bit from my book *Leading from the Middle: A Playbook for Managers to Influence Up, Down, and Across the Organization*.

PROVIDING DIRECTION

I interviewed/surveyed/focus grouped/studied thousands of successful middle managers and their employees for my new book. As we drilled down into the subject of change, I came across a startling fact. The No. 1 thing employees want from leaders in the face of change is clear direction. Yet only 15% say they get it. Ouch.

You can beat the percentages in this next pandemic work phase by following these three steps:

Set a directional agenda. You can't withhold direction-setting, waiting until you've had time to develop a fully baked,

long-term plan. People will expect direction immediately as you begin returning to the office. So start by setting a directional agenda that outlines the work that needs to be done promptly and why, with timelines and tasks, identified processes and structures, and so on.

It's about quickly fostering a sense of order and forward progress, not about setting the plan-of-all-plans in stone. In fact, you can reserve the right to change your mind on the nuances of the direction you're setting. That's why it's called a directional agenda.

But do share one, because inertia quickly leaves employees feeling rudderless, uncertain, and unsupported. They'll have difficulty focusing on anything other than what the change will require from them personally. In the absence of an agenda, they'll make assumptions—which helps no one.

Set a vision. The organization needs a North Star, a broader vision for how the changes brought about by the return to the office fit into a longer-term plan that will improve the organization and help it achieve its goals. It's about cementing a unity of effort, painting a compelling picture of a desired future state for everyone to rally around—getting the change story right.

That's right, something as seemingly mundane as returning to the office presents a great opportunity to tell a broader, grander, "change for the better" story.

Keep your vision simple, be clear on the benefits of the vision for the organization and the employees, and communicate it repeatedly.

Anchor the organization. Especially now, people need a steadying force in their life, an anchor to provide some sense of certainty. Provide that by highlighting what won't change as you return to the office, being clear on expectations, roles, and responsibilities as you return, being visible and available to your chain of command and employees as you lead the change, and celebrating victories along the way to foster feelings of success and self-belief.

CARRYING YOURSELF AS A STRONG CHANGE LEADER

Leading in the face of change is like being a fish in a fishbowl—your every move is visible, all around, and people are watching, especially after being out-of-office for so long. Employees will be taking cues from the way leaders act in this return-to-the-office phase, so it's critical to role-model the attributes that will have the biggest positive ripple effect.

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Not to worry. My research across a multitude of successful change leaders reveals a very specific pattern of how the best ones carry themselves in times of change. Think of “how to be” during change by considering the 5 Cs of Leading Change:

Calm. Emotions run high in times of change. Especially now. People try to resolve the associated uncertainty by making assumptions (often incorrect), further fueling emotion, agitation, and unproductiveness. Chaotic behavior from leaders throws gas on the fire.

Instead, be the calmest person in the room. Don’t jump to conclusions prematurely or make uninformed assumptions. Speak in a controlled tone and act with a steady, measured confidence. Doing so keeps everyone focused on what must be done versus what might happen.

Candor. Change creates doubt and fear. Honest communication creates certainty and eases fear, if done well. The key is to share information openly and truthfully, while striking a balance between reality and hope. Employees need the truth, but they also need reasons to feel optimistic.

Clarity. Change also creates confusion. Provide clarity in what you say, do, and intend. With what you say, be direct, specific, and concise. Before saying something, ask yourself one question: “Will this communication trigger the WENDY

response?” (What Exactly Now Do You mean?). This is not the ideal response. Asking this question forces precision in your communication, which is vital for clarity.

Also, be sure that what you do reinforces what you say. Employees are watching, and mixed messages here will confuse. And be transparent about your intentions, always. You can make a mistake of content, but never of intent. If people are unclear about your motive for doing something, trust evaporates.

Concern. Change elicits an emotional journey. Change in the middle of a horrific pandemic? More so. Show empathy and understanding for employees as they work through what the return to office and associated change mean for them professionally and personally. Acknowledge and ease their distress by reminding them they’re not alone in working through it.

Courage. Rarely is taking tiny, risk-free steps enough to successfully adapt to substantive change. Big change requires big thinking and bold moves. It requires perseverance and an understanding that missteps won’t bring you anywhere near as far backward as your progress has brought you forward—that’s why it’s called a misstep, not a mis-leap.

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KEEPING EMPLOYEES FOCUSED

It’s common for employees to lose their focus during times of adversity and the change that comes with it. Change is a lot to process and work through, especially in this case, so it’s understandable—but not acceptable from a business standpoint. To refocus employees (and yourself), it’s best to keep things simple and follow the 3P Approach:

Pragmatic implications. Discuss with employees: “Given the change we’ve gone through or will go through, what are the pragmatic implications we must address?”

Possibilities. Discuss with employees: “Given the change we’ve gone through or will go through, what are the possibilities that present themselves because of the change?”

Priorities. Discuss with employees: “Given the change we’ve gone through or will go through, what are the priorities we must laser in on?” (Discuss whether they’re the same priorities as before or new ones.)

ROLE-MODELING RESILIENCE

Many leaders say the single toughest thing about change is staying resilient. Change wears everyone down, especially those who must lead it, and especially now. But if you don’t display resilience, employees won’t either. Here are six powerful ways to be a resilience role model:

Avoid victim mentality. Playing the victim in the face of change—believing you have no control over outcomes, thinking you’ve been irreparably wronged, or being stuck in “It’s not fair”—is devastating because the underlying belief is “I’m powerless.” Learned helplessness and inaction follow. That is poisonous. Instead, believe that you can plow through associated challenges—you have before and will again.

Find the agreeable adversity. Change brings adversity, not all of which is disagreeable. As you return to the office, ask yourself these questions: “Where’s the good in this?”; “What possibilities does this present?”; and “How might learning and growth happen?”

As for the unpleasantness adversity brings, resilience comes from being pragmatic versus pessimistic. Realistically assess implications without exaggerating, and take the pragmatic actions needed. Key here is putting your energy toward problem solving versus emotional coping.

Don’t fly solo. Resilience is a group activity. Lean on your support network to help manage stress, solve challenges, diffuse tensions, and identify opportunities. Leaders say the biggest reason resilience breaks down during change is that they start feeling like they’re going it alone. You don’t have to.

Let your anchor steady you. Much as you anchor the organization when providing direction (discussed earlier), you must also anchor yourself. Uncertainty accompanying change drains your sense of control. You regain some control when you re-anchor by considering what *won’t* change with change—your values.

If I asked you to write down your three most closely held, non-negotiable values, could you? If you haven’t tried this exercise, do so. Keeping your values top of mind while upping your tolerance for ambiguity is a powerful duo for staying resilient.

Remember the Attitude Anthem. “Life is 10% what happens to you, 90% how you react to it.” That’s a quote from author Charles Swindoll, one I kept on my office door for daily doses of resilience. To practice that spirit here, ask yourself three questions when lamenting the impacts of change:

Will this change as we return to the office...

- weaken me to the point of ruin or make me stronger in some ways?
- cause irreparable damage, or be a setback I can recover from?
- cause others to truly doubt me or just me to doubt myself?

It’s in that 90%, how you react, that resilience lies.

Remember the Gratitude Anthem. “You are enough. You have enough.” That’s it. The return to office presents many challenges, but you have so much to be grateful for. Resilience comes from self-reflection.

So, middle-manager heroes, lead the charge back to the office with confidence and conviction. And remember that you’re not stuck in the middle—you have the chance to lead in every direction. [AQ](#)

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