

Adopt Mindfulness Principles to Help Facilitate Change



If you've ever participated in, or led, a change management effort, you know how difficult it can be to get others (or even yourself!) to embrace the desired change. While change can be incredibly valuable and is a norm for today's organizations to thrive and survive, researchers estimate that as many as 70 percent of all change initiatives stall, lose focus, or get derailed.

Rather than changing the likelihood of change initiative success, many organizations are increasingly looking at mindfulness—the individual state of active, open attention on the present—as a vital tool to help guide employees through the inevitable peaks and valleys that accompany change.

In this article, we'll explore how mindfulness can benefit your organization's change efforts. But first, it's useful to understand the fundamental challenges inherent in any change effort.

Why Change Often Fails

It helps us to understand that we are biologically hardwired to resist change, which, in our distant evolutionary past, often signaled life-threatening danger. Simply put, change and risk-taking entails uncertainty. That's why most people stick with a sure outcome over a gamble with higher or equal expected value (a mindset that psychologists call risk-aversion). This partially explains why people stick with jobs, relationships, or property that they don't really like: it's because the alternatives—even if logical to outside observers—are simply too unknown and daunting.

Couple our inherent wariness of change with the way many change efforts are introduced—often sub-optimally—and it becomes easier to understand why as many as seven out of ten change efforts are unsuccessful.

Famed management consultant Peter F. Drucker catalogued the reasons why many change efforts fail to achieve their full potential:

1. **Insufficient Urgency:** The organization fails to establish urgency for why the change is needed.
2. **Ineffectual leadership:** Change led by leaders with insufficient power, prestige, and/or management support to effectively lead the change effort.
3. **Inadequate vision:** The framed vision about the change fails to fully answer: What will be different? What will be preserved? How will the vision be achieved?
4. **Poor communication:** Inadequate communication of the vision, to the point that the change is perceived as a threat, not an opportunity.
5. **Adherence to the past:** Prior systems, policies, or structures that undermine the vision are not dealt with.
6. **Lack of recognition:** Change leaders do not properly recognize and reward individuals and teams for performance improvements through their change efforts.
7. **Rushing results:** Change leaders fail to properly monitor change effort progress and prematurely declare completion.
8. **Incomplete commitment:** Employees are allowed to revert to old, familiar ways of doing things instead of being required to adopt change.

Structuring Change Success

No matter the scope or scale of a planned change, experts suggest that the process will be most effective when it:

1. Has active senior leadership involvement and commitment
2. Is carefully planned
3. Engages the entire team or organization
4. Proactively introduces new ways of doing things
5. Sustains its successes

Of the success factors listed above, the most important is senior leadership involvement and commitment. When deciding whether to commit to and support change, employees take their cues from their leaders. A change effort

will more likely succeed with leaders who strongly make the case for change, create a sense of urgency of driving it, effectively communicate the need for change and find meaningful ways to involve others in generating ideas and plans to support the change (people support what they help create).

Conversely, multiple studies show that when leaders simply announce a change, then disappear and leave change implementation to others, the likelihood of the change succeeding falls dramatically.

Why do many leaders avoid proactively embracing and leading change, and instead dither with non-change-related activities? While there may be many reasons why leaders insufficiently lead change (e.g. too busy, too complacent, etc.), I believe one of the strongest factors is the fear of confrontation and not knowing how to handle it.

Keeping in mind our inherent risk aversion, when faced with the prospect of change-induced conflict, many leaders would prefer to do something else than face conflict. This aversion scenario becomes more noticeable when leaders lack the support and tools necessary to handle the conflict. And that's especially true in the health care industry, which has faced, and will continue to face, a disproportionate amount of change. Combine that with the fact that health care is an intrinsically complicated and emotional people-centric business, and you have all the right elements for health care leaders who dread change efforts.

Applying Mindfulness to Change

This is the point where mindfulness can be a particularly helpful tool when handling change and the inevitable conflicts that go with it. Too often during change situations, people allow themselves to be consumed with fear, resentment, or even anger. This response is one way of reacting, but it's not productive. Such thoughts typically involve the past, which has already occurred and cannot be changed, or the future, which is just imagined until it happens.

With a mindful approach, rather than allowing negative thoughts and feelings to control you and interfere with your other activities, you instead observe them, as if from a distance, without judging them as "negative." Instead, you opt to live in the moment and pay attention to your current state.

The result of a mindful approach? Individually, the results include:

1. Less stress—as illustrated in academic studies
2. Increased self-awareness
3. Reduced rumination (constant re-thinking about a subject)
4. Increased memory and focus

5. Greater cognitive flexibility
6. Less emotional reactivity
7. Greater relationship satisfaction

Among the list of results, the latter two are crucial in change situations, as they rely on effective interactions among colleagues for success.

If you've been thinking mindfulness is simply a "feel good" exercise, think again. As recently reported by [Forbes](#), companies as varied as Aetna, Intel, and Keurig Green Mountain have adopted mindfulness as a leadership practice and report gains in individual employee health, productivity and job satisfaction. That's important, as job-related stress has been shown to cause a litany of adverse physiological, psychological and behavioral outcomes.

As reported by the [Mayo Clinic](#), the negative effects of stress can include muscle tension/pain, fatigue, upset stomach, sleeplessness, anxiety, irritability, depression, overeating/undereating, angry outbursts and social withdrawal. It's no wonder that chronic stress is linked to the six leading causes of death: heart disease, cancer, lung ailments, accidents, cirrhosis of the liver, and suicide.

Aetna's CEO promoted mindfulness company-wide after he found it helped him cope with constant pain following a ski accident. More than one-fourth of Aetna's 50,000+ employees have participated in at least one mindfulness class, and report an average of 28 percent reduction in stress levels, a 20 percent improvement in sleep quality, and a 19 percent reduction in pain. Aetna also reports that participating employees have gained an average of 62 additional minutes per week in productivity, providing a \$3,000 per-employee annual gain, and use on average \$2,000 less in healthcare services.

Intel initially began its mindfulness program with approximately 1,500 employees. After participating in mindfulness training, these employees reported a two point average decrease in stress (on a 10-point scale) and a three point average increase in happiness. Intel found these results sufficiently compelling to expand its mindfulness program to more than 10,000 employees.

Practicing Mindfulness

Change is challenging enough to people even under "normal" circumstances. Add change to an already fast-paced and often stressful industry, like healthcare, and you have the makings of potentially serious staff health and adoption issues. That's why healthcare industry leaders are increasingly willing to apply the proven principles of mindfulness to their change efforts.

I've seen the positive power of mindfulness firsthand, from the yoga classes I instruct part-time to my full-time role as a health care industry consultant. I've witnessed how mindfulness can transform the culture of a workplace and

give people permission to interact with one another on a level of deeper understanding and compassion.

If you're new to mindfulness, know that it's relatively easy to learn and practice. It's useful to receive instruction on mindfulness practices from a practitioner/instructor experienced in applying mindfulness in a health care work environment.