Laboratory supervisors have always had to deal with change. Today these changes are arriving more rapidly than ever. Changes in technology and services are escalating exponentially. Mergers, acquisitions, new competitors, cost-cutting measures, complex collaborative efforts, and other fiscal and institutional issues are adding more threatening alterations. Today, all employees must be adaptable and flexible. Some position descriptions must be radically revised.

Not all employees are quick to embrace change, however. If you have ever tried to implement a new initiative, then you know that some employees can put up real resistance, providing a barrage of reasons why your unit cannot or should not change. You may have heard such statements as the following:

- “Well, here we go again.”
- “How can we get our work done with all this nonsense?”
- “No good will come from this.”
- “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”
- “This is going to cause a lot of problems.”
- “There’s going to be nothing but chaos.”

Managers must be on the alert for these signs of concern, resistance, cynicism, or foot-dragging. They must understand why many people resist change and they must apply the best strategies for introducing innovations.

Why We Resist Change

The major cause for resistance is fear: fear of job loss, fear of loss of working relationships, and fear of the ability to do the new work. Mostly, however, people fear the unknown. The element of surprise can be numbing, so it’s not surprising that the first reaction to change is often resistance. Fortunately, this fear can be largely alleviated by keeping employees informed—still better, by involving them in the planning and/or the implementation process. Leaders should talk with employees about the threats facing their organization and articulate any opportunities the change may present.

Many employees will not support a change until they clearly see the need for it. To widen their field of vision, laboratory leaders should start selling the benefits of a proposed change before they ask employees to implement it. Employees should be informed of trends in laboratories and shown how they measure up to performance benchmarks. When employees see the need for change themselves, they’ll come on board.

Another barrier to change is the fear of obsolescence. Workers may resist changes that make their skills and competencies obsolete. This barrier often can be knocked down by implementing programs to retrain workers for new jobs and to help them develop new skills.

Many initiatives require employees to forge new alliances with other workers, report to new managers, or depend on new power networks. If
you ask employees to keep an eye out for any potential relationship problems, you'll have a chance to work through the disruptive effects. Hold informal meetings during which employees can air their differences. Counsel staffers that professionals rise above personality differences to get the job done.

**Removing Barriers, Brick by Brick**

Following are ways to help employees overcome their resistance to change.

- **Communicate.** Find out as much as you can about changes that are being contemplated. The more you learn, the better prepared you'll be to answer the many questions that will come your way.

  Explain to your employees the need for change, and how it benefits customers, the organization, and your unit. Tell them how they will be affected.

  Make yourself available to answer questions. When you don’t have an answer, get it for them. Be honest. Straight talk is essential to your credibility. Avoid phrases such as “You know as much about it as I do,” or “No one tells me anything either.”

- **Reassure.** It’s helpful if workers can be reassured that the change will not threaten their jobs, assignments, workload, or staffing relationships. Reassurance also is helpful when employees are offered transfers or retraining. They relax when told that positions will be eliminated only after employees leave on their own volition. They also must be reassured that the change was not introduced because of poor performance on their part.

  Listen patiently to their fears, and do your best to alleviate them. Validate their feelings by agreeing or empathizing with them. If you say “I see your point” or “Others have expressed those same feelings,” they no longer have the need to defend their viewpoint, and are more willing to accept the change.

- **Empower.** People respond more positively to change if they feel they have some control over what’s happening. The more that they get involved in the planning and the implementation process, the more confidence they will have.

  Empower them by telling them precisely what you want them to do and, if necessary, showing them how to do it.

- **Be patient.** No change should be implemented until everyone knows what to expect and has had a chance to express his or her concerns. Absorb some of the dissonance by tolerant listening. Give employees time to get used to new ideas. Cushion the stress by accepting a temporary decline in performance. Anticipate and tolerate intense informal discussions around the coffee pot.

- **Practice what you preach.** Model the behavior, attitude, and comments that you want from your staff. For example, when you get the word about a change, do you refer to it as a challenge, look for its best features, agree that it is necessary, and even exhibit enthusiasm? Or, do you groan, wince, or get angry? Do you say things like “Now what?” or “What will they expect of us next?” Be willing to take risks and to accept ownership of unpopular ideas.

- **Reward participation and compliance.** Provide recognition, praise, and other rewards for ideas, help in the planning, and participation in the implementation.

  There’s no denying that a change effort can stir up emotions and fears that lead to resistance. But by recognizing these common barriers, you can devise ways to overcome them and facilitate the process of meaningful change.

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