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How to lead and successfully manage workplace change

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All you have to do is say the word "change" and everyone goes into fight or flight mode. Change takes people out of their comfort zone. It is the fear of the unknown, the feeling that something awful will happen and they will lose whatever control they have of their work and space. However, workplace change doesn't have to be overwhelming.

Company leadership understands that work environments are valuable and necessary tools to support organizational and cultural changes. After all, a company's work environment directly influences employee behavior, morale and productivity. The configuration of a work environment can affect attitude, enhance employee perception, and improve their overall experience and efficiency. Developing a new or significantly modifying an existing workplace environment is one of the most powerful, visible indicators of change an organization can make.

A new workplace strategy is typically fueled by business needs. The needs topping today's list include the desire to increase real-estate efficiency, reduce costs, integrate new technologies, better align with today's multi-generational work styles, increase retention and attract new talent. Dictating change can prove to be costly, time consuming and counterproductive. Carefully orchestrating a strategic approach to change can be much more effective, and ultimately result in better outcomes.

Successful change management is heavily reliant on carefully crafted communication and engagement strategies. It begins with a vision and an implementation plan to drive the project's process. An effective change management plan is essential to supporting a smooth transition to the desired result. It involves leadership, careful planning and close collaboration among Human Resources, Information Technology, Facilities, and Real Estate departments.

Components of a successful Change process:

Vision: Build a case, create the vision and design a "roadmap" everyone can understand and follow. Support from top leadership is vital. The success of a new workplace strategy depends on leadership support, management buy-in and strategically communicating a single, clear, consistent vision. The most successful transitions are when leadership openly supports the vision, remains visibly involved, sets the tone throughout the process, and ideally "walks the talk."

Engagement: People are a company's most valuable resource; therefore, involving everybody affected by the change in the process, the easier and more successful the change will be. Create a change management team to invest employees in the process and promote the vision. Recruit individuals who are enthusiastic, understand and support the need for change, and have enough power to influence others. Once the value of the change is recognized, others become more eager to own the process.

Communicate with stakeholders often and begin early. A common response to change is denial that the change is needed or will actually work, and a collective dread of the process. Everyone assumes that something will be taken away from them. Committee goals should include investing

stakeholders by including them in the process. This ongoing inclusion and education will help them better understand the underlying need. Reinforcing the benefits using visual aids and discussion will help staff to see things from a different perspective, and help to shift attitudes and behaviors.

- * An effective change-management team huddles regularly to ensure milestones are met. In this huddle, they will together review plans, share input and comments, and agree on how to address challenges.

- * Not everyone learns or engages in the same way. The best way to engage stakeholders is by using multiple communications methods and creating opportunities for feedback. This will help to develop the implementation strategies necessary to make it easier for people to accept and adapt to change.

- * Constantly building and reinforcing awareness helps staff to understand the impact, goals and benefits of the change, and is the path to acceptance. Be sure to include plenty of opportunities for questions and answers along the way. This is how people learn and regain that desired sense of control. A line at the door during the process is a whole lot more productive than a line at the end of the process.

Change management tools and strategies can include:

- * Questionnaires
- * Focus workshops
- * Mock-up or pilot spaces
- * Tours
- * Town Hall meetings
- * Project website
- * Exhibits
- * Staff newsletter

Control: Actively manage the change. Develop a detailed schedule of activities and tasks to help drive the process from planning through occupancy. Realistically manage employee expectations; end-user satisfaction is strongly dependent on end-user involvement. The more you involve people in the process, the more efficient the transition will be. By communicating and involving stakeholders the learning curve will be shorter, and enable staff to more readily accept, adapt and, ultimately, become productive more quickly.

Change management is a valuable service SLAM provides as part of our integrated approach, partnering with the leadership of organizations planning to make a cultural and workplace change in support of business needs. An effective change management program can bring tremendous value to an organization. Modifications to the physical work environment can enhance business performance; promote brand and culture consistent with the vision. Change management is most effectively utilized when incorporated into the entire facility development program.

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