



Distribution Center MANAGEMENT

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Managing people, materials and costs in the warehouse or DC

From the Golden Zone

Seven ways to keep employees committed to change

By Richard Lepsinger

Distribution centers large and small spend millions of dollars each year to make change initiatives a success. Whether it's implementing a pricey warehouse management system, embracing new RFID technology, or implementing lean initiatives, change is almost constant in today's DCs.

And yet sometimes the results of those changes are dismal — changes fail to achieve their objectives, and leaders are left wondering what went wrong. Company executives blame change-phobic employees, and employees say executives didn't manage the change effectively. If you're responsible for driving change, you find all the finger-pointing frustrating and, frankly, unhelpful. If only you could pinpoint where the failure originates, perhaps you could head it off at the pass.

Here's some good news. A survey conducted by my firm, OnPoint Consulting, shows the real source of the problem, and it's not getting employees' support for the change effort — it's keeping their support and commitment at high levels.

Most supervisors know they have to clarify the purpose of the change, develop a transition plan, and get employees committed to the change effort right up front. And many of them appear to do a pretty good job at first. But in the first month after the big kickoff, employee commitment and support for the change begins to trail off.

I call that point the “commitment dip.” Top performing companies detect this dip and quickly take action to get back on track. Less successful companies take longer to reverse the trend — and even if they are able to do so, many times their recovery does not stick.

What can you do to avoid the commitment dip in your DC? Here are some guidelines to help you implement successful changes:

Be forthright about the change and its impact. Many supervisors are hesitant to discuss a change with employees. Sometimes it's a misguided attempt to “protect” them. Sometimes it's because they feel they won't be able to answer all the questions. In either case, not discussing a change with employees is a mistake.

Model behaviors that support the change. In other words, “walk the talk!” Be sure your supervisors do not revert to old behaviors. If employees perceive that there are two sets of rules and behaviors — one for them and one for senior leaders — the change will lose credibility and be seen as less important.

Get supervisors onboard. Conventional wisdom emphasizes the importance of getting the senior team onboard. But one big difference

Your change won't be successful if you aren't realistic about what can be accomplished in the time available.

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between top companies and less successful ones seems to be the extent to which supervisors feel involved in and integral to the change process.

Don't put your plan on automatic pilot.

Many companies do a lot of work on the front end to put a plan in place that clearly communicates the objectives and prioritizes them so employees know what they should be doing when. Management assumes all it needs to do is switch on the automatic pilot and say, "go," and employees will stay committed to the plan and carry out the change. Companies that do this will find that they aren't achieving their planned change objectives.

Set realistic objectives and milestones.

Regardless of how often you revisit and revise your plan, your change won't be successful if you aren't realistic about what can be accomplished in the time available. Don't set employees up for failure by asking them to bite off more than they can chew in the first critical few months. If they feel overwhelmed or pressed for time in getting certain goals accomplished,

they will lose enthusiasm for the effort.

Don't underestimate the resources required. Over-committing existing resources or underestimating what it takes to accomplish change objectives is a primary cause of change initiatives' failing to meet their intended outcomes. Keep in mind that your employees have regular jobs aside from the work they'll do to make the change a success.

Maintain enthusiasm and excitement among your employees. Think about what's going on during the first month of the change. Senior-level executives and supervisors are pumping up the troops. After the first month, though, employees can lose focus on the task at hand. To keep employee enthusiasm from waning, continuously celebrate your company's successes and communicate the benefits of the change to your employees so that they stay motivated.

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