

How to Make Change Work for You – Even if You Don't Like It



In the Air Force we called them GOBI's: General Officer Bright Ideas. From our often limited point of view they were ideas that could only have come from someone far removed from the reality of the situation. Of course new ideas and changes to policy don't have to come from the very top, and they can be disruptive no matter where they come from.

Leading directed change

Your job as a leader is to implement these changes; whether you agree with them or not. Leaders are often taught that they must accept the boss's idea and present it to their team as though it was their own. But it's tough to pull that off. Those that try appear either insincere or out of touch with the realities of the organization.

If you don't agree with a change, or feel it may be detrimental to your team, appearing to embrace it as your own will be a significant hit on your personal integrity and your team will either think you haven't been listening to them, don't really understand, or have sacrificed them and your integrity for points with the boss.

So what's a leader to do? Accept that everyone answers to someone and must from time to time lead change they may not agree with. You'll be more successful if you strive to gain a complete understanding of your team and its people. Develop an open relationship that allows communication to flow both ways. It's essential for your team to know

you're concerned about them and want to know what they think. The same is true about your relationship with your boss.

There's a simple 3-step method that will keep you straight with your boss, your team, and yourself.

1. Make sure you fully understand what you're being asked to do. Then approach the boss with concerns and suggestions – privately. A public challenge will make the boss defensive and much less likely to hear or consider your concerns.

When you've clearly expressed your thoughts and a decision has been made, you are obligated to implement the change to the best of your abilities. That can be difficult but it's what you must do. So, the next step is to present the change to your team.

2. Clearly explain the pending change. If you presented a rebuttal, you can explain that, but don't bad mouth the boss. Simply explain that the boss heard your concerns but felt it was necessary to proceed. If your rebuttal resulted in a

modification of the original idea, you can mention that. It will show your team that you really have expressed their concerns. People want a leader to fight for them.

3. Finally, ask your team to help you find the best way to approach the directed change and make it positive for the organization. Who knows, it might actually result in something good which no one anticipated!

Leading change is your responsibility, whether or not you agree with that change. You must support your boss, but you must also support your team. You can do both while keeping your integrity intact.

Leading change when it's your idea

But, what about change that you want to implement. After all, now we're not talking about some silly idea the boss had. This is a great idea and it's important.

If you see things in your organization that could be improved,

processes that could be streamlined, problems that could be solved, by all means, tackle them. But keep this in mind.

Your team may see your ideas the same way you saw your boss's ideas. So you will need to sell them on why you think a change is necessary and beneficial.

Before you do anything, go back and review the chapter on problem solving and decision making. Then, review the first part of this chapter. With that in mind, ask yourself where and why there will be opposition to your idea. Don't flatter yourself; someone is not going to agree with you. Be prepared for that argument.

Consider the timing. Big changes are not well received when they are suddenly announced while other major efforts are underway. Granted, this may be necessary, but only when the change is directly related to that major effort. Also, constant change with no time to adapt can be very disruptive.

So, you've considered all these points and carefully crafted your idea. You're ready to make a change.

These days there is a lot of emphasis on innovation. A good leader will encourage innovation and the change that comes with it. This may mean implementing a change that a team member advocates. Encourage good ideas from your team. Don't try to be the smartest person in the room.

How do you present that change to your team and gain acceptance?

Consider two points. First, people are seldom as resistant to change as you might think. What they are resistant to is what they see as dumb or unnecessary change. Therefore, it's your job to convince them that your idea is not dumb.

Second, people are much more willing to accept change if they feel they have at least some input into how the change is implemented.

With these two points in mind, your first task is to present the situation that impels you to make the change. No accusations here; just the facts. You haven't started selling your idea yet, but if you can't get agreement on the basic issue you're addressing, you won't get buy-in to your idea.

Now that you've explained the problem and received agreement from your team, you can move on to that great idea you can't wait to share. Careful now. It's not a good idea to blurt out, "Here's what we're going to do." Instead, try a softer approach. Something like, "What about if we tried this?" Then, lay out your idea in sufficient detail to make sure your team knows what you have in mind.

Then, and this is critical, openly listen to their feedback. There's

always a very good chance you missed something. If you've built a good, dynamic team they will pepper you with thoughts, arguments, and suggestions. Now they are part of the change process. Most likely, you also have a better idea of how to implement your idea than when the meeting started.

Human nature being what it is, you will most likely not receive a standing ovation and fawning adoration from everyone on your team. Reaction to change has often been equated to the stages of grief following a death. That's pretty depressing and it's especially true for those who are invested in the old way of doing things. I've found that there are normally three types of people when it comes to change. Consider them carefully as they aren't always what they seem.

First are those who will enthusiastically embrace your idea. There are two subsets to this group. Those who actually do believe your idea has merit and those who could not care less about your idea but will support anything you say since you're the boss and they may want something from you later.

The second are the take-it-or-leave-it group. They don't really care if you make changes or not as long as it doesn't upset their world too much. These folks probably won't oppose

you, but they also probably won't be big supporters. Don't ignore them. They may seem harmless enough, but are more easily swayed by those who don't like your idea and can switch to the third type if they feel threatened.

The third type may not have legitimate reasons for not liking your idea. They might see it as a threat to their position, or they may just not like you. Whatever the reason, these folks are the most likely to work against you. In doing so they will probably also try to turn others against your idea. This is the group you need to spend some time with.

Have them tell you what they don't like about the idea. Asking what they don't like is more specific than why they don't like it. Why leads to whining. What leads to facts.

Take these critiques seriously. They may be right. Also, by seriously considering their input you may win them over. Remember, people like to be part of the answer that leads to success.

Don't let this group become whiners. In the end it may be necessary to take a more directive approach. Point out that you have listened to their inputs and would like to continue to hear their thoughts as the change is implemented.

Now that you've achieved a reasonable level of buy-in, you've implemented the change and are starting to see results. You will also probably see the upsetting results of the Law of Unanticipated Consequences. This is also sometimes expressed as "No good deed goes unpunished." Chances are something unexpected and unwanted will happen because of your change. Don't hide that. As soon as you realize this has happened, bring it up with your team and deal with it. Those unexpected problems won't usually derail your idea, unless you let them fester and grow.

But, what if your idea was a dud?

You thought it was a brilliant idea. You weighed all the options, considered possible consequences, and examined the impact the change would have on the organization. Everything looked good. You implemented the change and sat back to watch the amazing, positive transformation that would follow.

Except it didn't. You naturally set about finding the people who were blocking the way so you could convince them that this really was a brilliant idea and just needed a little time to work. But you were wrong. What seemed brilliant in concept turned out to be less so in

application. This is something that happens to all leaders. The question is, after you've just laid this colossal egg, what do you do next?

1. Admit that your attempt at improvement fell a little short of the mark. There's an old saying that the first thing to do when you find yourself in a hole is to stop digging.
2. Do an honest analysis of what went wrong. Was the idea bad to start with? Did your implementation leave a little to be desired? Was the timing of the change bad?
3. Once you've done your own analysis, gather a few of your trusted team members and

get their feedback. This can be a little painful, but that you asked for their opinions will go a long way towards success in the next step.

4. Decide whether to try again. It's very possible that you were on the right track, but your idea needed a little adjustment. The input from your team may well answer that question and since you asked for their thoughts, they'll be much more likely to support your next attempt.

Most importantly, don't stop trying. Learn from what happened and move on.



About the Authors

Steve Alltop and Bob Mason are dedicated to leadership development and concentrate on developing leadership skills in supervisors and managers. Their approach stems from their firm belief, backed by extensive experience, that leadership doesn't have to be complicated. Leadership is simply getting things done through people and when supervisors and managers understand themselves, their purpose, and their team they become effective leaders.

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Steve Alltop is a former U.S. Air Force fighter pilot. His military career took him from pilot training to high-performance jet aircraft in combat to an assortment of command and leadership positions. Retiring from the Air Force after 24 years of service, Steve joined the corporate world as a project manager supporting diverse projects which provided high-tech solutions to the modern warfighter.

Steve is a free-lance project manager serving in the high-tech space industry. But he thoroughly enjoys spending time with his leadership students when he can and believes he is enriching lives by helping folks find the great leader within themselves and by having a lasting effect on those that they lead.

Steve is a graduate of the United States Air Force Academy with a B.S. in Astronautical Engineering. He holds a Masters of Aeronautical Sciences, a Masters of Business Administration and is a certified Project Management Professional. He currently resides in Colorado Springs, Colorado where he enjoys his family and powered paragliding.



During a 30-year career in the U.S. Air Force, Bob Mason worked in aircraft and munitions maintenance and was a crew member in combat rescue. Early in his career he was given the opportunity to lead ever larger and more complex teams, eventually commanding four different squadrons, including a deployed aircraft maintenance squadron and the Air Force's largest munitions squadron.

When Bob retired from the Air Force he started a company dedicated to helping others learn the skills that he has found make leaders successful. He has studied leadership extensively, but more importantly has been there, working with real people, making hard decisions, and experiencing the results.

Bob is a professional speaker and author and a Past President of the New Mexico chapter of the National Speakers Association. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Human Resource Management, a Master of Science in Aeronautics, and a Master of Business Administration in Aviation. He is the author of four books on leadership. Bob lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico where he and his wife enjoy hiking and exploring the history of the Southwest.