

Unless you're a fresh startup, your organization has a history. It's a pretty good bet that your history includes some significant changes. And you're about to introduce another...

Whether your company's history is a source of pride and loyalty or a dark dungeon of despair, you can't afford to ignore the past as you introduce change. The uncertainty of change stirs emotions even in those who aren't inclined to express them. For some, those emotions may be positive as they see the potential for a brighter future. For others, even positive changes are accompanied by overwhelming anxiety. And if the change is in any way threatening...

In any change that impacts people (is there any other kind?), managing the emotions of change has as much to do with success or failure as the objectives of the change. Those emotions have roots in each person's history of change experiences. You can't change that history, but you can leverage it.

Building on a Healthy Change Legacy

If you and your predecessors have led well, you can point to past transformations and remind everyone of their successes. Remember how uncertain we were at the beginning and how well it turned out? Imagine where we would be today if we hadn't embraced the challenge of that change?

Make them the heroes of the past change stories, inspiring them to do it again. Tell specific stories that stir memories of overcoming seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Connect those past changes and the current one to the fulfillment of your organization's mission, vision, and values. People will rally together to slay a dragon for an important enough cause.

This needs to be an ongoing communication theme throughout the change process, not just a one-and-done message at the start of the project. For those who weren't around during past changes, they will be encouraged to know there is a history of success.



Building on an Unhealthy Change Legacy

But what if the past isn't such a pretty picture? First, admit it. Don't try to ignore it (they won't), deny it, or gloss over it. Start by acknowledging the bad track record. Then paint the picture of why this change is important to the corporate mission.

With humility, acknowledge that you need their input to form a change plan that will make this time different. Then LISTEN with empathy. Create multiple forums and opportunities for the stakeholders in this change to speak into the change process. Invite lessons learned from past mistakes. Your goal is for them to own the change process, not just execute yours.

Leading Through Change

Whether your history is bright or dark, there are two essential ingredients to managing the emotions of change: *Communicate* and *Celebrate*. Your communication skills – both speaking and listening – need to be on steroids during major change. And never miss an opportunity to celebrate a milestone or intermediate success.

Emotional intelligence is a strong indicator of a person's likelihood of future success. Never is that truer than when leading through change.