

3 Steps to Overcoming Organizational Fear of Change



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It's every entrepreneur's nightmare. Our own version of Home Alone. You finally carved out some time for a much-needed break, only to return to work to find that everything went off the rails while you were gone. Projects are stalled, morale is in the dumps, and chaos seems to have taken up permanent residence. The minute you stepped away, the wheels fell off, and you're left wondering if taking a break was even worth it. Sound familiar?

When this happened to me, my mind went running. One thing I know about myself is I will always try to figure out the root cause of moments like these instead of overanalyzing the symptoms – and in this case, I realized the root cause was fear.

I think of a leader as a stabilizer. Just like a capacitor in a circuit, they provide the steadying force that keeps everything running smoothly. When a leader is present, they absorb shocks, manage the flow of energy, and ensure that the entire system operates efficiently. But what happens when the stable force is removed?

1. Identify the root cause of resistance

Why are employees hesitant to take initiative when the boss is out? It is likely rooted in how we chastise and blame decision-makers. Sometimes, we hyper-fixate on the single point of failure, but the single point of failure is rarely a subject matter expert. They are usually a decision-maker.

It all comes back to fear – even experts will defer decisions because they fear things like job loss. Leaders often don't recognize how pervasive this fear is in the current economic climate. It contributes to overreliance on a single decision-maker instead of empowering others to make choices based on their expertise.

Your first step in solving the problem of fear should be to create a culture that tolerates mistakes – or rather, where the shouldering of responsibility is incentivized. After all, failure stifles innovation. How can we do this? Get to the bottom of the fear.

I prefer a head-on, fact-based discussion where I ask questions like: What is fear to you? What is the worst-case scenario, or the worst, that can happen by speaking your truth right now? Then, I consider the impact. If you narrow it down to the worst-case scenario, you may find out that it is not actually that bad.

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It Actually Makes You More Productive

2. Build trust through transparency

In doing business with folks from all over the world, I've ultimately learned a lot more about us as workers. The English language can be very unspoken and nuanced, especially in the workplace. Messaging can come with tones that sometimes divert people from hearing the intended meaning.

Your second objective is to foster a dynamic where feedback is direct and frequent – that cuts through the ambiguity. Clear, written feedback ensures everyone knows exactly what is expected of them. It eliminates guessing games and helps people understand how they can improve and contribute more effectively. Communicate openly about the reasons for and benefits of change to involve others in planning. Solicit feedback through multiple channels and address concerns to build buy-in.

Again, incentivizing is key. Consistent validation is like giving a helping hand to those who feel unsure or are uncomfortable with ambiguity. Regular encouragement and clear feedback can make all the difference. When roles and expectations are clearly defined, it eliminates the guesswork and helps people focus on their tasks with confidence.

3. Drive accountability for cultural evolution

When people feel comfortable failing, and your lines of communication are well-structured, your last goal is to establish clear roles and responsibilities aligned with the new vision. This step is crucial in reducing anxiety because everyone knows exactly what they need to do and how they fit into the bigger picture. This clarity not only boosts productivity but also ensures that everyone is working towards

the same goals, making the transition smoother and more efficient.

Then, you should monitor progress holistically. Sometimes, being a leader is about constantly supporting and validating your team. Keep an eye on the broader organizational goals and make sure everything is on track, but also pay attention to individual efforts and successes. Regularly check in with your team, celebrate their achievements and offer guidance when needed.

Conquering fear with strategic leadership

Recognizing fear as the core obstacle to change allows for strategic planning. By continuously reflecting on and refining organizational systems, you can sustain a culture that evolves rather than stagnates. Put simply, leadership requires a balance of providing stability while empowering others to embrace necessary shifts. If you can foster an environment where failure is accepted, communication is clear, and roles are well-defined, you create a resilient and adaptable team ready to tackle any challenge, even when you're out of office.

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