

# Key lessons

## Introduction

Picture yourself showing up for business as usual one day — and it's anything but. Just as you're settling in with your first cup of coffee, your boss drops by. Maybe that blog speculating about a merger with a former competitor was true after all. Maybe the division is unveiling a compensation structure that's going to give your team fits. Or maybe the new CEO is planning to take the company in a direction that leaves you scratching your head and worrying about your job.



If you haven't had a day like this yet, you will. As entrepreneur and author [Seth Godin writes](#), "In today's world, betting on chaos is the safest bet of all." And while company changes are hard for most employees, they can be especially hard for managers caught in the awkward position of having to communicate and enact changes they had no part in initiating.

To handle company changes with grace and courage, you'll probably need to accomplish three big tasks:

- Get your own head around the change. How do you feel about it and what does it mean for you?
- Help your direct reports get *their* heads around the change. How do they feel about it, and what does it mean for them — both collectively and individually?
- Implement the change. What are you and your team going to have to do differently, and how are you going to do it?

You may have to do all of these things simultaneously, and in an environment where emotions are running high. You also may need to balance some tough contradictions in your head — for example, recognize that a restructuring is both necessary for your company and potentially painful for your team.

Are you up to the challenge? Knowing and applying these basics can help ensure you do your best to support your team and organization when they need you most.

## **6 Key lessons**

### **1. How you communicate and enact a company change at the team level is crucial to the change's success or failure.**

A company change may feel like it's outside your purview — something for the leadership team or HR to figure out — but team leaders play a critical role. They act as the face of the company (from their direct reports' perspective) and apply the change to the team's daily work. Will you keep your direct reports in the loop? Explain why the change is happening and what it means for them, in a way that resonates? Listen to their concerns? Help them set new goals in light of the change, and measure results over time?

If so, the change will have a much better chance of succeeding. If not, your inaction could contribute to its failure. The stakes really are that high.

### **2. Company changes aren't events with finite endings; they're processes to be woven into your team's daily work and culture.**

In some ways, moving to a new city doesn't end the day you unpack. It begins. Similarly, company changes aren't one-off events — a tough day of layoffs, a new CEO's arrival, the official announcement of a merger — they're the start of a new way of doing things. What about the layoff survivors' morale and workload in the coming weeks and months? The new CEO's efforts to put his or her stamp on the company, and what that might mean for your team's workflow? The power struggles that unfold after a merger when your team actually starts working with new colleagues from a different corporate culture?

### **3. You'll need to customize your approach for each of your direct reports to help them process the change.**

When experienced manager [James Burgess](#) announced to his engineering team that they'd be shifting from a proof-of-concept project to bringing that product to market, his team's reactions were, in his words, "all over the map — from not wanting to change anything, to feeling like we had license to change *everything*."

You should expect a similar range of reactions. Each member of your team has had different experiences with change (both personally and professionally); each has different motivations (both generally and in relation to the change at hand); and each has a different relationship with you and the other leaders involved in communicating and implementing the change. Why *wouldn't* they all react differently?

The critical (and tricky) part for managers is customizing *your* reactions to their reactions. Unless your team is a bunch of clones, a one-size-fits-all approach isn't going to cut it. For tips on figuring out what make your direct reports tick, see our tip on [asking direct reports new questions in their 1-on-1s](#) and our article [5 common career drivers](#).

#### **4. It's dangerously simplistic to think of resistance as bad and acceptance as good.**

The super-analytical direct report on your team who asks hard questions about a change's feasibility might have a point worth communicating up to your manager — one that could make things better for everyone. And the overzealous innovator who loves the idea of change — any change — might get bored with it once it's time to actually execute, and end up letting the team down.

This is not to say resistance is always good and acceptance is always bad, either. The point is both are a natural part of change, have pros and cons, and are usually best evaluated and dealt with on a case-by-case basis. Managers who recognize and embrace this complexity may fare better than those who try to stamp out all forms of resistance and reward all forms of acceptance.

#### **5. You'll need long-term vigilance and discipline to make most changes stick.**

This one is painfully obvious — and painfully difficult to put into practice. There may be times you wonder if anything you're doing is working. Or times you fall into the common (and wildly counterproductive) trap of declaring victory too soon.

The managers who make changes stick are the ones who keep setting doable but challenging goals related to the change, keep measuring results, keep giving team members both reinforcing feedback when they make progress and redirecting feedback when they regress, and generally just keep at it. Persist, and at some point — maybe months or even years from when the change was initiated — you may realize that the new way has become the old way.

## **6. Smart managers proactively and continually build a resilient team.**

Change is a given in the modern workplace. So what if you were to take a proactive, instead of a reactive, stance toward it?

You could get into the habit of regularly asking, “*What could we be doing better?*” and then following through on the best ideas. You could take pains to build a healthy [feedback culture](#), ensuring your team is ready to be communicative and transparent when changes hit. You could stop using 1-on-1s with your direct reports for status updates, and start using them to explore learning and development goals so that your team's skillset keeps pace with your industry. You could screen job candidates for resilience and adaptability by asking interview questions related to their experiences embracing change at work.

Take steps like these, and who knows? You and your team might even look forward to the next company change.

Next: [How to mentally adjust when your company changes](#)