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Organizational change: Implications of directive change management

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Abstract: This article explores the implications of directive change management, characterized by top-down leadership and minimal employee involvement, on organizational dynamics, employee morale, and job security. This approach's psychological and operational impacts are underscored, emphasizing the imperative of addressing employee perceptions and fostering trust. Strategies for rebuilding trust and enhancing morale post-directive change management are presented, including transparent communication, participative decision-making, and recognition of employee contributions. The significance of enhancing job security through clear policies, open dialogue, and robust mental health and well-being support systems is highlighted. Practices that encourage job dedication are introduced, emphasizing goal alignment, meaningful work design, and a culture of innovation and continuous improvement. Long-term strategies for cultivating a healthy workplace, such as establishing feedback mechanisms, investing in leadership development, and maintaining organizational adaptability, are also discussed. This brief article is an introductory resource for business leaders, managers, and change practitioners seeking to be better equipped with the necessary tools and strategies to navigate the post-implementation effects of directive change management. It is anticipated that this information can assist leaders and organizations in navigating the challenges of directive change management, promoting resilience, employee well-being, and sustainable organizational success.

Keywords: directive change management; coercive strategy; directive strategy; organizational dynamics; employee morale; job security; trust rebuilding; participative decision-making; organizational adaptability

1. Introduction

Change management practices can be used to help guide organizational transitions and transformations. Organizational change management practices include structural approaches to align organizations and their stakeholders with change (Hubbart, 2023a, 2023b; Kotter, 2012; Kotter and Schlesinger, 1979; Udofia and Stanley, 2021). Despite guidance from well-accepted methods, organizational change initiatives can be complex and ongoing, requiring specialized skill sets and talented leadership (Ha, 2013). Said differently, implementing change initiatives can be highly challenging, and success often depends on the abilities of leadership to guide employee perceptions, attitudes, and activities toward change in positive ways (Ololube and Ololube, 2017). Ultimately, strategically administered change management best practices are critical if the goal is to refocus an organization's outcomes and outputs while retaining current employees. Despite this, best (or better) change management practices are sometimes overlooked amidst change initiatives (Davidson, 2015).

Directive strategy (sometimes termed coercive strategy) in change management is characterized by top-down leadership and rapid implementation and can be highly

effective when coupled with talented strategic thinking and a willingness for swift adaptation. Al-Kadri et al. (2015) demonstrated this process through a clinical institution's successful transition to an academic entity, highlighting that directive strategies can facilitate quick implementation, thereby overcoming what otherwise may be transitional setbacks. Dunphy and Stace (1993) further supported this perception by showing that many organizations prefer a directive style over traditional incremental and participatory methods of rapid transformative change. Additionally, Ludvig et al. (2013) emphasized the critical role of effective communication in executing strategic changes, particularly in contexts involving compliance with directive change management. Previous studies collectively suggest that while directive strategies in change management may challenge conventional models, they can lead to successful organizational outcomes when combined with strategic management, effective communication, and the ability to swiftly and productively adapt to changing situations (Al-Kadri et al., 2015; Dunphy and Stace, 1993; Ludvig et al., 2013).

Regardless, in the wake of directive management-implemented changes lacking strategic personnel management best practices, employees commonly feel alienated and disconnected from the organization's goals and visions. Kotter (2012) emphasized that successful change involves guiding people through acceptance and commitment, which is often overlooked in directive approaches. Research by Burke and Nanus (1985) highlighted the importance of transformational leadership in contrast to transactional leadership in times of change, suggesting that inspiring and involving employees leads to more successful and sustainable outcomes. The consequences of such unilateral change strategies are multifaceted. A study by Herold et al. (2008) showed that directive change management could increase resistance and decrease employee commitment. These findings are echoed in the work of Armenakis and Harris (2009), who argued that employee buy-in is crucial for the success of any organizational change, a sentiment shared by many previous authors (Hubbart, 2023c; Kotter, 2007; Shtivelband and Rosecrance, 2010; Thomson et al., 1999). Thus, while the directive change management method may be expedient, avoiding employee involvement may lead to unintended consequences, including diminished morale, heightened job insecurity, and a pervasive sense of being underappreciated.

This article explores the adverse effects of such a management style, underscoring the critical need to address and rectify related challenges associated with the method. The article focuses on rebuilding trust, enhancing morale, ensuring job security, and fostering a culture where employees feel valued and integral to the organization's success. Addressing these areas is vital for organizations to recover from the potential challenges of directive changes and thrive in a continually evolving business landscape. This article provides an expediently navigable overview of directive management and approaches to rebuild trust and morale following this change management approach. The goal is not to review all possible literature or methods but to serve as a helpful road to further inquiry for learners, leaders, and organizations.

2. Understanding the effects of directive change management

Directive change management is characterized by a top-down leadership approach and minimal employee involvement, often leading to significant organizational, psychological, and operational impacts. Directive change management can be considered an antithesis to participative change management, which includes, involves, and engages individuals in an organization who assist in diagnosing and improving the organizational change process, fostering shared decision-making with leadership (Tichy et al., 1976). A participative approach reduces resistance to change and enhances performance by emphasizing inclusive and equitable management styles (Pardo-del-Val et al., 2012). As Eisenberger et al. (1986) identified, employees who feel excluded from decision-making tend to experience reduced job satisfaction and commitment, leading to a sense of alienation and decreased morale. Communication challenges, or a lack of communication, often worsen these symptoms. Previous authors repeatedly noted that effective communication is crucial in such moments of change, influencing employee perceptions, attitudes, and outcomes (Elving, 2005). Lack of transparency and rationale in communication during directive changes fosters misunderstanding, mistrust, and resistance among employees (Wanberg and Banas, 2000). Employees may, therefore, feel disconnected from the decision-making process and undervalued. Additionally, the approach can heighten job insecurity because employees may perceive changes as being imposed without consideration for their well-being or job stability. This approach can foster a pervasive sense of being underappreciated as employees feel excluded from contributing to organizational decisions, leading to feelings of alienation and reduced morale (Eisenberger et al., 1986).

Ultimately, the long-term effects of directive change management can harm organizational culture, employee well-being, and outside (stakeholder) perceptions. Kotter (2007) argued that neglecting the human side of change management, such as failing to build a supportive company culture and ignoring employee buy-in, is a primary reason many change initiatives fail internally and externally through reduced public opinion. Griffeth et al. (2000) similarly noted a link between organizational change practices and employee turnover. Thus, directive change management's inherent disregard for employee input and value can lead to increased turnover rates, impacting the organization's stability and incurring additional costs. It is worth noting that directive change management may be a tactic organizational leaders use to coerce employees into voluntarily leaving an organization (Fugate et al., 2012). However, using directive change management to encourage employees to leave should be approached cautiously, considering the ethical, legal, and practical implications. It is often more beneficial to engage in transparent, ethical practices that respect the rights and dignity of all employees. Ultimately, the impacts of directive change management are deep-rooted, affecting the immediate operational changes and the long-term health and functioning of an organization and its employees. Recognizing these effects is crucial for leaders aiming for effective and sustainable organizational change outcomes.

3. Restoring trust and enhancing morale

Reestablishing trust in an organization following directive change management requires a focused and sensitive approach. Leaders must practice transparent and authentic communication (Mayer et al., 1995). Leaders must also commit to clear and consistent communication, acknowledging past missteps, and setting realistic expectations for the future. This approach helps alleviate employee uncertainty and anxiety, laying the groundwork for a more trusting relationship. Another vital element in rebuilding trust is including employees in decision-making processes. Lawler (1992) described the benefits of collaborative decision-making, noting that it enhances the quality of decisions and strengthens employees' commitment to these decisions. By valuing employee feedback and incorporating employee insights into plans, organizations demonstrate respect for their expertise and perspectives. This participative approach is essential to restoring employees' sense of control and value within the organization. In addition, the establishment and maintenance of consistent and fair policies are crucial for regaining trust. Multiple authors have stressed the importance of organizational justice, emphasizing that fairness in processes, outcomes, and interpersonal treatment is fundamental in shaping trust (Cropanzano et al., 2007). Policies that ensure equitable treatment and avoid arbitrary decisions reinforce a sense of security and fairness among employees, further aiding in rebuilding trust (Colquitt et al., 2001; Greenberg, 1990).

Boosting employee morale in the wake of directive change management is essential for transitioning towards a positive and productive work environment. A vital aspect of this involves recognizing and appreciating employee contributions. Grant (2008) noted the significant impact of acknowledgment on employee motivation and job satisfaction. Implementing recognition programs, or even small gestures of gratitude, can help employees feel valued and acknowledged, thereby enhancing morale. Team-building activities and social events also play a crucial role in morale enhancement. Tannenbaum et al. (1992) emphasized the importance of these activities in improving group dynamics and fostering a sense of belonging among employees. Regular team-building exercises and social gatherings can strengthen interpersonal relationships and create a more cohesive and supportive work environment. Furthermore, providing opportunities for personal and professional development is critical for morale. Noe (1986) articulated that employees are more engaged and committed when they feel their growth is supported. Offering training programs, skill development workshops, and career advancement opportunities not only boosts morale but also contributes to the overall skillset and effectiveness of the workforce.

4. Fostering job security and safety

Some of the best practices to restore trust and improve morale can also improve job security and safety. For example, investing in activities that create a sense of job security and safety is critical to stabilizing the workforce after directive change management. Central to this is the need for transparent communication about job stability, which can significantly mitigate employee anxiety and uncertainty. Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt (1984) underscored the importance of perceived job security in shaping employee attitudes and behaviors. Employers can alleviate fears

and foster a sense of stability by openly discussing job roles, future opportunities, and organizational plans. This transparency helps employees understand what they can expect for their position(s), reducing speculation and rumors that often lead to insecurity and stress. Equally important are the policies and procedures that protect employees from arbitrary dismissal. Brockner et al. (1992) demonstrated that perceived fairness in employment practices significantly impacts how employees react to organizational decisions. Establishing clear, fair, and transparent policies regarding layoffs or dismissals can give employees a sense of security, knowing their employment is not at whimsical risk. Such policies should be communicated effectively and applied consistently, ensuring all employees are treated equitably. This sense of fairness is reassuring for employees and crucial to maintaining organizational trust. Moreover, providing robust support systems and resources for mental health and well-being is essential to fostering a safe and supportive work environment. Iverson and Maguire (2000) showed that organizational support mechanisms significantly influence employees' perceptions of job security and overall well-being. Access to counseling services, mental health programs, and stress management resources is critical to helping employees navigate through periods of change and uncertainty. These resources demonstrate the organization's commitment to its employees' well-being, further reinforcing a culture of support and safety.

5. Encouraging employee job investment and dedication

Encouraging employees to invest fully in their jobs in the wake of directive change management requires a multifaceted approach that aligns individual aspirations with organizational goals (i.e., a space to pursue mutual affinities). According to Locke and Latham (1990), success lies in mutual goal-setting, underscoring the importance of specific and challenging objectives. By aligning employee goals with the organization's broader objectives and ensuring these goals are clear and attainable, employees can see the direct impact of their work on the organization's success. This alignment can be achieved through detailed performance reviews, personal development plans, and transparent communication about the company's direction and objectives. When employees understand and buy into organizational goals, their engagement and commitment to their roles are significantly enhanced. Providing meaningful and challenging work is another critical aspect of fostering full-time job investment. Hackman and Oldham (1976) demonstrated that job satisfaction and motivation are higher when employees are engaged in varied, significant, autonomous work and provided clear performance feedback. Organizations can create a more engaging and fulfilling work environment by designing jobs that incorporate these elements. This involves assigning tasks that challenge employees' skills and providing the autonomy to approach and solve problems creatively. Encouraging this level of engagement ensures that employees feel that their work is not just a series of tasks but a meaningful contribution to the organization. Developing a culture that values innovation and continuous improvement is essential to encouraging complete job dedication. Amabile (1997) emphasized the role of a supportive work environment in fostering creativity and innovation, noting that organizations that encourage risk-taking, acknowledge and

learn from failures, and celebrate successes create an atmosphere where employees feel motivated to contribute innovatively. Such a culture stimulates creativity and encourages employees to invest fully in their roles, driven by the belief that their ideas and efforts are valued and make a difference.

6. Long-term strategies for a healthy workplace

Establishing long-term strategies for a healthy workplace following directive change management involves creating sustainable practices that support continuous improvement and adaptability. A critical component of this is the establishment of regular feedback mechanisms (Rogelberg et al., 2002). Surveying employees and encouraging consistent feedback channels are instrumental in understanding the workforce's evolving needs, sentiments, and reactions to changes. This ongoing dialogue allows organizations to stay attuned to their employees, identifying and addressing issues proactively. Such responsiveness not only aids in promptly tackling emerging concerns but also demonstrates a commitment to employee well-being and organizational improvement. Leadership plays a pivotal role in cultivating a healthy workplace; thus, investing in ongoing training for managers is vital. Bennis and Thomas (2002) pointed out the significance of emotional intelligence in leadership, underscoring the need for empathetic, communicative, and understanding leaders. Training programs focusing on these aspects, including leadership skills, can equip managers to better support and engage their teams. Managers may need to develop leadership acumen beyond conventional management skills. This implies that ongoing development is crucial, given that effective leadership can significantly influence employee satisfaction, engagement, and the overall health of the workplace. It ensures that managers are adept at handling day-to-day tasks and can foster a positive, inclusive, and supportive work environment. Additionally, continuously revisiting and adjusting organizational policies and practices is essential for a dynamic and healthy workplace. Worley and Lawler (2006) emphasized the importance of adaptability and flexibility in organizational design. Regularly reviewing and updating policies to align with current and evolving employee needs and external conditions ensures that the organization remains relevant and responsive. This approach requires an openness to innovation and a willingness to experiment with new methods and practices that may better serve the evolving dynamics of the workforce and the market. Such adaptability enhances the organization's resilience and creates an environment where employees feel their needs and voices are valued and respected.

7. Conclusion

The journey to rebuild and revitalize an organization following directive change management is multifaceted and demands a strategic, empathetic approach. Various strategies can assist in restoring trust, enhancing morale, fostering job security, encouraging full job investment, and establishing long-term practices for a healthy workplace. Implementing these strategies is not a quick fix and requires an investment of time and resources in an ongoing process that also requires commitment and adaptability from organizational leaders.

Restoring trust depends on transparent communication and the genuine involvement (empowerment) of employees in decision-making processes. Enhancing morale is rooted in recognizing employee contributions, fostering strong team dynamics, and supporting personal and professional growth. Ensuring job security and safety involves clear communication about job stability, fair employment policies, and accessible mental health resources. Full employee job investment is encouraged by aligning individual and organizational goals, providing meaningful and challenging work, and nurturing a culture of innovation. Finally, long-term positive cultural enhancement of the workplace following directive change management requires clear workload expectations, regular feedback, continuous leadership development, and adaptable policies and practices. Ultimately, the path to a healthier organizational environment post-directive change is an ongoing journey. It demands an understanding of the profound impact such changes have on employees and a commitment to cultivating a workplace culture that values, supports, and motivates its workforce. The strategies discussed herein provide a roadmap and a springboard for further information for organizations looking to recover from directive changes, thrive, and foster a resilient, engaged, and committed workforce.

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