

Executives who want to implement a change need to identify the influencers in their organization who can help push the project forward — or who can cause it to stall.

Executives who want to head in a new direction need to identify the influencers in their organization. They then need to work with them in different ways, because influencers come in six types, ranging from sponsors to cautious fence-sitters to negative sceptics.

How do you get employees to embrace change, rather than fear it?

That was the question that kept surfacing for Ellen R. Auster (Schulich School, York University) and Trish Ruebottom (Goodman School of Business, Brock University) as they worked with executives as consultants and oversaw more than 400 change projects conducted as part of the Kellogg/Schulich Executive MBA program.

What they heard, over and over, was frustration. Change projects that were cut short or stalled. Projects that suffered from push-back from suppliers. Staff that got disengaged or burned out. “Left unattended, scepticism, fear and panic can wreak havoc on any change process,” Auster and Ruebottom write in “Navigating the Politics and Emotions of Change,” in the Summer 2013 issue of MIT Sloan Management Review. “Performance may also drop as exasperated high-performing employees leave for calmer seas.”

Their solution? A five-step, proactive process designed to help leaders identify and direct both the politics and the emotions that are churned up by heading in new directions.

Step 1: Map the political landscape. Change leaders need to “map the political landscape — the key external and internal, formal and informal stakeholders who will be affected” Auster and Ruebottom write. Politics will emerge as stakeholders weigh in to represent their interests, and change leaders need to know who is out there.

Step 2: Identify the key influencers within each stakeholder group. “Influencers are the key individuals who have the resources, skills or social networks needed to win over the hearts and minds of the larger group,” write the authors. “It is important to spend time up front identifying these key influencers, listening to their ideas and engaging their participation, because they play a critical role in providing resources, enlisting others and casting the change in a positive or negative light.”

Step 3: Assess influencers’ receptiveness to change. Auster and Ruebottom have seen influencers take one of six roles regarding potential changes to the organization: they can become sponsors, promoters, indifferent fence-sitters, cautious fence-sitters, positive sceptics or negative sceptics.

In Auster and Ruebottom’s experience, bringing sponsors and promoters on board in the initial phases of change can be beneficial in moving change forward. Positive sceptics can be a catalyst for useful rethinking of different aspects of a plan. Negative sceptics and their concerns need to be addressed. As for the fence-sitters, they often look to their peers for direction. “In our experience, it tends to be the energy of influential promoters and sponsors that wins over this fence-sitting majority,” write Auster and Ruebottom.

Step 4: Mobilize influential sponsors and promoters. Cultivating these people’s interest is crucial to building overall support and energy for sustaining change, write Auster and Ruebottom. Possible action steps include asking them to shape the plan; enlisting them to help lead an early part of the plan; giving them a role with visibility to the C-suite; and allowing job flexibility throughout the change to encourage shared learning.

Step 5: Engage influential positive and negative sceptics. Sceptics can be valuable or they can be roadblocks. Working with them early is key.

“Positive sceptics may offer important perspectives and insights about the vulnerabilities of proposed changes,” write Auster and Ruebottom, while working directly with influential negative sceptics is equally important. “Addressing their concerns honestly sends a clear message that

their perspective is important, that the change will not be force-fed to them and that transparency and openness are valued.”

Action steps include creating a context that encourages “failing smart” and disassociating a change from previous changes by emphasizing differences in its content, in its process and in who’s leading it.