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How to be an IT champ

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'EVERYBODY likes innovation until it affects himself, and then it's bad.'
- Walter Wriston, former chairman, Citicorp Bank, 'Sayings Of The Year',
Observer, Dec 29, 1974.

Looking at resistance

Resistance to change is nothing new. In the past two centuries we have had to deal with such technical advances as steam, electricity, the combustion engine and nuclear power. Now we are facing a new challenge: Computerisation.

Malaysia's manpower shortage has pushed companies to invest in new technology, mostly in the form of computers. In the past, small businesses could hire a clerk or deal with their information flow (accounts, stocks, taxes etc) themselves.

Only large corporations invested in computers to deal with their information flow.

In today's competitive climate a company must react speedily to new developments in the market if it wants to survive. Companies are hampered by the fact that they cannot find enough employees to deal with the - routine work necessary to keep a business going. Furthermore, the corporate world is changing quickly. Thanks to our new sophisticated information technology (IT), new trends are analysed much faster than they were 10 years ago. The company which predicts future trends accurately will have an advantage over its competitors.

Most employees are accustomed to routine and resent the work which comes with change. Under optimum circumstances, routines have been developed over a long period and are tried and tested methods of dealing with tasks in the most effective manner. The introduction of new tools often disrupts these routines. Employees believe that the 'old way' is the best way. To overcome this resistance a champion is needed. Champions help to introduce change in a positive manner. They put the positive face on change, generating enthusiasm and support. Corporate IT champions must communicate with everyone involved, such as the project manager, trainers, trainees, etc.

The champion should be a member of the team sponsoring the change-over to IT systems, and have the backing of that team, but may not be directly involved in a specific part of the process. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, for example, champions IT without being directly involved.

As an appointed corporate IT champion, how should you go about your job?
Introducing change

The first thing is to compile a project plan. This is not necessarily your job but as you will be identified with the project and its success or failure, it would be prudent to make sure that the plan:

- * focuses on results;
- * analyses each step of the process for management and control purposes, starting with the purpose and objectives;
- * allocates the resources you need;
- * defines roles and responsibilities; and
- * adopts a clear and simple reporting structure.

You can use this plan to guide you through the process of championship. To give everyone an idea of the pace of change, present the project plan and use it as a guide to progress. When milestones are reached on time,

employees should be congratulated, praised and encouraged.

To start with a high morale, announce the news with the reasons for change clearly explained in an enthusiastic and positive manner. The advantage should be outlined clearly using positive vocabulary.

Next, initiate discussions which focus on the positive aspects of the impending changes. Encourage employees to find the positive aspects themselves. People who feel that they have participated in a decision identify with the project and are more enthusiastic and willing to see it succeed.

Be aware that for many employees, the introduction of new technology automatically means downsizing, therefore job security is a major issue. When introducing change it is important to confront these fears and lay them to rest.

Try to focus on the positive side of the introduction of IT systems, pointing out that streamlined and efficient company processes will release employees from the tyranny of tedious mechanical work. This means that employees have to upgrade their skills which demands dedication and hard work. However, the company will be able to deal with routine work much quicker, leaving it free to pursue more business. When employees are willing to upgrade their skills and take advantage of the new processes, there should be more work, not less.

As champion, be careful to actively promote the use of the new system and, if possible, be seen to use it. Keep in close contact with employees, discussing experiences regularly and openly, whether good or bad, in an informal manner. This creates team spirit.

Initially, there will be resistance. Therefore, arrange for a handful of employees who can be relied upon to be enthusiastic to be trained first. You can then use those trained employees to heighten enthusiasm, and help develop a roll-out plan.

Once the first group is trained, have them discuss with other small groups how they want to learn new skills. Employees may choose an intensive course, or choose a more gradual approach. When employees feel in control of their own destiny a positive atmosphere is created.

Once training is underway, be sure to keep an eye on stress levels, both environmental and psychological. Stress ignored is a problem. Acknowledged stress is often halfway solved, especially if it is minor stress caused by temporary circumstances. Most sufferers have very clear ideas of how to prevent it, but are too shy to bring the subject up. This is especially true of workers who deal with new technology. There is a fear that others will not understand and perhaps disbelieve the problems which result from working with computers. An open line of communication will bring the problem, and hopefully the solution, to the fore.

Where not all personnel are required to be retrained, arrange for everyone in the company to take part in learning to deal with the new system, whether by hands-on or reporting methods. When everyone is aware of the triumphs and difficulties of the new system, tempers will be held in check during the learning curve.

Taking account of the learning curve

There will be an adjustment period which can be trying for all those involved as new technology requires tasks to be looked at in a new manner. This means that tasks which have been dealt with efficiently, now become difficult. For the inexperienced user, the learning curve is a long one. Users can become discouraged very quickly. Some feel it is their own lack of intelligence or application which is causing the problem. Others blame it on the machine which they say is 'useless'.

As champion you must halt this process. Stay in touch with trainers and trainees. Praise success, however small, lavishly. Allow for mistakes with

attending words of encouragement. Encourage development of a process whereby those involved can report problems and their solutions. Make this information available to everyone. When motivation wanes consider instituting schemes whereby incentives such as money, promotion and attainment badges are used to reward progress.

To sum up, the champion's main task is to put the positive face on change, generating enthusiasm and support. Successful championship relies essentially on good planning, positive and regular communication with employees, encouragement and reward.

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