THE HUMAN FACTOR IN CHANGE

In the current economic downturn in Malaysia, there are many organizations, which are presently undergoing downsizing, restructuring and re-engineering to take into cognizance the new 'hostile' external environment. These organizational change efforts take place daily as these companies' struggle to survive. Yet, many companies that carry out these processes do not achieve positive results. This is perhaps due to the fact that most of these changes are only undertaken from a strategic and business viewpoint. Sadly, the human element is given very little priority, in spite of the fact that most managers will argue that an organization's most critical resource is its human assets. In that sense, organizations tend to be good at planning and orchestrating the technical and structural aspects of change, but poor at guiding and supporting the human side. And this ultimately is the Achilles heel of most change processes in organizations.

Human beings are all creatures of habit. It is generally difficult for people to try new ways of doing things. They prefer predictability and routine in their work environment. This basic human characteristic ensures that most employees do not have enthusiasm for change in the workplace. They tend to resist changes because their sense of security and the way in which they have been accustomed to doing things are threatened. They resist whenever it is perceived that their 'comfort zone' is being disrupted, and this resistance is usually demonstrated through indifference or outright opposition.

At the organizational level, resistance to change can come from two sources. Political resistance can arise when organizational changes threaten powerful stakeholders, such as top executives, as change often implies a different allocation of scarce resources, such as capital and training budgets. Cultural resistance comes about when changes are deemed to be challenging the norms and values of the organization. In a real life example, a large company in Senawang decided to change its work timings as many of its employees were routinely late. This lateness was caused by the jams as a result of the large number of workers coming to work at about the same time in the large industrial estate. The employees however, met this change with extreme hostility as it forced them to change their individual routines, which affected their school going children and families. As a result, the company was forced to retract this change and to adopt a flexi-time system. This example serves to illustrate the point being made that no matter how technically or administratively perfect a proposed change may be, in the final analysis, it is people who make or break it.

There are at three major strategies for dealing with resistance to change. These are:

* Communication. People tend to resist change when they are uncertain about its consequences. Lack of adequate information fuels rumors and adds to the anxiety of employees. Change efforts therefore requires effective communication between management and employees, especially on the reasons and likely consequences of these changes. Management must also make every effort to 'sell' these changes to its employees. Staff can be persuaded to accept changes if they are made aware that it is for the long term good of the organization.

* Participation and involvement. One of the most effective strategies for overcoming resistance is to involve staff directly in the planning and implementation of change. Employees can provide ideas and suggestions, which can contribute to making the changes effective and appropriate to the situation. This involvement increases the likelihood that employees interests will be accounted for during the change process. Consequently, they will be committed to implementing the changes because it is in their best interests to do so.

* Empathy and support. Understanding how people experience change requires a great deal of empathy and support. It requires a willingness to try to see the situation from another's perspective. When employees feel that those managing change are genuinely interested in their feelings and perceptions, they are less likely to be defensive and more willing to share their concerns and fears.

In this instance, management must be seen to be sympathetic to those having problems with the change process.

Change will always be a very difficult management process, as a result of the human factor. There exists this paradox, where change is required for organizations to be more effective and even sometimes for survival, and yet its most important asset, i.e. the human resources provide the major obstacle. Any change efforts will therefore have to take the interests of its employees into serious consideration. Failure to do so will ensure that these change efforts will be doomed.