

Using a Positive Approach to Gain Buy-in from Resistant Stakeholders

By: Pat Lynch, Ph.D., President

Human beings seem hard-wired to resist change, even when we believe the promised outcome will be positive. In the late 1980s, for example, when CEO Fred Smith declared that FedEx would become the first service company to win the prestigious Malcolm Baldrige Excellence Award, employees uniformly were enthusiastic. That excitement quickly dissipated, however, once we discovered that achieving this goal required US to change how we worked. Suddenly the status quo looked a lot more attractive.

Like other organizations, public safety agencies are subject to employees' and other stakeholders' resistance to change. However, Fire Chief Kingman Schultd has developed a positive-based change process that has enabled the Greater Naples Fire and Rescue District to overcome objections by a variety of stakeholders to a number of initiatives. As a result, the agency has been successful in consolidating multiple independent fire districts as well as developing and implementing an organizational strategy, an employee performance system, and a customer satisfaction survey program. Here are the steps in Chief Schultd's positive change process:

1. Recognize that winning buy-in is a process, not a task or activity.

Just as change is a process, so is gaining stakeholders' support. By planning and following a gradual, one step at a time approach, you improve your chances that others will accept and embrace the desired change.

2. Take a positive approach.

Even when change has a real or perceived downside, find and highlight the positives. For example, few people like having their performance evaluated. Yet by utilizing a performance management system designed to help employees be fully successful, Chief Schultd found that staff quickly embraced it.

3. Have a plan to address negativity.

In any change effort, it is the leader's job to meet people where they are and enable them to support the desired outcome. Whether the resistance arises from skepticism, cynicism, or fear, when you identify and address those underlying sources AND you maintain a positive approach, you will be able to help most people see the benefits to them for accepting and even embracing the change effort.

4. Identify all relevant stakeholders.

Do your homework. Find out what the interests are of each group, and what concerns they are likely to have about the proposed change.

5. Tell stakeholders up front what's in it for THEM to support the change.

Enlightened self-interest is a great motivator. When you show stakeholders at the very beginning how they personally will benefit from the change, you get their attention. For example, by framing the Greater Naples Fire Rescue District's strategy development and implementation process as increasing public safety by investing in employees, Chief Schultd was able to show how all stakeholders would benefit from the direction set by his Board of Commissioners.

6. Create a procedurally fair process that enables widespread participation.

Research and experience show us that people will accept outcomes they don't like or agree with IF they believe the process by which the decisions were made was fair. For example, during the consolidation process that combined the East Naples and Golden Gate Fire Districts (and continues with other districts), Chief Schultd made sure that all stakeholders were kept fully informed, that the steps of the process were transparent, that there were multiple opportunities for interested parties to be heard, and that the input

was considered seriously.

7. Identify, research, and vet potential solutions.

Do your homework. Spend some time identifying and evaluating potential solutions vs. taking the first one that catches your attention. Invite relevant stakeholders to participate in this process.

8. Delegate as much responsibility as possible to relevant internal and external stakeholders.

People who are part of a process are much more likely to support the results than those who are not. Chief Schuldt has found that when he sets the parameters and then steps back to let the stakeholders work within those boundaries, the time invested in a participatory approach pays off in terms of on-going stakeholder acceptance and support.

9. Communicate, communicate, communicate – directly, openly, frequently, and honestly.

Create multiple communication paths and media for two-way dialogues with all stakeholders. Do not shy away from controversy, conflict, or push-back. Most people want to be heard, even when they know their position will not prevail. Chief Schuldt has found that giving all stakeholders a voice results in greater buy-in – and often a better outcome.

10. Provide positive constructive feedback.

People respond favorably to positive reinforcement. When leaders catch people doing things right and recognize their efforts, they encourage repeat performance. Chief Schuldt found that although some of his staff initially voiced concerns about implementing a customer satisfaction survey, the positive feedback from the community has caused crews to engage in a friendly competition to see who can provide the most memorable service.

11. Co-create a big picture of the desired outcome and use it as a touchstone.

Human beings want to feel that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. Articulating a clear big picture for public safety – e.g., a safe, healthy, economically viable community – that everyone can appreciate and support addresses that human desire.

Keeping that picture front and center serves as a constant reminder of why you do what you do. For example, the questions on the Greater Naples Fire Rescue District's customer satisfaction survey are based on the agency's values of professionalism, integrity, and compassion.

12. Address the political aspects of the issue.

Public safety agencies operate in political environments. Chief Schuldt has found that by learning and embracing the political process on the local and state levels, he and his Board of Commissioners have been very successful in achieving desired outcomes such as consolidation. A critical side benefit is the development of longer-term relationships that benefit the community's level of public safety.

13. Invest in outside experts when necessary.

Although fire and rescue professionals are consummate problem-solvers, there are times when the pay-off to investing in an outside expert is much greater than the return from the learning curve when you try to figure it out yourselves. When the community has a fire or medical emergency, they call their subject matter experts: fire and rescue professionals. Fire chiefs need to do the same: if you don't have the technical expertise or resources available, find someone who does.

By following the above process, over time, your agency can establish a culture that takes a positive approach to all issues, not just those at the strategic level. Chief Schuldt reports that already he has seen a measurable difference in how employees respond to a positive approach. Such a culture can result in increased employee morale, greater public trust, increased bonding as an organization, and greater community and partner support. Why not make that investment in your community's public safety?

Pat Lynch, Ph.D., is President of Business Alignment Strategies, Inc., a consulting firm that helps first responders maximize their performance by removing or mitigating obstacles to achieving their mission.