

Change Management: Recommendations for Prechange Success

BY PAUL J. ANTONELLIS JR.

OVER THE YEARS, THE TOPIC OF change management has been written about extensively in science articles and textbooks. Many fire service members began to study change management in mid-career professional development programs with a greater emphasis on the detailed steps to bring about long-term positive change management in their organization at the senior fire service administrative level. This article will provide a review of change management steps with a focus on the prechange process—the areas you should consider before you can implement a change; some of the areas that can impact change management in the fire service; how diversity, ethics, and politics can affect change management; and the steps needed to reduce internal and external resistance points to the change being proposed in the organization. The suggestions and recommendations here can prove beneficial to the company officer who wants to implement a change on the shift, the fire association elected officer who is charged with making change in the association, or the fire service administrator.

Change management's goal is to ensure its own best chance for a positive long-term impact on an organization. Organizational change fails about 70 percent of the time. So, why the high rate of failure? Research shows that an organization should be assessed to determine if it is ready for change; the leader should be active in showing support for the change, following a change process, seeking input from stakeholders (internal and external), and maintaining support of stakeholders if the proposed change is going to be successful. The person responsible for introducing and incorporating change should focus on the management of the change process.

Management of change may involve planning; organizing; implementing; assessing; evaluating; and, if needed, making additional needed iterations. The following recommendations will not only allow you to manage change but also help you lead it in the organization. Many change processes are used, and it is up to you to select the one that will work best for the proposed change, the organization, and you as the change agent.

When leading the change, you must be able to look at yourself and assess if you are in fact part of the problem that the change is attempting to correct.

No matter how large or small the change, you must follow the same management of change practice, which may involve the following categories:

- Modifications to an established process.
- Introduction to new equipment, technology, procedure, or standard.
- Substantial equipment replacement.
- Modification of unacceptable behavior to acceptable.

Self-Reflection

Some change agents in the fire service always see the problem everywhere except in themselves. When leading the change, you must be able to look at yourself and assess if you are in fact part of the problem that the change is attempting to correct. Self-reflection may be the hardest challenge here, and you must put your ego aside and attempt to

assess what behavior or role to play in the identified problem.

Many who have served as chief or managed a change think they are doing things right. As humans, we tend to think that we are better than we are at managing change or conducting a medical evaluation at a trauma call. People tend to overestimate their ability to force change. In the field of psychology, this is referred to as "self-serving bias." Managing change involves the process of self-reflection and ensuring that your self-serving bias is not influencing your change in a negative manner.

People also tend to underestimate the challenge of leading change and changing people's unacceptable behaviors. In fact, self-reflection and keeping your self-serving bias in check should be a continuous process for professional growth and development as a leader and manager.

Communication Is Key

So, today, you are on top of your game, doing your job as a company officer. The firefighters under your command respect you and they are well trained. You think to yourself, "Things could not be better"; your leadership skills and management skills are all in sync. Then, out of nowhere, the chief calls you into his office to inform you that he has issued a new policy on a new piece of water rescue equipment. The chief explains that the new equipment will help the firefighters and the victim stay safe. Time is short, and the chief gives you the new policy, but he fails to explain why the new equipment is needed or how it will make the troops safer.

As you leave the office, you think to yourself, "Did I miss something? Why the sudden change? Have I allowed my firefighters to operate in an unsafe manner? What brought this change to light

today?" The farther you walk, the more questions come to mind. Your once great feeling now shifts to frustration and then anger about the change that is being forced on you and your group. As the officer, you are now challenged by the lack of a guiding coalition; no officer training and education can overcome fire service tradition and inertia. You are now left to convey to the troops the importance of this new policy without knowing fully what the importance is.

The implementation of this new equipment may have many reasons, but they have not been articulated to you. Your job as the company officer is to now make sure that your group is prepared for the new equipment. You think to yourself, "I need to let the group know what is going on and see what they think about this change." You are already thinking of how you will communicate this change to your group.

Regrettably, the administration did not take the same approach about communicating the importance of the change to the members of the organization. Ad-

ministration did not provide vision for the change or seek input from the internal stakeholders who will be directly using the new equipment; they may have only received input from external stakeholders. This scenario can take place in any fire department, and we all know the end result: The change is implemented and not anchored in the organization; it is only written on paper.

The first lesson learned in this scenario is to communicate why the change is important to internal and external stakeholders. Seek input from the stakeholders to ensure that the problem you are attempting to solve is properly identified. One set of eyes looking at a potential problem is not the best option to identify the root problem that the proposed change is going to correct. In this scenario, the firefighters who directly use the equipment need to have some idea of how their future will look once this new equipment is integrated into department operations. They should be allowed time to suggest and recommend alternative actions and any resistance points to the

proposed change. Doing this early in the process allows the administration to adjust the change process to reduce the resistance points and, at the same time allows the members of the department see how the new equipment will improve safety (the importance of change) and what the future will look like using the new equipment. Generally, humans tend to resist change based on the unknown; they do not know how and to what extent it will impact them. Exposing humans to a proposed change early allows time for them to process the information and begin the acceptance process and at the same time allows for a voice in the process of the change. Removing that unknown aspect of the change process can be beneficial to leading change.

Change or Transition?

Transition is the process that people feel, see, and/or experience during change, whereas change involves observable change. Change and transition may be two separate and very distinct areas, but each holds a central role in



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management of change. A leader may force a change in an organization, but if the stakeholders are not transitioning with the change in a positive manner, the stakeholders will feel or experience a level of resistance. A poor transition process can have a negative impact on the long-term change. The change agent will need to ensure that the transition process is monitored during the entire change process to determine any resistance points and not allow the resistance to obstruct or block the change.

You can identify resistance points early in the management of the change, and they may fade as they are addressed. However, new resistance points may develop later with some stakeholders. Monitoring the transition process for fading resistance and the development of new resistance will allow the change agent the opportunity to adjust the transition process to yield positive results for the change. Just about any suggested or implemented change will result in some level of resistance, so your process should prepare for it. Change involving people may involve emotional or physical resistance. The change agent's responsibility will be to let the people see why the change is needed and why it is important for the people to believe in the change.

Change involving a work practice or some other change in behavior will need the support of stakeholders in bringing about positive, long-term change. For example, if a regulatory board notifies the emergency medical services department that it must change how it conducts a medical procedure in the field, the medical personnel may read about the change, but they may not think that the change is needed. In this case, the regulatory board is forcing a change, and the stakeholder must follow the new change or face disciplinary action. This change is being forced on the stakeholder, and the stakeholder's lack of support may not yield a positive change for the long term. The stakeholders who do not feel the need for the change may resist the change by any means possible.

Incomplete Analysis

Think back over your career: How many of your department's changes, policies, or procedures are the direct result

of an incident with no input from the stakeholders? This action is referred to as being reactive rather than being proactive to an incident and forecasts changes. Often in a reactive state, change managers fail to properly collect and analyze the data. So, how can the change agent be sure that the proposed change is going to resolve the problem? What's missing here is properly identifying the root cause of the problem.

The stage of collecting data and

analysis can be referred to as the "shared need." Collecting data and input from internal and external stakeholders will develop a shared need for the stakeholders and, if done correctly, can identify resistant points for the change agent to adjust. The ultimate goal for successful and long-term change is to have the need for change exceed the level of resistance.

As a fire service change agent, you will face reactive and proactive change. How you handle each will have an

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impact on the success rate of the change being made. Some change will require a narrow time frame, and the change agent will not have ample time to gather input and data from all stakeholders; in some cases, this is predicted and expected. Proper data collection and analysis are needed before implementing the proposed change. Poorly executed analysis can result in a negative impact on the change as well as wasted fiscal and human resources and potentially damage your relationship with stakeholders. Trust and open communication coupled with a common vision and mission for those involved in the change process is a powerful force. So, share the transparent data analysis with all stakeholders.

Diversity and Political Pressure

For the purpose of this article, the word "diversity" means that the data from the internal and external stakeholders should include a diversity group. Consider seeking data from those who may not hold the same views, ideas, or thoughts on a given problem. If you can gather data from the major resistance points, the change agent will be better prepared to adjust to this challenge early in the process. If the change agent seeks data only from those who have the same line of thinking, the data will do a disservice to the management of the change because the data will be skewed. Successful change will yield the best results when data are collected from a diverse group of stakeholders. Resist using data from a "people like me" approach.

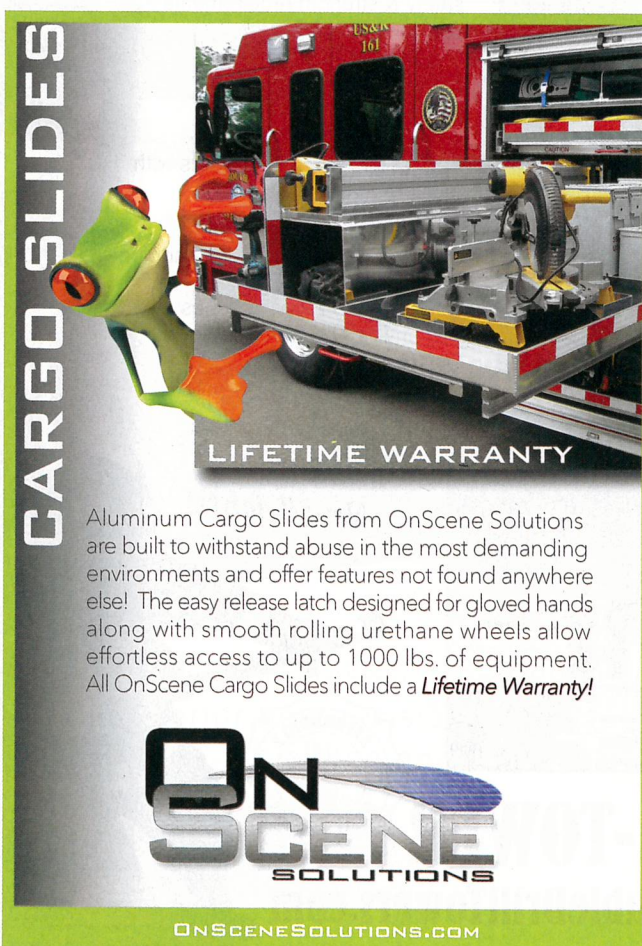
Fire service culture, tradition, and inertia can play significant roles in change in an organization. An overly autocratic approach will do little to draw in internal or external stakeholders to the problem-solving process or the "shared need" approach. Fire service administrators need to reach out and connect with stakeholders to build and maintain an inclusive, cohesive partnership. Think of the fire department that has put forward several times the need for a new station, only to have the voters or the administration decline. The first decline should serve as an opportunity to collect additional data on resistance points and reevaluate the proposal. Has the department held informational sessions in various locations within the community, ensuring that all social, ethnic, and economic groups have input to the process? This action will further the shared need as resistance points are identified and addressed. Addressing participants' resistance points may be considered a small win, and all small wins will add up to support. A second round of meetings can be held after the data have been analyzed and adjustments made, with the goal of seeking "buy-in" from the diverse audience.

Political pressure, some positive and some negative, is always present in the fire service. Political pressure within an organization can be powerful and attributed to negative work outcomes. As a new company officer, you may be faced with changing or altering a shift in culture or local politics. Keep in mind that neither the culture nor the politics developed overnight, and you will not be able to change them overnight. As a change agent, always show in a group the positive side of the change for which you are advocating while also attempting to address the resistance points of those involved.

For example, you are a new shift officer in an organization that has rock-bottom morale. Now what? If you come in and maintain the status quo, you have now become part of the problem. However, if you come in and attempt to bring forward the smallest positive change and people begin to see this small change, it may catch on and the environment may begin to alter, allowing others to change. Leading change should identify small wins during the process so everyone can see even the smallest steps forward. Failing to identify and acknowledge small wins can have a negative impact on the change process.

In a recent class, I had a new officer complain to me, "No one wants to do anything." I said, "You are the officer. Take the lead and do the extra. Do not allow political or peer pressure to take away the pride you have for doing the best you can in the fire service. Set the example for others." I challenged the officer to go back to his department and set his focus on getting one or two more members to come out to this same training next year. Again, it is going to take time; if he is successful, there will now be three members who will be trying to do the right thing. Equally important is not to declare victory too soon; those who think they have successfully anchored a change may soon find out how quickly behaviors resort back to a prior state.

Some organization members may act differently when talking to you in front of others. The onstage presentation by a member of the group in front of you may be very different when you are no longer around and they demonstrate a backstage behavior that is inconsistent with the onstage presentation. This is often referred to as being "two-faced" because the person shows two



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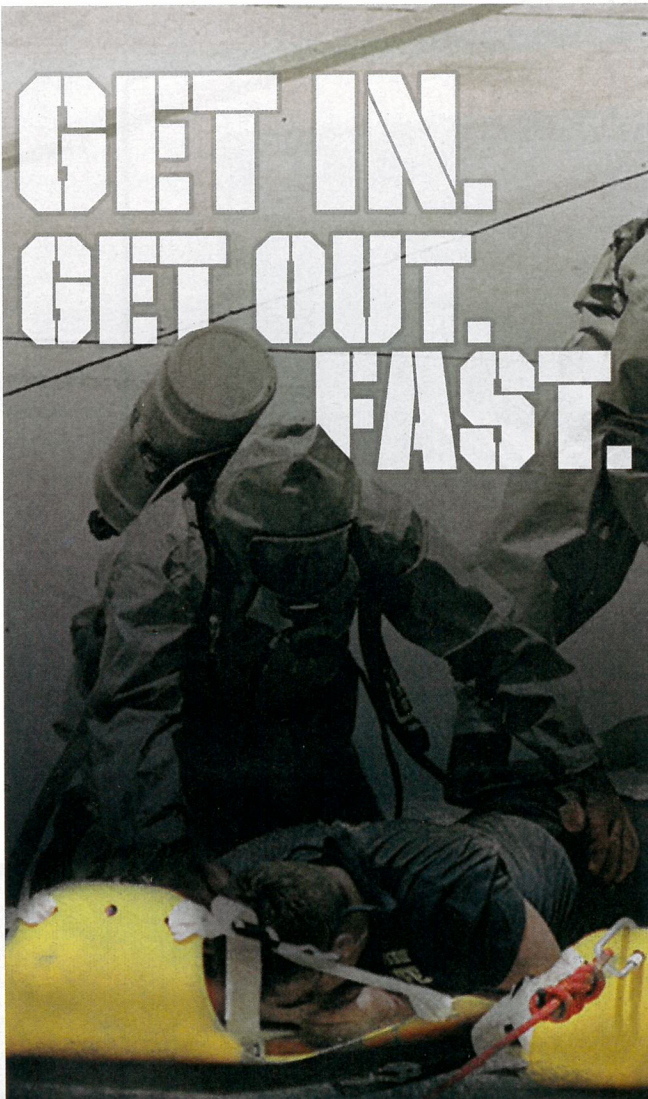
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different faces, depending on who he is talking to and the audience he is in front of. As a change agent, you will need to ensure that you are not sending two different types of communications to the stakeholders.

I hope you can now see the importance of the prechange process for an organization. Between this and my previous article ("How Politics and Ethics Can Affect Change Management," *Fire Engineering*, June 2014), the focus has only been on the need to prepare for the change. Yes, I understand that not all changes in the organization can be vetted in this same process and that, at times, immediate change will be needed. The immediate change is going to have an impact on the organization; your goal should be to minimize the impact of the change.

Regardless of your role or position in the organization, you have an opportunity to bring about positive long-term change. How you go about managing the change will often determine how successful and how long the change will be in the organization. ■

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PAUL J. ANTONELLIS JR., MA, Ed.D. (ABD), has more than 20 years of fire/EMS experience, holding various positions including chief of department in the state of Massachusetts. He also has 11 years of law enforcement experience with the Dennis (MA) Police Department. Antonellis is an assistant professor of management at Merrimack College—Girard School of Business. He has lectured to emergency service providers nationally and internationally on various emergency service topics. Antonellis has also authored and published more than 30 articles, two peer-reviewed research articles, and three books (his most recent book, *Labor Relations for the Fire Service*, was published in 2012). Antonellis has a doctorate of education with a specialization in educational leadership and management. He also has a master's degree in labor and policy studies, a bachelor of science degree in fire service administration, an associate of science degree in criminal justice, and an associate of science degree in fire science technology.