

Awareness

How to effectively build Awareness for change



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Any successful change begins by answering one of the most basic questions about change: Why? It is human nature to want to understand the reasoning behind an action or a required change.

The five elements of the Prosci ADKAR® Model include the outcomes an individual must achieve for a change to be successful: Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability and Reinforcement. Awareness is the first milestone.

Awareness represents a person's understanding of the nature of the change, why the change is being made, and the risk of not changing. Awareness includes information about the internal and external drivers that created the need for change, as well as "what's in it for me?" This first goal is defined as "Awareness of the need for change," not simply "Awareness that a change is happening." This is an important distinction.



Why Build Awareness?

Lack of Awareness of the reason for change was cited as the primary source of employee resistance in the *Prosci Best Practices in Change Management – 11th Edition*. This is caused by failure to communicate details of a change to employees. Ultimately, if an employee cannot answer the question, “What’s in it for me?” resistance is likely to occur. And when Awareness is overlooked or ignored, projects face increased resistance, slowed progress and reduced return on investment. As one research participant said:

“Often employees are not opposed to a solution or a new way of doing work, but rather they resisted change because no one made a clear and compelling case as to why the change was needed.”

The elements of the Prosci ADKAR Model represent the natural order of how one person experiences change. It is tempting to skip Awareness and jump straight to Desire and Knowledge. Yet, building Awareness establishes the groundwork for individuals to make personal choices about change. Desire or Knowledge cannot come before Awareness, because Awareness of the need for change stimulates our Desire or triggers our resistance to change.

When employees clearly see that an organization is in trouble, building Awareness will be relatively easy. In contrast, when an organization is already succeeding it is often more difficult to build Awareness. In such cases, change leaders need to create a compelling case and make the reasons for change obvious. If they are responding to an opportunity, they will need to be clear in communicating the reasons for change.

Building Awareness with the ADKAR Model means sharing both the nature of the change and communicating why the change is necessary. It means clearly explaining the business drivers or opportunities that led to the need for change. It also means addressing why a change is needed now and explaining the risk of not changing.

Meeting the human need to know “why” is a critical factor in managing and enabling change. People begin to seek this information at the first signs of change. In an organizational setting, employees and managers feel



Building Awareness

eager to know the business or organizational reasons for the change, so they can better understand the change and align themselves with the organization's direction.

Many assume that sharing information is enough to produce measurable Awareness. This is not the case. The effectiveness of your communication depends on how the messages are received and internalized. When an employee says, "I understand the nature of the change and why this change is needed," you have succeeded at building Awareness. To get this confirmation, you need regular interactions and feedback.

Tactics for effectively building Awareness include:

1. Effective Communications
2. Effective Sponsorship
3. Coaching by People Managers
4. Ready Access to Business Information

1. Effective Communications

Awareness-building is most effective when you set the message in the proper context for each audience and design it with them in mind. This begins with identifying and segmenting audience groups, determining the appropriate messages and preferred senders for each, and then developing the most effective packaging, timing and channels for these communications.

In any Awareness-building plan, allow ample opportunity for two-way communications. Check for understanding and buy-in. Provide opportunity for impacted groups to raise concerns and engage them in the broader change initiative.

Depending upon the audience and position in the change process, channels of communication may include:



- Face-to-face meetings
- Group meetings
- One-on-one communications
- Email
- Newsletters
- Intranet
- Executive presentations
- Training and workshops
- Project team presentations
- Update bulletins
- Video conferencing
- Demonstrations

2. Effective Sponsorship

The primary sponsor of the change is the best spokesperson for communicating to employees why a change is needed and the risk of not changing. To be effective, the primary sponsor must be active and visible throughout the entire change process, engaging with the project team and collecting feedback from employees. This direct communication with employees increases adoption of the change. The primary sponsor must also build a coalition that reinforces the Awareness messages at all levels. This includes enabling peers, people managers and direct reports to communicate the reasons for change through multiple communication channels and throughout the organization. A dedicated and supportive sponsor is critical to a successful change initiative.

In the [Best Practices in Change Management – 11th Edition](#), as in previous research reports, participants identified “active and visible sponsorship” as the most important contributor to change management success—more than three times as often as other contributors.

3. Coaching by People Managers

Part of Awareness-building for employees is learning what the change will mean for them personally. When a change is proposed, a people manager is in the best position to help employees understand this in meaningful terms. To be effective at coaching employees, people managers must first have the opportunity to build their own Awareness of the need for change. This means they must have accurate messages relating to the change, and basic knowledge about and skills for leading change with their employees.

It is also important to remember that people managers are employees first and managers second. If they don't understand the need for the change or don't have the support to participate in the change, they will experience resistance themselves. It is critical to plan activities to build Awareness of the need for change with people managers before expecting them to effectively build Awareness with employees.

People managers face the greatest challenge because they are in charge of translating the change message from the top to their employees. Before they can do that, they must receive appropriate training and coaching. Only then can they conduct effective sessions with their employees. Face-to-face communications with employees about the change has been cited in all of our longitudinal benchmarking studies as the most effective form of communication. Honest, straightforward and confidential discussions also help to correct misunderstandings and provide an opportunity to collect feedback from employees, which helps leadership better understand the background conversation. Although group meetings are more convenient and useful for initiating communications, one-on-one conversations that offer details of the change on a personal level are best at answering "what's in it for me?"

4. Ready Access to Business Information

Many companies underestimate the power of readily accessible information about company performance, market conditions, environmental factors, competitive threats and changing business priorities. Transparency builds Awareness on an ongoing basis and supports not only the current change but also future changes. Increasing visibility and creating a culture that values open sharing of information translates directly to increased Awareness of the need for change among employees.

Many factors influence how readily people recognize the need for change. As a change leader, you need to understand not only the activities that drive Awareness, but also the resistance factors or restraining forces that may prevent the Awareness message from taking hold with your audiences. In some cases, the resistance factors are so strong that even the best Communications Plan will not be sufficient. Effective change management plans are designed to surface and deal with these resistance factors.

Here are a few common resistance factors and suggestions for overcoming these barriers:





Obstacles to Building Awareness

1. A Person's View of the Current State

Individuals who are comfortable with or strongly invested in the current state may discredit or reject the reasons for change in favor of maintaining the status quo. To understand their unique points of view, schedule one-on-one conversations and actively listen to their concerns.

2. How a Person Perceives Problems

People have different cognitive styles. This will impact how an individual approaches a problem, internalizes an Awareness message, and perceives the need for change. While some already see the need for change, others may be completely caught off guard. For this reason, broad and general communications to create Awareness of the need for change may not be effective. Individualized messages and one-on-one communications are more effective, along with providing the time and opportunity for people to process new information and ask questions.

3. The Sender's Credibility

When it comes to building Awareness, those receiving the Awareness message will consider the sender either credible or not credible, depending on how much they trust and respect the sender. The sender directly impacts how the receiver internalizes the message.

Senders from different levels of the organization are more credible than others, depending on the message content. People expect messages about why the change is being made and how it aligns with the business strategy to come from the person near or at the top of the organization. People expect messages about how the change will impact employees personally to come from the people manager they report to.

Employees also weigh the message against the organization's track record for change. If there is a history of false alarms or failed changes, individuals tend to disregard the new information. Designing credible Awareness messages involves designing them specifically for each group, and factoring in their unique context, access to ongoing information, and their specific change-related pain points. Tailoring key messages for each group and delivering them from their preferred senders increases credibility.



Rumors

If business employees cloud the the or and people correcting the real from the fabricated.



4. Circulation of Misinformation or

managers have withheld information from about the change, rumors may spread and facts—and employees may prefer to listen to rumors. To overcome the barrier of distorted incorrect background information, leaders managers must now spend extra time misinformation, while employees decipher

Because misinformation stalls efforts to create Awareness, it is better to communicate the right information from the start. Even if all information is not yet solidified, it is better to start clearly communicating what is known and what is not yet known rather than letting people fill in the gaps for themselves.

5. Contestability of the Reasons for Change

If the reasons for change are unclear, subjective or open to debate, Awareness takes longer to build. Although some changes have external and observable reasons that are difficult to dispute (such as new industry regulations that require compliance), other changes are internal and less obvious to employees. When employees question the credibility of the reasons for change, they are more likely to resist.

Once the first objective of the ADKAR Model has been achieved, we can shift our focus to the next milestone.



Next Steps

In “Desire: How to Positively Influence a Person’s Desire to Embrace Change,” we explore the importance of creating Desire, typical challenges, and many tactics you can use to influence and create the Desire to support and participate in a change.

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