

Political skills crucial for leaders navigating through organizational change

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In today's fast-paced business environment, organizational change is inevitable, yet around 60% of these changes fail. Leaders can play a crucial role in navigating these transitions, but achieving success calls for more than just traditional leadership styles—it's also about mastering certain political skills.

Researchers from Radboud University and the University at Buffalo (State University of New York) found that sincerity, networking ability and other factors play a large role in successful transitions. Their [findings](#) are published in *Group & Organization Management*.

To find out how leaders can effectively lead an organization through significant changes, the researchers looked at the four political skills that are often seen as closely linked to the workplace: interpersonal influence, networking ability, apparent sincerity and social astuteness.

"These skills can be developed and trained, meaning any leader can become good at using them," explains Wieke Knol, lead author on the paper. "By studying which of these skills have the biggest impact on teams, we want to provide insight to leaders on what to work on before you embark on these types of organizational changes."

Interpersonal influence

The researchers surveyed [employees](#) at a large Dutch organization transitioning to a new structure. The employees would be expected to work more independently, in self-directed teams. Before and after the transformation, employees and leaders were asked about the process to understand which factors were essential in effecting change.

Knol states, "Interpersonal influence, meaning the ability to influence and persuade employees when interacting with them, can be crucial. Doing it successfully lets you convince employees to embrace change and experience their work as less ambiguous, by clearly communicating the benefits and addressing concerns in a way that resonates with them."

Yannick Griep, one of the authors, explains that they saw similar benefits with two of the other political skills studied. "More effective networking abilities allow leaders to understand what employees are

discussing, making sure that employees better understand what is expected from them and that they are more accepting of the [organizational change](#).

"Plus, effective networking can help secure resources that further help employees embrace change and clarify expectations. Similarly, the ability to appear sincere and genuine reduces people's distrust of changes. If employees believe their managers are sincere in their beliefs about the change, they're less likely to look for ulterior motives."

Social astuteness as a risk

Surprisingly, Knol and colleagues discovered that one ability has the potential to backfire. That was the case for social astuteness, the skill of empathizing with employees and responding effectively to their behaviors and feelings.

"A certain degree of empathy is crucial. It's important to have some idea of how employees might react to a change. But our study shows that too much social astuteness can actually lead to distrust. This is likely because, if you are a leader who overly empathizes with an employee concerned about the changes, you might actually validate those concerns—thereby only increasing their concerns," says Knol.

Organizational changes can lead to hectic periods, both for employees and leaders. "Applying these specific skills can really enhance how leaders can guide their teams through change. Apparent sincerity is valuable but requires frequent interaction with employees, which isn't always possible. In situations where time is limited, it's important to know what skills can have the biggest effect.

"By strategically using interpersonal influence and networking—skills that don't require constant interaction—leaders can foster a committed

workforce even when time is limited. Making sure that [leaders](#) are equipped to apply these skills ensures they can build commitment and clarity among their teams, essential to fostering a successful transformation," states Knol.

More information: Wieke M. Knol et al, Use of Political Skills by Leaders to Establish Successful Organizational Change, *Group & Organization Management* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/10596011241278028](https://doi.org/10.1177/10596011241278028)

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