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Q: How Do You Get Stakeholders to Embrace Change?

Key to successfully influencing others is an understanding of the mechanisms of ‘change’. What the athletics director is really trying to do when asking others to think in a certain way, take specific actions or provide resources is to change that other person’s thinking to support a new position. An athletics director may not only have to deal with the challenge of all employees accepting the change, but possibly parents, student-athletes and donors too. Think of what will go through the hearts and minds of student-athletes and donors who are asked to accept and support a new coach after the termination of a much respected but not very successful predecessor.

In general, the athletics director needs to grasp two important facts: (1) people accept change at different rates because change is a process and (2) there are predictable stages of and responses to change that need to be anticipated and handled. In the first stage, people who are asked to change initially encounter emotions ranging from loss, fear, confusion and anxiety to anger and resentment. These emotions vary according to the experience and personality of the individual and their level of confidence and security. The second stage is usually some form of resistance which can range from skepticism to passive and overt forms of undermining behaviors such as retribution against those who benefit from the change or efforts to sabotage implementation systems. In stage three, acceptance begins and hopefully, positive anticipation and excitement about doing something differently.

Therefore, the primary focus of the manager is to get as many people as possible, especially those employees or donors most respected and emulated by others, through the first two stages of change with minimal angst and into the acceptance and celebration stages as soon as possible. To do so, the athletics director uses his or her power of position (potential sanction) and knowledge (education) and works to positively reinforce the behavior of those who adopt the change. Many times, navigating and leading the change process is incredibly complex, requiring keen insight and moral strength to get others to adopt a position which is right but unpopular at the moment.

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