Lead Through Uncertainty: How Do I Address Employee Fatigue as a Tech CEO?

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Today’s average employee can absorb half as much change as in 2019 before becoming fatigued. This research will help tech CEOs identify and develop effective strategies to mitigate the risk of employee change fatigue.

Quick Answer

What tactics do tech CEOs use to successfully address change fatigue in the workplace?

- Focusing on reducing day-to-day changes as they are the most damaging
- Increasing employees’ capacity to absorb change by increasing trust and team cohesion
- Empowering teams with a degree of control to shape their own change experiences

More Detail

With the arrival of COVID-19 in early 2020, the number of organizational changes increased dramatically for many employees. Unfortunately, this period of unprecedented change coincides with a 50% reduction in employee change capacity (see Figure 1) — meaning employees can absorb less change before becoming fatigued. The combination of a growing rate of change and a less-change-resilient workforce means leaders are right to rank change fatigue as one of their top two change-related priorities (along with equipping managers to lead change).
Change fatigue is the negative response to change that harms organizational outcomes. For many companies, the current challenges have resulted in constant change initiatives. Not all these changes are planned, and not all are big. Many are created and implemented on the fly. Not all change can be avoided; tech CEOs should focus on implementing only those changes that address their most damaging issues. Even in that instance, though, employees are still at risk of change fatigue. Below we discuss ways tech CEOs can alleviate this fatigue.

Reduce Day-to-Day Changes as They Are the Most Damaging

Most tech CEOs focus on implementing organizational-level changes. This high-level focus seems sensible because the stakes are so much higher. However, Gartner’s research shows that day-to-day changes, including changes to direct managers, team composition and job responsibilities, are significantly more damaging than organizational-level transformations. In fact, one day-to-day change for the average employee has 2.5 times more impact on change load compared to one organizational transformation. ¹

Tech CEOs’ key to managing the large aggregate impact of day-to-day changes is to identify the “moments of truth” (points at which change interrupts the employee’s experience) for individual changes and plan around them. Change impacts different people in different ways, and hence flexibility and experience become essential to the process.
Tech CEOs must:

- Start their change journey with a clearly defined end state and case for change.
- Document clearly the end state of the change and be clear and to the point about directing the individual path.
- Create feedback mechanisms to monitor and report on change readiness.

Increase Trust and Team Cohesion to Help Employees Absorb More Change

Gartner research has revealed that factors such as tenure and seniority have a limited impact on change fatigue risk (see Tactics to Address Fatigue in Times of Unprecedented Change). The significant differentiators that influence how much change an employee can take are:

1. High level of organizational trust
2. High level of team cohesion

Employees who trust the organization are less worried about the impact that change will have on their activities or results. High trust in the organization translates into a safer environment for asking seemingly simple and mundane questions related to change. Higher trust also allows employees to experiment more and risk failing more, which are key ingredients for a change process to succeed in uncertain times.

Likewise, the level of team cohesion that employees experience significantly affects their ability to absorb change before becoming fatigued. A cohesive team allows for people to rely on each other to share tasks, apprehensions and experiences. During the pandemic, it was hard for teams to build this cohesion remotely, especially when so many new people were hired. However, the teams that did bridge this gap and that built camaraderie in remote settings have been able to combat fatigue.

Tech CEOs must:

- Create opportunities where employees feel safe to have open discussions about change.
- Communicate executive decisions frequently to the team. Make sure the messages are informal and friendly, and not cold and impersonal.
Empower Teams to Shape Their Own Change Experiences

Tech CEOs should provide employees with a degree of control over change implementation decisions. Empowering employees to own implementation plans directly includes them in the change process and allows them to define their own success metrics and identify key obstacles. This approach facilitates a better change experience for employees because they personally understand the actions they must take to successfully implement change. It also shifts the planning away from leaders, who may not fully understand how change really affects employees.

Planning change in an inclusive and collaborative manner also supports team cohesion as teams have direct ownership for creating a successful change initiative. Employees can hold each other accountable to team-defined standards and actions that make change successful.

Tech CEOs must:

- Increase cohesion by giving teams greater psychological safety by making them feel included in team processes.

- Share information transparently to help employees diagnose their own experience gaps and areas where they want to improve their experience.

- Provide defined options and relevant choices for employees to personalize their experience to prevent them from not acting because they are overwhelmed with too many choices.

- Nudge employees to the next best action to make it easier for them to take action.
Evidence

¹ In the 2019 Gartner Change Fatigue Survey, we asked all respondents whether they feared experiencing either a serious illness or having to leave their job against their wishes in the coming six months. We used the portion of respondents who reported either of these worries (8%) as a proxy for the average employee in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. We confirmed this assumption by asking these two questions in the July 2020 Gartner ReimagineHR Employee Survey and noting that the portion of respondents reporting those same worries had increased to 47%. When we compared the capacity of that original 8% to take on change before becoming change-fatigued, it was exactly half that of the full sample (i.e., the average employee). So, comparing these two groups, the risk of change fatigue was doubled for the average employee during the COVID-19 pandemic.
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