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How to Build a Framework for Policy Changes

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Companies at every level of growth will eventually face the need to change, restructure, and introduce new organization wide policies. Building the structure to manage for policy change, tactical operations, and team communication may seem overwhelming depending on the scale and scope of your initiative.

Here's how Mike Kohn, an experienced Head of People applied a framework for approaching change management with empathy and clear communication to a change in vacation policy.

About Mike Kohn

Mike Kohn is a People Ops veteran and is currently the Director of People and Talent at the Patrick J. McGovern Foundation, a private foundation dedicated to advancing artificial intelligence and data science solutions to create a thriving, equitable, and sustainable future for all.

Recently, Mike and his leadership team took on the task of overhauling the organization's vacation policy from a traditional accrual style system to a more modern,

flexible policy that encourages people to take the time that they need without the limitations and administration of an accrual system.

Building a framework for policy change management

Understand the principles behind your policy

While preparing to communicate out a company-wide policy change, Mike says you first need to understand the core principles of the policy and be able to articulate the individual "why." This means understanding the connotations of the language used and most importantly, how this will affect your individual team members. He says that understanding how you talk about policy changes is critical to change management.

In the case of changing their vacation policy, Mike started by asking questions like:

- Why do we have a vacation benefit?
- How often do our employees typically exercise this benefit?
- How can we make it easier to prioritize wellness, mental health, and time off?
- What is the connotation of accumulated time vs unlimited in the startup world?

The Soft Launch

Once you've created the policy, gathered the necessary buy-in from leadership, and drafted both the why and the tactical how, it's time to start thinking about the soft launch. At this stage, Mike says it's not uncommon to want to get as much feedback from as many people as possible, but depending on the size of your organization, it's important to realize early that you probably won't be able to speak to everyone. Instead, think strategically and prioritize talking with team members with a diversity of experience.

For example, vacation time is used very differently across an organization; you will get different perspectives from someone who is fresh out of school and someone who has a family at home

According to Mike, through this process your employees will create a constructive dialogue, ask challenging questions, and will provide a diversity of opinions. These conversations can take the form of informal 1:1s, floating ideas back and forth, and posing direct questions about specific aspects of the new policy.

Revising your policy based on feedback

Next, Mike says it's time to go back to draft and make changes based on feedback gathered. Here you may want to ask questions like:

- Do we think we're still on the right path?
- How can we frame this better so it stays true to our principles while being clear and easy to understand?
- What additional context can we provide that wasn't clear in the soft launch?
- Are there different tactics or operational details that we heard that we should incorporate into our policy?

Taking the time to update and rewrite the policy to reflect and clarify these questions before rolling it out to the entire team should help with streamlining internal communications.

Communicating your new policy company wide

This is a major step and takes care and planning. First, Mike likes to determine how big the change is and use that to guide how he'll introduce it to the team. He considers things like: Is this something you can announce through an internal memo or email? Does it deserve its own meeting? Can we set aside time during an upcoming all hands meeting?

When talking with the team, Mike says it's important to communicate the rationale behind the policy change, the approach and process taken when creating the new policy, feedback gathered during the soft launch, and finally, implementation. Answer "How does this affect you as an individual?" and avoid falling into the default line of reasoning that "this is good for the organization."

Once you have established the why, you can talk about the tactical implications, mainly prepping your team to expect follow up, updates, and additional information through the core tools for communication already used by your team (email, [Slack](#), Teams, etc).

For their new vacation policy, this looked like Mike clearly answering questions like:

- How does this better enable your work life balance?
- How will the new policy affect day to day operations? When will the policy go into effect?
- What happens to my accrued PTO hours?
- Where can I go to share feedback or get updated information?

Next steps and creating avenues for interpersonal communication

Setting up ways for employees to share follow up questions, equipping managers with the tools to ask for feedback, and creating clear avenues for communication is a must for

change management. Depending on the size of your company this can look like:

- Direct channels to managers, HR, leadership, etc
- Touching base with department heads to see how things are going
- Directly asking for feedback at a team gathering
- Engagement surveys

The information and feedback you gather after introducing the new change should inform additional policy adjustments moving forward. You may need to revisit the policy once enough time has passed and your employees have adapted to the changes.

Measuring the success of your policy roll out

For Mike, success is both qualitative and quantitative. At a high level, everyone at the organization has an understanding of why the change is being made, that it is done with good intent, and how the change will impact them.

At the operational level, successful implementation and continued communication should take priority. Mike says that it may be easy to assume everything will work out once you've made the announcement, but making sure to follow through with team reminders, check-ins, and setting implementation goals will ease the process.

And although it's unrealistic that every change is going to be supported by all team members, Mike stresses that by approaching change management with empathy, understanding, and transparency, you can be better prepared to successfully implement policy changes across your organization.



Grace (LinkedIn) is a journalist, writer, and story teller, passionate about cultivating team cultures.

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