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The More Things Change, The More They Stay the Same: When Innovation Meets Resistance

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WHEN INNOVATION MEETS RESISTANCE

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"*Feels like déjà vu*," William sighed as he reviewed an email forwarded from the corporate headquarters. "*It's gonna be like 2011 all over again.*"

For the past 15 years, William served as regional sales manager (RSM) for the East Texas regional headquarters of Southwest Modifications, Inc. (Southwest Mods), a midsized company that wholesales aftermarket SUV/truck accessories to car dealerships. Since William took over the RSM job, Southwest Mods experienced year-over-year increases in revenue and market share. As RSM, William manages 12 district sales consultants whose territories stretch across Texas, from Dallas to Austin to Houston.

Early on in his tenure at Southwest Mods, William built his sales team with industry veterans he was able to hire away from the major automakers. Guys like Larry, who came over from Nissan, and Marty, who left GM, were in their early 50s when they joined the team. They were old-school, stubborn, and resistant to change, but they were hard workers who knew the business and could hit the ground running. Unfortunately, when the US recession of 2008 hit, William had to let a third of his seasoned team go. Since rebounding from the recession,

William has been forced to grow his team in a more fiscally responsible way, now bringing in talent straight out of college for lower salaries. Young newcomers like Darren and Jose, who joined Southwest Mods in 2013, faced a learning curve with respect to mastering the business and charming dealership personnel. However, both embraced innovation, were authorities on the latest automotive technology, and really shined in explaining the features of the latest dash kits, stereo and lighting systems, and other interior accessories. Larry and Marty often leaned on Darren and Jose for help understanding the more technologically advanced products while offering the pair mentorship and guidance in other aspects of the business.

William just received some news he felt could negatively affect the productivity of his team in the near future. Lynn, the national sales manager of Southwest Mods and William's boss, just sent over the findings of this year's internal communication audit. A communication audit is a means of evaluating information flow in organizations, identifying weaknesses, and recommending changes to address opportunities for improvement. In most cases, an external consulting firm conducts interviews and administers surveys to a company's employees to gain insights on where the company can enhance its communication efforts.

William has been through a few communication audits throughout his career at Southwest Mods, but the last one was less than memorable. Up until 2011, sales operations at Southwest Mods embraced somewhat of a "bring your own device" philosophy. District sales consultants (DSCs) were provided laptops, but allowed to use their own mobile phones to conduct business as they travelled through their respective territories. Every month, the DSCs would simply submit a copy of their phone bill with their other expense reports for reimbursement. However, this policy changed as a result of the 2011 communication audit, which found that DSCs were particularly slow at responding to email. Most of the older DSCs, like Larry and Marty, still used flip-phones with limited data plans. As a result, with virtually no Internet access during an 8-hour day of sales calls, the DSCs would not see their email inboxes until the early evening.

Based on recommendations from the 2011 communication audit results, Southwest Mods began requiring their DSCs to carry company-issued smartphones. The idea behind this change was to make the DSCs more accessible during their workday. With a smartphone, the DSCs could now view and respond to emails during lunch or in between sales calls. Unfortunately, this did not go over well with older DSCs like Larry and Marty, who repeatedly griped to William and other coworkers about having "one more thing to learn" and viewed the smartphone as an "electronic leash." Initially, the two refused to even activate their smartphones in protest. It took nearly 3 months of training, cajoling, and gentle pressure from William to get them into compliance. Even after Larry and Marty started using their smartphones, William had to train them on how to check email from a mobile device and constantly remind them to do so.

Ironically, *this year's* communication audit results found that Southwest Mods *relied too heavily on* email as a means of internal communication.

Employees complained about information overload, citing inboxes of 80+ daily emails. Employees also noted that the sheer volume of emails exchanged made it difficult to locate reports, spreadsheets, and other useful information quickly. Some employees raised the difficulties of collaboration through email alone. Finally, employees also desired the capability to create and exchange more visual messages using graphics, photos, and videos that were standalone, not simply links or email attachments.

As a result of these findings, the consultants who conducted the audit recommended Southwest Mods transition away from email to a single, easily accessible communication interface that supported the exchange of video, photo, instant messaging, and wikis for collaboration. The consultants recommended an "enterprise social media" platform that combined the functionalities of a corporate intranet and a social networking site. William took a deep breath, gathered his thoughts, and called Lynn.

"Hey Lynn, it's William. I just got your email," he said.

"OK. What's up?" Lynn asked.

"Do the suits at corporate know what they are doing to me? What is this enterprise social media crap?"

"William, it's not just about you. These recommendations are for the benefit of the entire company. This is bigger than just the East Texas Region."

"Yeah, I heard that before. Back in 2011."

"Well, it's 2018 now. You have a chance to handle the situation differently."

"How long do I have before we start moving to another system?"

"IT is looking at a platform called Netwrkd. When they clear their recommendation through the CTO, I'll give you a heads-up."

"Yeah, OK. Larry and Marty are going to love this."

Knowing he would have to be creative to sell most of his team on this new system, William decided to do a little research. He found that Netwrkd had several features that addressed the results of the communication audit. In addition to allowing for private messaging between employees, Netwrkd allowed for the creation of groups; the uploading of video, pictures, reports, spreadsheets, and other media; and it had the capability to create and edit documents collaboratively. It could host web conferences for virtual teams and was available in desktop form as well as a mobile app. William also observed that Netwrkd had an interface similar to Facebook. Employees could create posts that would appear in other employees' news feeds, where they could be liked or commented on. Netwrkd would definitely cut down on the need for email, if not eliminate it altogether.

While William was surprised to find some good reasons to adopt the platform, he was more concerned about the cons. For example, what if employees started tuning out during meetings to follow conversations on their mobile devices? Who would manage what type of content was posted? Would this platform exacerbate the spread of rumors or gossip? And most important, how was he going to get Larry, Marty, and the older DSCs to go along with the change?

After a couple weeks passed, William's phone rang. It was Lynn. "William! I just got out of a meeting with the CTO," she announced.

"And?" William inquired.

"You didn't hear it from me, but we're rolling out Netwrkd in about a month. You should get the official notice from IT next week."

"Is IT gonna come train my guys?"

"We've already discussed this. I'm sure you will figure out a way to make this a smooth transition. Do you plan on having your team back in the office anytime soon?"

"We've got a quarterly sales meeting coming up in a couple weeks."

"Sounds like a good time to break the news. Gotta run."

Every quarter, William brought his team in from their respective territories to discuss the past quarter's performance, the upcoming quarter's objectives, and updates from corporate. At 9:00 a.m. on the morning of the quarterly meeting, William gathered everyone in the conference room to kick things off. During the opening session, William congratulated everyone on meeting their objectives, and he identified increases in several key metrics. Next, William rolled out the upcoming quarter's targets and explained the importance of meeting these goals.

After breaking for lunch, William returned to the conference room to begin the closing session of the quarterly meeting. After the team settled in, William began to deliver what he thought might be the most pivotal presentation of the day.

"A couple months ago, we all participated in an internal communication audit," William began. "As always, the objective of these audits is to determine how we can share information more efficiently as a company. When we communicate more effectively, we are more engaged and more productive. As a result of the most recent audit, we will be implementing some changes. Specifically, the consultants suggested that we ease up on email. Too many emails are flying back and forth, filling up inboxes, and burying key information. How many of you can say you are at inbox zero?" No hands went up.

"So, are we supposed to stop using email?" Jose asked.

"Not exactly," William responded. "A better way to put it, we are going to start using what's known as enterprise social media. Corporate has informed me that we will be adopting a platform called Netwrkd. We can post updates, comment, attach files, and exchange messages, just like Facebook. Multiple people can create and edit documents. We will probably use email less and less over time."

Darren nudged Jose and the pair smiled and nodded in approval. Then, as William feared, Larry's hand went up.

"What exactly does this have to do with selling accessories?" Larry inquired. "Why can't I just do my sales calls, hit my numbers, and go home like I have been doing for the past 37 years?"

"Larry, this isn't just about you or me or this team," William explained, recalling that Lynn told him the same thing a little over a month ago. "Decisions like this are meant to benefit the entire company, and we are part of the company."

"Yeah, I remember hearing that when you made us use this," Larry replied, holding up his smartphone. "Now that I finally know what I'm doing with it, you want to change something else! For no good reason!" He then turned to Marty and whispered, "They can't make me use this new networking thing. I won't do it!"

Meanwhile, across the room, Darren and Jose appeared much more receptive to the news. "Does Netwrkd allow us to create and share video?" Darren asked.

"I believe so," William replied.

"What about video-conferencing?" Jose added.

William thought for a minute and nodded.

"Well, I think we should at least give it a try. It sounds like it could make our jobs easier," Darren noted.

"Maybe," Marty interjected, "Or maybe not. Nobody asked us what we thought about Netwrkd. I don't wanna do it. I've got almost 40 years in. Maybe it's time for me to retire."

Just as William feared, at least two of his top DSCs were not taking a company-mandated change well. Lynn told him that this time around, he has an opportunity to handle the situation more effectively. But how?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Darren and Jose appear to embrace new ideas, new processes, and new technology. According to the diffusion of innovations theory, what kind of adopters are they? What about Larry and Marty? What role could each potentially play in influencing other DSCs to be willing to adopt Netwrkd?

2. Historically, Southwest Mods has made changes as a result of communication audits. What element of systems theory best represents the cause of the changes? What might happen if Southwest Mods ignored the communication audits?

3. When Larry and Marty grouse to each other and other employees about adapting to organizational change, what type of resistance are they enacting? Discuss the pros and cons of their approach. In 2011, what type of resistance did Larry and Marty display when they refused to activate their smartphones?

4. Despite the advantages of Netwrkd, William worried that the new technology might change his team's interpersonal interactions. Which potential changes resulting from adopting the platform appear to concern William most? What can be done to address these changes?

5. Netwrkd allows for information to be shared and accessed throughout Southwest Mods in several new and different ways. How might using Netwrkd change how Southwest Mods employees establish meaning in their communication? Is this helpful or problematic?

6. During the quarterly meeting, William attempted to persuade his team to accept the move to Netwrkd by stressing its necessity. How did William utilize gain frames and loss frames in his explanation?

7. At the quarterly meeting, Larry and Marty voiced opposition to adopting Netwrkd. As Netwrkd diffuses across Southwest Mods and alters the communication networks therein, how do you think Larry and Marty's individual roles in those networks might change?

8. Marty hinted at retirement in response to Southwest Mods adopting Netwrkd. How could he have used a more effective strategy to voice upward dissent?

9. The consultants who conducted the communication audit for Southwest Mods suggested an enterprise social media platform would improve collaboration across the company. Determine which primary functions of horizontal communication discussed this might enhance and describe how.

10. As regional sales manager, William exerts influence on the district sales consultants. What type(s) of power does William have over his direct reports? Provide examples of each.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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