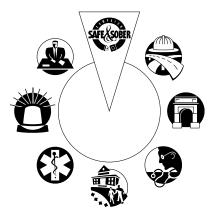Building a successful traffic safety program starts with the recognition that to be successful, the community-wide effort requires the support of many individuals and organizations. If everyone is to work collectively toward the overall planning and implementation of the program, each participating organization must accept some changes in how it operates both individually and collectively.

Imagine that your agency wants to introduce a safety belt enforcement program that is directed at four community areas. Consider the variety of individuals working with you -- staff persons in your agency, other agency directors, community group members, leaders of citizen advocacy groups, among others. At first it may seem that because of their employment, training, skills, and personal objectives, they will automatically see the value of your new program relative to their work and accept proposed changes with glowing praises. Experience demonstrates that this is rarely the case.

Also, your own excitement about the well-conceived program design, specific activities, publications, and the anticipated impact on the target population, may not be enough to get the leadership of these community groups to support your program idea.

It is not that you have to rant, rave, and bring people to tears before they will support the change you're trying to implement. In fact, the more excited or anxious a program administrator is about a program, the greater the tendency to deliver a one-way speech or a "sales pitch." In reality, the opposite is true. Your ability to listen well and draw people out, in order to learn about their needs or objections, will increase your ability to "sell" the program design and the change you are trying to effect.

As the administrator who initiates the program, it is important to take the lead in establishing a positive climate for change that will ultimately help increase the chance for your program's success. Some suggestions include:

Think holistically. Nearly everyone has been guilty of "tunnel vision" that causes us to think only of our own agency, jobs, tasks, budget, or mission. It's easy to fall into this mind set. When we fail to consider the big picture and recognize all the factors and parties affected by the proposed change, we decrease our chances of success. We must balance humanistic needs with technical aspects of implementing the program, budgetary constraints, etc., knowing that we can't please all of the people all of the time.

Concentrate on communications. Be prepared for change to destroy established communications. Since rumors will be flying, be sure others are wired into the changes and that they are picking up solid information prior to its announcement. Everyone needs to know what's "going down." One has to view the communication process as being as vital as the change itself.

Work with an advisory committee. Provide the opportunity for staff, volunteers and community personnel to serve on committees that will plan the design and implementation of the program. It is no longer appropriate to use a rigged command structure for getting things done. A planning committee is needed to support the program. Remember, "if they're there for the take-off, they will be motivated to help during the flight."

Creating a Viable Climate for Change When Working With Community Organizations

Negotiate. You may not succeed in selling others totally on all your viewpoints. However, 30 percent gained today, and 20 percent next week, can begin adding up, eventually to perhaps 80 percent of what you wanted. Again, avoid thinking like an autocrat, where "a partial victory is a total defeat." Complete victories occur only in John Wayne movies. Partial victories are legitimate victories.

Use time to find points of negotiation. Time allows for second thoughts and provides the opportunity to arrange for trade-offs with other players who will enter into shared cooperation for goal attainment. Time also allows for the evolution of better approaches. Also, asking for paced time to implement systematic change will aid the organization's adjustments as well as your own. Avoid using time to stall. Time must be used effectively, must be fruitful, and must contain commitment.

Establish political relationships. The desire for major change always brings with it changes in the political grid within which the manager functions. In some cases change means organizational realignments with power position shifts, working with outside groups, staff speaking to the public or media, etc. Even without formal hierarchy changes, a major program modification brings with it pecking-order changes and changes in the nuances of power.

Avoid sandbagging the change. After the negotiation and discussion are over and the decision is made, then comes the time to put your shoulder to the wheel and make it move. To continue to fight, or to sabotage the plans of the program is folly. Know that when "the bell of choice" sounds, the fight is over. Recognize and support the collective ideas and suggestions of others.

Don't feel paranoid. Nobody is out to get you. While some may envy and show it in strange ways, change is not brought about as some elaborate plot to cause your demise. Stay on top of it, but don't fear it. Your contribution is needed, perhaps with a different emphasis, but your own track record of past success is again being called upon to perform once more.

Reward people for acting. While you need not act impulsively, also do not wait until you have all the information. Judiciously reacting to the information available at the moment is a characteristic of success during change.

Put people on teams with others they don't know. This will provide cross learning.

Provide constructive and immediate feedback. Research shows that as much as 50 percent of performance problems occur because others don't get the feedback they need.

Ask agency employees and community groups to suggest ideas for the next change just after the last change. This will reinforce change as the norm. Play a roll in getting everyone to think in the longer term and involve them more deeply in the change process.

Provide meaningful tasks right after the change that rely on employees' "past skills." They will accept change faster if they feel that some of their skills are transferable.

Show that "why" they're working has not changed. But "how" they accomplished the "why" may have changed.

The only constant in life is change. A safe prediction for any traffic safety program administrator to make is that change, choice, and confrontation are the realities of managing. Program administrators can not escape making choices for change. If they try, they are not managing. Change management is the core of the management process.

Change is opportunity. In the midst of choices there can be great opportunities to advance traffic safety programs in your community. Change brings about battlefield conditions and the opportunity for battlefield commissions. Every man or woman with an answer is welcome to sit at *their* command table.

Based on "Changes and Choices" by Charles Sherman and Mark Silber.

NHTSA
People Saving People
U.S. Department of Transportation