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Continuing professional development and workplace learning – 15

300 **Achieving successful organisational change – do's and don'ts of change management**

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Abstract

Purpose – Subsequent instalments in the series examined achieving readiness for change, recognising and responding to change resistance, and communicating in times of change. This, the last in the series, focuses on nine fundamental, and interrelated, elements that are key to achieving successful and sustained change.

Design/methodology/approach – Focuses on nine fundamental, and interrelated, elements that are key to achieving successful and sustained change.

Findings – Finds that change is now a constant organisational imperative.

Originality/value – This article and those preceding have attempted to provide, for those tasked with guiding and steering change, pointers to how the challenge of successfully achieving change might best be met.

Keywords Organizational change, Change management

Paper type Research paper

Faced with the choice between changing and proving that there is no need to do so, almost everyone gets busy on the proof.

This wry observation – attributed to diplomat, economist and author John Kenneth Galbraith – will ring true for all managers who have, at some stage, had the task of achieving change in their organisations. Despite the investment of significant time effort and resources, very many change initiatives fail to achieve substantial and lasting results (for example, see: Kotter, 1995; Burke, 2002).

There can be many reasons why well-intentioned organisational change efforts founder. Common reasons for failure include:

- lack of change readiness;
- insufficient or ineffective planning
- failures in the leadership and management of the change program;
- ineffective communication; and
- insufficient follow through and a failure to achieve and sustain organisational learning.



Overlaying all of these factors, however, is perhaps the most frequent and wide ranging failure of all: not recognising and adequately attending to the human element of organisational change.

The article, which began this short series (Smith, 2005), emphasised the importance of the “people” element in organisational change and examined the inherent conundrum of change: that is that people, the human resources of organisations, are both an essential factor in achieving change as well as being the biggest potential obstacles to change. Subsequent instalments in the series examined achieving readiness for change, recognising and responding to change resistance, and communicating in times of change. This, the last in the series, focuses on nine fundamental, and interrelated, elements which are key to achieving successful and sustained change.

1. Ensure readiness for change

It is people who make up organisations and people who will either embrace or resist change. Employees' perceptions of the degree to which their organisation has the flexibility to achieve change, and the extent to which participation in the change process is available, are key factors in achieving successful change. For organisational change to take hold and succeed it is important that there is readiness for change – at both individual and whole-of-organisation level. It is important to communicate with employees early in the change process, even before change begins in order to create an organisational environment that is receptive to change. Creating readiness for change entails building individual and, thence, organisation-wide momentum excitement and commitment to change. There should be a sense of need and urgency for change and the change message and the plans for change must be widely communicated with effective and wide-scale participation and involvement in the change process. Anchoring points and a base for the achievement of change need to be established well before the change begins.

2. Plan for change

Organisational change is a complex and long-term task. A change management plan is critical in mapping how the organisation is to move from its current state to a desired future state. A change plan also serves to link together the disparate parts of a change process – establishing priorities and timelines, allocating responsibilities, establishing mechanisms for review and (where necessary) revision. A change plan can also form an important part of the communication process – informing employees and others as to what is to happen when and why, and engaging them in the change process. To be effective, planning for change should begin well before changes are to take effect and should be the product of wide consultation. The people who are to carry out the changes at all levels of the organisation need to be involved in planning how the changes are to happen. Making clear the links between the overall change and the work of each work group, and ultimately each individual in the organisation, is important. A detailed process of consultative change planning can be an important means of establishing these important linkages. Flexibility in planning for change is also important, and planning for change should provide a balance of structure and control with room for flexibility and changes in plans as and when circumstances demand this.

3. Lead change

Effective change requires good and sustained leadership at all organisational levels. Commitment, vision and direction from the top of the organisation is critical: senior managers and leaders play a vital role in selling the vision for change, and in establishing and articulating clear and achievable paths and methods towards the new future. Employees' perceptions of the degree to which their organisation has the flexibility to achieve change and the degree to which they can participate in decision making about the changes, are both important factors in achieving successful change.

Change messages must be realistic and genuine. Change leaders cannot just mouth the language of change. Their words and actions must personify the intended culture. Direction for the change needs to be established by the senior leadership of the organisation with, clear articulation of goals, timelines, expected achievements and review points. Change leadership by middle managers and supervisors throughout the organisation is also a vital element of successful change, along with leadership on the part of "change champions" – people working at any level of the organisation who understand the need for, and are interested in achieving, change.

Real change is not something that can be simply imposed on an organisation. Top-down direction setting for change should be balanced with genuine involvement of people throughout the organisation in determining the direction and implementation of change. The best chance for change to persist and to be truly effective is where the changes are achieved through a partnership between those who lead the organisation at a senior level and those who are close to the everyday practical work of the organisation. It is therefore necessary to actively seek out and give to people in all areas and levels of the organisation responsibility for carrying through change. Providing genuine opportunities for employee involvement in transforming their own work environment can be a powerful medium in which to develop in employees a sense of challenge and ongoing commitment to change.

4. Manage change

Managing change process is critical to success. Clear focus is important: ensuring that as the changes progress the main goals are kept in sight. Scope-creep can be a danger, particularly if change initiatives and those leading them are successful. Successful change leaders and change teams may, because of their record of success, be given extra tasks to undertake. The risk in such cases is that the change focus may be diluted and resources drained away from the primary objectives. The changes and progress towards them needs to be kept on the organisational agenda, both literally and metaphorically. The change initiative, progress and setbacks, resourcing and activity should become regular and prominent agenda items at key meetings throughout the organisation. Less directly, but just as importantly, the change objectives need to be kept in the forefront of general organisational consciousness through regular organisation-wide communication and discussion. Change managers should guard against the danger of change stalling. Stalling can arise from organisational inertia and the tendency of things to gradually slip back to the old ways of working, and also by active blocking of change by those who either stand to lose from the changes or who are, for whatever reasons, opposed to the changes.

Trouble-shooting is important during change implementation. Any change initiative will encounter obstacles or not proceed according to plan. Identifying and

fixing trouble spots, promptly and practically, can turn potential change blockages and rallying points for change opponents can into wins for the change process. It is important that such obstacles and setbacks are openly acknowledged and taken in to account. Open examination of failures in the change effort – with input from all those who have a useful perspective – provides the opportunity to learn from errors and to encourage in employees and leaders willingness to learn from experience, to take risks and to think outside of the existing organisational parameters. It is important that people at all levels of the organisation – especially those who work at action/operational levels – are empowered and enabled to explore ideas which support desired changes. Creating an environment of empowerment where new ideas and ways of working can be tried out – even with the consequent risk that some of these will fail – can be a highly effective tool in loosening up deeply embedded organisational thinking and working.

Identifying wins and achievements along the way towards change, and recognising, rewarding and celebrating them appropriately and meaningfully, is important. Achieving change can take a long time with potentially difficult organisational and individual transitions and trade-offs to be made. Things often get worse before they get better. In such an environment it is easy for those in the thick of the changes to lose confidence that change can be achieved. Identifying and celebrating achievements, even if they are small, can play an important role in maintaining momentum and inspiring action towards achieving desired change goals.

5. Support change

Basic infrastructure and support for the change process is important. For change to succeed it is important that adequate staffing, money, time and other needed resources are in the right places at the right time. It is also important to invest non-direct resources in support of the change and to align organisational systems with the needs of the change program. For example, human resources systems, in particular recruitment and performance management processes, have an important role to play in achieving and embedding change. Training and development programs – direct training in new skills and knowledge as well as broader development programs such as those focussed on organisational and individual knowledge required as part of the changes and more generic programs designed to assist people work through the impact of changes – can form an important element in the success of any change program.

6. Deal with resistance to change

Change resistance is a natural and expected part of any organisational change. Understanding why and how opposition to change occurs, and developing the ability to respond effectively, is crucial to the success or failure of change efforts. Resistance can manifest in many different ways and in different degrees – from mild expressions of reservation, through to active hostility and attempts to delay, subvert, or stop change. Resistance to change may at times be well founded – for example, because some aspect of the change, or its implementation, has been poorly thought through by those responsible for initiating the change. In other cases resistance may simply be a refusal to let go of the old to make way for the new. The key to effective managing change resistance is to clearly understand the nature of and reasons for resistance. A contextually sensitive response, one that engages with change resistance, takes it

seriously and listens in order it to asses the validity of the resistance may turn initial resistance and opposition into support for change. In some instances, however, the exercise of authority and power may be required in order to overcome hard-core resistance to change in cases where, on objective analysis, such resistance has become a force impeding the achievement of overall organisational benefit. The moral and organisational authority gained by engaging with and responding to expressed resistance – as opposed to simply attempting to overcome it – can be of significant value to change agents when they are faced with the task of dealing with residual, truly negative and intractable change resistance.

7. Communicate effectively

Effective communication is critical to achieving successful and persisting change. Employees are more likely to commit to change when they have full and clear information about the nature of the changes that reasons for change. Conversely, people are more likely to resist change when clear and honest communication is absent. Some basic rules apply to good organisational communication. These are important at any time but especially so during periods of change.

- Recognise that organisations vary – they are not homogenous entities – and communicate accordingly. Use a variety of communication methods including – depending on the intended audience and message: meetings/forums (small and large); written communications (formal and informal); and individual face-to-face discussion
- Listen – do not just talk. Communication should be two-way and genuinely interactive. People should be encouraged to comment openly, to seek information and clarification about the changes and their role in achieving them. It is important to genuinely listen to, and consider, what is being said – both good and bad – about the changes. Communicate the reasons for change, what is happening, why and how it is happening, what has been achieved and what is still to be done.
- Demonstrate commitment to genuine and open communication at all levels of management and involve all managers in the process of communicating about change. Communication from change leaders and managers should be regular, timely, honest, clear, interactive and easy to understand. Avoid jargon and hype! Communication should be open and honest including information about success but also about failures or mis-steps if and when these latter occur.
- Above all, take time to communicate. Successful organisational change takes time. So too does communication about change.

Remember too to communicate with clients and other external stakeholders. Clients, and others with an interest in the organisation, such as funding bodies or supervening organisational groups, as well as the staff, also need to know what is changing and why.

8. Follow through, evaluate, learn

Achieving sustained organisational change is a long-range task. The process of change does not stop when the most visible parts of a change program have been completed.

Many failed change efforts have fallen at precisely that point – with the result being that changes have been overturned by either organisational inertia, a desire by some to return to old ways, or a combination of both factors

For change to really take root the impact and outcomes of change should be honestly evaluated. Questions asked should include: Have the expected benefits been achieved? What can be learned from how the change was handled? What might have been done better? What remains to be done? Organisations wishing to achieve sustained change will be well served by developing a culture of ongoing learning – one which values openness in thinking and which tolerates and encourages an appropriate degree of risk taking and the making of mistakes.

9. Attend to the human factor

The “people” element in organisational change underlies any and all change efforts and holds the key to success or failure. Change happens only when people make it happen – other than in exceptional circumstances change cannot simply be imposed. Well handled, the people element in any change process forms the key to success. Poorly handled, the people element may be the biggest hurdle to achieving change and may exacerbate all of the other common causes of change failure.

Conclusion

Change is now a constant organisational imperative. This short series began with the observation by futurist Charles Handy (1993) that:

[...] achieving change in organisations is not so much about “managing” – which process assumes both that managers know where to go and how to get there and can persuade others to come along – but may be more about guiding and steering the process of change.

This article and those preceding have attempted to provide, for those tasked with guiding and steering change, pointers to how the challenge of successfully achieving change might best be met.

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