

## Implementing Change - First Steps First

True or False?: When the business climate, with all its attendant dynamics and forces, compels an organization to change the way it does business, the most difficult aspect of the change effort is determining exactly what the future state of the organization should be.

Although it depends a great deal on the organization and its leadership, if you answered *true* you'd probably be wrong. Most contemporary organizations, be they businesses or government agencies, are led by managers able to read the need for change and come up with a vision of what their group or company must do, or how it must be different, in order to thrive.

For most groups, teams, corporations or ministries, the real difficulty is *bridging the gap* between the present state of affairs and the desired future state. Navigating this gap involves both art and science. It requires careful, meticulous planning to ensure the organization is adequately prepared for change (physically, fiscally and psychologically) and *managing the implementation*. While sometimes regarded as a time-consuming investment, planning carefully for change and intensively managing its implementation usually overcomes the reasons why change efforts fail (employee resistance, lack of monitoring/tracking processes, lack of alignment, lack of top-down commitment and inadequate communication).

Planning and managing the implementation of change promotes understanding, acceptance and commitment – indispensable elements for success in reaching a desired future state. On the other hand, merely announcing how things will change and then *pushing a button* to make it happen is a recipe for disaster. Two cases in point will serve to illustrate.

A few years ago, a major public sector organization developed a new strategic plan with a vision of partially reinventing itself to better serve its client base. The plan was documented in a glossy, multi-colour brochure and contained the usual elements: vision statement of desired future state, values, mission and a number of goals and objectives designed to help it attain its vision.

Nine months after the plan was published, executives realized there had been very little progress toward attainment of the goals. In fact, almost all managers and several senior executives took no ownership in the plan. While a communiqué with the plan was sent to employees, it had in effect been published, distributed and was filed. For all the reasons mentioned above, change failed to occur. A high level plan had been developed; but there was no attempt to develop a plan for *managing implementation* of the plan.

Happily, the following year the same organization got its act together and developed a change management and implementation strategy. It included the engagement and involvement of people at all levels; a thorough communication plan; and processes for alignment, accountability and measurement. In short, it created understanding, acceptance and commitment. Significant progress was made toward attainment of the goals and the vision in the service plan during the second year.

A solid change management strategy also *prepares the organization for change by engaging and involving its members*. Recently an insurance brokerage put together a project team to update several of its renewal processes, overtaken and rendered obsolete by industry-wide technological advances. Having experienced projects which failed to be supported and productively implemented in the past, the branch manager was prepared. He provided the team with an expert to help them develop the teamwork skills they would need in order to work together and to carefully assess the readiness of their organization for the changes envisioned.

By engaging the broader organizational membership to assess change readiness, the project team embarked on a path to psychologically prepare the group for change ... promoting understanding, acceptance and commitment early on in the effort. Data gained from the assessment allowed the team to develop a carefully tailored change management plan to ensure the implementation was meticulously monitored and managed. The project was a success.

In both cases, success was ultimately achieved by observing and practising a few time-tested change management principles:

1. Engage and involve as wide a cross-section of employees as is appropriate very early in the change planning process.
2. Begin communicating early and broadly, using a variety of media. It is axiomatic to say management cannot over-communicate when it comes to promoting buy-in to change.
3. Put together a cross-functional, broadly-representational project team to carefully plan for the implementation.
4. Implement the change in very deliberate, carefully managed steps.
5. Monitor the implementation, celebrate success, make mid-course corrections as appropriate.
6. Overarching all of these principles, an essential condition, is top-down commitment and executive sponsorship.

Organizational changes are challenging. Understanding these challenges, developing a proper implementation plan and proactively managing that plan will dramatically increase your chances of success. Most organizations recognize strong project management skills as a key to success – add strong change-management and change implementation management skills to fully solidify change in your organization.

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