

## Managing Projects in the Context of Continuous Change

Many corporations are facing conditions that demand continuous change, but this need not mean dealing with chaos. Understanding the relationship between individual change projects and the broader process of strategic adaptation can mean the difference between a string of irrelevant or unfinished projects, and a connected and powerful series of projects that build on one another.

Most critical is to understand that both individual change projects and broader continuous change processes both occur in cycles, not in linear programs that are sometimes associated with planned change projects. The cycle of change involves four stages, each with its own type of change agent and its own energy.

Stage one – “The idea”: All change processes begin with an idea – an insight, intuition or belief that motivates someone to want to change the way that the firm operates. Isolated ideas, though, never lead to change: to initiate change processes, ideas need to be articulated in ways that either excite and enliven others in the organization. The change agent in this first stage must therefore be an *evangelist* – literally the bringer of good news – selling the idea to other key organizational members.

Stage 2 – “New behaviors”. Even the most widely accepted idea will not in itself create organizational change unless it is put into practice in some form. Thinking of customers as royalty, or patients as collaborators, is not enough – customers need to be treated like royalty and collaborations need to be formed with patients. So, once an idea has gained acceptance by key organizational members, the dynamics of continuous change shift from a focus on ideas to a focus on behavior. But, the transformation of new ideas into coherent, collective action is a precarious process. Effecting collective action usually depends on the use of authority – the formal, legitimate power to tell people what to do, how to do it and when. This means that a second-stage change agent needs to be something of an *autocrat* – someone with the legitimate authority to translate ideas into action.

Stage 3 – “Routinizing”. Together, Stages 1 and 2 – gaining acceptance for a new idea and implementing new behaviors – represent the transformative side of continuous change; at Stage 3, the emphasis shifts to the institutionalization of change, making sure that ideas and practices are maintained and elaborated over time. In order for this to happen, the core ideas and practices need to be embedded in the corporate systems and culture. A new type of change agent is needed to begin the process of institutionalizing change: in order to design the systems required to embed change in corporate routines, organizations need to find and empower an *architect*. A key role for the architect is designing technological systems that embody the spirit of the change process and entrench the behaviors and practices of individuals so that they become organizational routines.

Stage 4 – “Embedding”. The final stage in any significant change process is perhaps the most critical and the most commonly overlooked – ensuring that the change process has a legacy beyond the initial changes, and that strategic change becomes deep change through the fostering of innovation that extends and elaborates the initial ideas and practices. The cultural component of change is forward-looking with focus on shaping the identities of employees so that they have the expertise and motivation to not only enact the direction of change but to extend and elaborate through workplace innovation. New ideas need to be born so that they can be picked up, evangelized, and integrated into workflows and structures. The change agent needed to successfully navigate this stage is an *educator* – not a teacher, but an individual with the ability to structure the work experiences of employees so that they gain expertise in ways that foster their own strategic intuition. The educator is focused on creating environments within which employees gain experience, and attach meaning to that experience.

Together, these four stages provide a means of connecting individual projects to broader processes of strategic adaptation. Two possible relationships exist. First, individual projects might fulfill a single stage of this process. Project management tools and technologies can be utilized to achieve any of these – the articulation and communication of an idea, the implementation of new behaviors, the design of organizational systems, or the construction of work environments that support the formation of new work identities for employees. If this is the case, however – if projects are defined by a single stage in the process – the issue of “handoffs” becomes critical. Most strategic change processes fail at the point that change agents need to hand off “their” projects: a culture of collaboration and systems that facilitate communication and documentation of project needs are critical. The second possibility is that a project will be defined in such a way as to encompass the whole change cycle. In this case, the key issue is filling the project team with the right slate of people. The needs of the project will change as it moves through the four stages, but few individuals are able to take on all of the roles of evangelist, autocrat, architect and educator. So, including all of those types of people, or bringing them in at the right moments will be critical to the success of the project.

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