

Executive Insight >> Thought Leaders

Changing The Way We Change

Quiet cynics will derail your change program unless you bring them onboard or leave them with nowhere to hide

We've all read the statistics - 41% of change projects fail and of the 59% that "succeed" only half meet the expectations of senior management.

But we don't need studies to tell us this. We have the scar-tissue. We know how hard it is to mobilize an organization to take a different path. We know that new priorities or new crises emerge just as we are getting initiatives going. We know that new executives lobby organizations to embrace a better tomorrow, and then are nowhere to be found 18 months later. We know that teams of consultants promise transformational results, and then leave behind fancy presentations and detailed reports that may be brilliant but are not actionable.

We know that management teams diligently pursue long-term strategies that make sense, only to be curve-balled by merger, acquisition, new leadership or marketplace discontinuity. And we know how pervasive organizational culture is, and that as the change battle intensifies, cultures hunker down for the long-haul.

In the end, we tire, and so do organizations, and change loses its momentum and mantras quietly fade away.

Then the world changes again, we re-frame and attack the next cause célèbre. We energize once more; we rationalize that it will be different this time and gather up the requisite head of steam, only to be given lip service by an organizational culture that's seen it all before and knows, "this too will pass..."

Most executives would not characterize their experiences this way. Indeed resumes are full of heroic achievement narratives accentuated by startling statistics. But in the trenches – in the real world of middle-managers, supervisors and front line employees – they know that all that glitters isn't gold, that executive careers are more often built on hyperbole than reality, and that "this too will pass..."

At a time of intensifying global competition, shifting business realities and increasingly demanding customers we know that we need to create highly competitive, nimble and adaptive enterprises to survive and thrive in these turbulent times. But how to implement effective and sustaining change? That is the question that challenges executives and organizations everywhere.

A case in point

Two years ago a Chief Medical Officer was brought in and charged with revamping the Hospital. Several of his colleagues were brought in as well since they had experience with what needed to be done. Titles, organization charts and reporting structure were changed, new terms introduced and all current medical management employees were told they had to re-apply for their jobs.

Chaos ensued. People felt offended and took the change as a poor reflection on how they did their jobs. Communication of the changes was not clear and the leadership did not get behind the effort enough to allow buy in. A lot of time, money and emotion was spent, with little value. Without the proper change plan and roll-out this new way of doing things was doomed before it had a chance to be of any benefit.

In the end, and after this new group had moved on, the prevailing message that remained was that we are still here and they are not, so I guess we didn't need to change after all.

Mid-level Manager, Healthcare

We Need to Look at Change Differently

Like our Healthcare mid-level manager on page one, we know poor change process when we experience it, but transitioning the organization to a new place that sustains is that much more elusive.

There are many theoretical models of how to successfully manage change - confront reality, summon a mandate, appoint change champions, communicate continuously, secure early “wins” etc. And there are a thousand consulting firms clamoring to help you manage “better” change – most with a copy of one of John Kotter’s texts tucked into their briefcase.

But the best models and the best consultants do not necessarily bring you better results. Certainly good process is better than the opposite - and good help is hard to find - but we believe the answer lies in looking at change differently.

Change and Transition are Different

If we try to make change too fast, the body rejects the organ – albeit subversively – in large part because we’ve failed to understand the difference between change and transition and have insufficiently engaged and nurtured the organization in and through the process.

Many leaders assume a change mandate, yet as they try to orchestrate change they collide with organizational inertia and lose. Unless transition occurs, change will not work. The starting point for transition is not the outcome but the ending. Situational change hinges on the new thing, but psychological transition depends on letting go of the old reality and the old identity you had before the change took place. Nothing so undermines organizational change as the failure to think through who will have to let go of what when change occurs.

Conversely, if we change too slowly a tsunami of new circumstances will engulf us before we are too far along. Organizational energy and cost are consumed with no sustaining result and the “this too will pass” brigade emerges smug and victorious.

It isn't the changes that do you in, it's the transitions.

Change is not the same as transition. Change is situational: the new site, the new boss,
the new team roles, the new policy.

Transition is the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new
situation.

Change is external, transition is internal.

William Bridges, Ph.D.

Managing Transitions

Balancing Speed and Patience

So we believe the answer is a balance, the juxtaposition of slow and fast - slowing down enough to allow for transitions that yield sustaining new beginnings, while keeping one’s foot on the accelerator to get ahead of the next wave.

And the primary way to manage this paradox is to make sure that the momentum for change flourishes from the bottom of the organization and not just from the top. **Sustaining change is not a top-down campaign. It’s a bottom-up movement.** Effective change, in our experience, occurs most frequently when the organization broadly is engaged in shaping the change agenda rather than reacting to it. This mitigates the fear of change, gives the organization something to hold on to and propels the change process forward with remarkable momentum. As Thomas Jefferson once famously said, “I know of no safer depository of the ultimate powers than the people themselves. And if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion.”

Get Off the Balcony

Certainly companies engaged in change form teams and communicate often. But this is different; more intensive, more visceral. **You can’t plot sustaining change from the balcony; you have to create it on the field of play.** Too often we unveil the plans once they are formed, rather than allowing the organization to help shape them. Though we rarely articulate it, this is because we think we know what’s best. Leveraging organizational know-how to shape the change agenda can be a humbling experience, as we discover insights and alternatives that we would never have considered.

For, as Meg Wheatley reminds us, “We cannot talk people into reality, because there really is no reality to describe if they haven’t been there. People can only become aware of the reality of the

plan by interacting with it, by creating different possibilities through their personal process of observation... and it is this participation process that generates the reality to which they make their commitment.”

Give the Organization Something to Hold on to

In the process you have to find the toughest critics, convince them to join the cause and give them prominent roles. You have to find those in the organization with the most street-credibility and bring them aboard so that they'll carry others along. It will take time and patience but it will yield sustainable results. Going slowly initially will allow you to pick-up speed later. There will be less speed-bumps, less organizational drag, less subversive behavior as you proceed. Indeed you might find it hard to keep up with the energy and commitment to the cause that you've unleashed. Cycles of “this too will pass” is actually more borne of resigned inevitability than crude cynicism.

Give an organization a worthwhile cause that they can believe in and the confidence to know that you'll not let them down, and watch them go. You'll actually have the chance of succeeding in and sustaining your change objectives... and orchestrated carefully, a groundswell will emerge that engulfs the naysayers, the uncommitted and the politically-expedient who'll end up with nowhere to run and nowhere to hide.

It's not so much that we are afraid of change, or so in love with the old ways.

It's the place in between we fear.

It's like being between trapezes. It's Linus with his blanket in a dryer.

There's nothing to hold on to.

Marilyn Ferguson

Futurist

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