

Organisations tolerate too much complacency as they address change

Last month I wrote about the eight stages in the change process. Let me address the challenges in each of these stages and where the process can go horribly wrong.

Organisations tolerate too much complacency as they address change. In trying to create urgency they drive up anxiety which in turn pushes people into their foxholes. This creates the downward spiral from where resistance to change breeds and flourishes. However, without the sense of urgency people will not give the effort that is often essential and will feel unable (or unwilling) to make the necessary sacrifices.

A well articulated vision goes a long way in helping people come on board. Woolly vision statements create confusion - if you aren't clear then don't expect clarity from your people. A good vision statement often acknowledges that sacrifices will have to be made, and by making them the benefits will be worthwhile.

The main area for failure is the inability to achieve effective communications with all employees. Major change is usually impossible without employees being willing to help. People will not help, even if they are unhappy with the status quo, unless they think the potential benefits of change are attractive and unless they believe that a transformation is possible. It is the behaviour of senior people that sets the atmosphere for change. Employees interpret the millions of signals sent by senior people every minute of the day. The advice is - check the messages you are sending with several people to ensure that the intention you meant is the one that was received. Nothing undermines change like the behaviour of senior people.

Barriers are always there, in some form or another. The metal of change is whether these can be dealt with or whether managers will just try to skirt around them. Employees will feel disempowered by huge obstacles in their way. It is likely that there will be



a well placed blocker in the way. Somebody who, although apparently in touch with the change, skilfully ensures that change is either protracted or obstructed. These people are quite sinister and are usually known throughout the organisation. They need to be removed at the earliest opportunity or they will rake untold damage to all change initiatives.

Short term wins demonstrate the change is working. Failure to record and acknowledge these will allow the propaganda machine fuelled by cynics to gain momentum. Remember that facts are friendly. Feed them into the grapevine. The cynics can be defeated by effective communications and celebrations about small wins.

Premature victory celebrations can stop the momentum. 'We've arrived. Have a drink,' I hear relieved senior managers exclaim. Weary troops let themselves be convinced that they have won. Once home, tired soldiers seldom want to return to the front.

Change sticks when it becomes, 'the way we do things around here'. It is only when the customer notices and applauds the way he/she is treated and when the employee feels much better about life at the XYZ company and enjoys his/her lot that the culture blancmange is starting to set.

Finally the key is to understand why your organisation is resisting the needed change. The consequences of failing to succeed where change is desperately required are often fatal. A poorly executed change initiative will plummet the organisation into significant decline from which it may never recover. Before you embark on the journey make sure you have the stomach for it and the right team to make it happen. Otherwise don't bother.

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Ankersen". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single horizontal line.