Why Organizational Change Fails
By Mark Sanborn

"There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things."
Niccolo Machiavelli

As the U.S. Presidential election reaches the homestretch, both candidates are calling for change. Each decries the entrenched bureaucracy in Washington and rails against politics as usual. At a time when Americans perceive their country to be on the wrong track, the message of change inspires. However, the reality of leading change from the Oval Office is another matter entirely. Preaching change is much different than practicing it.

The status quo doesn't yield to good intentions. Change is tiring and toilsome work, requiring persistence and resourcefulness. Unfortunately, many leaders fall short in their efforts to enact change.

What causes attempts at change to bomb? What happens to scuttle well-intentioned plans?

The following list compiles what I've identified as the most common reasons why organizational change fails. You can use the list for diagnostic purposes, or to prevent mistakes in future attempts at change.

1. Misstarts

A misstart occurs when change is ill-advised, hastily implemented, or attempted without sufficient commitment. Misstarts are jarring and demoralizing to an organization, and they destroy a leader's credibility.

2. Making change an option

When leadership commits to change, the message must be sent that change is not an option. Regrettably, the message of change is often weak and watered down. "We'd like you to change, we're asking you to change, we implore you to change, please change..." Whenever people have the option to avoid change, they will.

3. A focus only on process

Leaders can become enmeshed in managing the process of change to the point where they don't measure tangible outcomes. Activity becomes more important than results.

4. A focus only on results

Unhealthy results-focus stems from a belief that the end justifies any means. Organizations tend to fail miserably in this regard: they downplay or ignore the human pain of change. Insensitivity to people's feelings not only prevents change, but also destroys morale and loyalty in the process.

5. Not involving those expected to implement the change

When management announces a change and then mandates the specifics of its implementation, a great deal of resentment is aroused throughout the organization. To smoothen the arrival of

change, employees need to be involved in two ways. Firstly, their input and suggestions should be solicited when planning the change. Secondly, after a commitment to change has been made, they should be involved in determining the means. Leadership needs to communicate, "Here's what must happen. How do you think it can best be done?"

6. Delegated to "outsiders"

Change is an inside job. Although outside consultants may provide valuable ideas and input, people inside the organization must accept responsibility for leading change. Dodging tough transitions or passing the buck is not an option.

7. No change in reward system

If you continue rewarding employees for what they've always done, you'll never move past the usual results. Make sure rewards, recognition, and compensation are adjusted to reflect the desired change.

8. Leadership doesn't walk the talk

For change to happen, everybody involved must buy-in. Leadership, however, must take the first steps. Attempts at change are sabotaged whenever leaders neglect to demonstrate the same commitment they expect from others.

9. Wrong size

In this instance, change is either too massive to be achievable or too small to be significant. Like a good goal, a change program should be neither too easy nor too impossible.

10. No follow-through

The best planning is worthless if not implemented, monitored, and measured. Responsibility for executing change must be clearly defined so that follow-through is timely and thorough.

About the Author

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