BREAKING THE CYCLE OF FAILED CHANGE MANAGEMENT

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Insanity is often defined as doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. Yet that’s the approach companies often take when trying to bring about change. Forbes reported in 2013 that the percentage of major change initiatives that fail is 75 percent.

For the past 20 years, I have been involved in major change initiatives as a coach, consultant, change leader, and trainer. Given my experience, I am not surprised that so many change initiatives fail—frustrated, but not surprised.

Many reports and studies over the years have noted the reasons that projects fail. When I query a room full of change agents about why such efforts collapse, I receive a number of telling responses: communication breakdowns, leadership challenges, hidden agendas, poor planning and processes, and people. These are definitely all factors. However, I have found that two main reasons always rise to the top: underestimation of complexity and misalignment of expectations.

This ATD at Work will provide techniques and tips for talent managers and change leaders so they can become part of the 25 percent who succeed in their change management efforts. In the issue, you will learn:

• why change management efforts fail
• ways to improve your chances for success
• tips for determining whether your organization is change ready
• how to move forward with a change management plan
• strategies for involving everyone in change.

WHY CHANGE MANAGEMENT EFFORTS FAIL

Facilitating change is more critical now than ever as organizations affected by economic conditions are driven to improve efficiency, productivity, and service quality. While the leaders, talent management professionals, and others within organizations realize that change is needed, they often fail to grasp the complexity of what change management entails and do not recognize that their expectations aren’t aligned with what is feasible within the organization.

Leaders underestimate the complexity of change when they do not take the time to understand the scope of the change, the stakeholders, and their environment. If we fail to understand the impact of change from a systems perspective, challenges will come up and become roadblocks. I encourage you to include in your philosophy the role of not only systems and processes, but also teams and people.

To ensure that we understand the complexity and that our expectations align with those of stakeholders, we must have trusting communication. Misalignment of expectations often includes assumptions: assumptions about how change will be received, what it takes to get the work done, or who will do it. For many, the push to execute before planning leaves out fundamental research and planning activities as well as conversations that validate assumptions and ensure alignment.

THE BEST-LAIDED CHANGE MANAGEMENT PLANS STRUGGLE IF TRUST IS NOT PRESENT.

WHAT DOES WORK?

ATD’s Change Management Certificate program provides a practical six-step model that helps learning and development and talent development pros grasp the complexity of change management and ensure that expectations are in alignment. The six steps of this model for managing change are:

1. Challenge the current state.
2. Harmonize and align leadership.
3. Activate commitment.
4. Nurture and formalize design.
5. Guide implementation.
6. Evaluate and institutionalize the change.
Unfortunately, far too many change managers want to jump straight to step 4 of this model and design the change. A significant amount of work needs to occur in those first three steps to ensure success. The upfront planning and understanding of the change and how it is likely to impact our organization is critical legwork required prior to actually designing change.

To create a culture more welcoming of change, we must invest time in planning and understanding change apart from the actual change endeavor.

The Role of Trust in Change

Studies over the past few years have emphasized the important role trust plays in organizational success. The best-laid change management plans struggle if trust is not present.

Models like “Great Places to Work” identify credibility, respect, and fairness as the building blocks of trust. Most often, trust comes from the top down. In other words, if executives are trustworthy and trusting, then the organization has a higher level of trust.

It is important for change leaders to be a part of establishing trust within the organization. Building relationships outside the change window fosters an environment of trust and increases employees’ readiness for change. As change managers, we keep our eyes on relevance and competitive advantage throughout the year. We can build trust by sharing good information without expecting anything in return. Consider, for example, playing a consultant role in which you find a good article, blog, or study and share it with key stakeholders in your change world. This builds credibility and mentorship, both of which are important for trust to thrive.

Before We Talk, We Must Listen

As a leader you may be thinking, “Wait—we make it a point to over-communicate, because you can never communicate too much.” I believe that you can. To align expectations and understand the change complexities, we must communicate the right things in the right ways. Before we can effectively communicate change, we must be good listeners. This foundational skill is absolutely critical. Are you a master listener? Take time to learn what it takes to really listen.

I believe it is human nature to want to be good and that, when we find a situation not going well, we want to help. This causes us to be in problem-solving mode. We listen for a few seconds and then start to formulate a solution in our mind, which then quickly comes to our mouth. The problem is that when listening, we are supposed to use our ears only. You may have heard the quote, “We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak.” This doesn’t stop most of us, however, from jumping to provide the solution.

Building trust requires us to listen. And this means truly listening, not just to hear the words from someone’s mouth and wait our turn to talk. Try this test in your next conversation. Is your mind focused with genuine curiosity, with the goal of understanding what the person is saying, or are you simply buying time until you can interject your words of wisdom?

IS YOUR ORGANIZATION CHANGE READY?

Much of the complexity in change efforts can be related to the readiness, or lack thereof, of our organizations. Far too many change initiatives are launched without regard for this readiness factor. But how do you determine whether now is a good time for change? Are you changing just to change? Do you have a history of successful or failed change efforts?

It is important to measure change readiness regularly. At least twice a year is a good frequency. The measurement can be taken from a pulse survey or an employee engagement survey. Plant direct questions around change. Past change
efforts can serve as a predictor of future success, and they also will give you an understanding of how the organization feels about change. While the history can reveal quite a bit, I don’t think it reveals as much as simply asking key individuals across the organization how they feel about the organization’s ability to take on change and achieve a successful outcome.

So before you launch a new change effort, take some time to learn more about where your organization currently stands.

Before launching any effort, you should produce a preliminary plan to determine whether adequate resources (budget, people, and tools) are available rather than acting only to find out there isn’t anyone to execute the initiative. Conduct a “make versus buy” analysis to determine whether the talent exists in-house to drive the change or whether external talent will be required.

Take Time to Know Your People and Culture

Some organizational personalities deal better with change than others. If you were to evaluate your organization’s people, would you define them as strategic and logical, relationship and team oriented, organized and process driven, or risk taking and action oriented? Understanding the dynamics of your organization can lead to great readiness insight. Groups that are more action oriented and willing to take risks are typically the most comfortable with change and not only are ready for change, but need it to feel engaged at work.

Conversely, groups that are very process driven and appreciate the daily routine of their roles are typically the least comfortable with change. This doesn’t mean organizations that are more process driven and comfortable with the status quo can’t have successful change efforts.

CHECKLIST FOR BEING A GREAT LISTENER

- Ensure the timing of the conversation is right. Make sure you are not distracted, pressed for time, or emotional.
- Is the space conducive to good listening? Keep the following in mind: privacy, noise, distractions, and technology.
- Have you settled your mind? Consider doing a five-minute meditation prior to listening.
- Lean in slightly (but there’s no need to touch).
- Exhibit good eye contact. Make sure to blink, and do not stare.
- Try to listen for two minutes without asking questions. Nod your head or smile, but do not interrupt.
- Seek with genuine curiosity; don’t try to solve the problem while listening.
- Ask clarifying questions as a way to ensure a dialogue, not a discussion.

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