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Mastering the Quick Change



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Putting people at the core of quality and change initiative success

As if it wasn't difficult enough tightening up the recession ropes, many organizations will soon find themselves reeling as the tide changes, and hiring and production once again swing into full gear. So the challenge becomes how to do more with less now, while preparing for the economic resurgence that's on the way—all without compromising consistent quality.

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The solution lies in establishing an organizational environment that values employee communication and engagement at all levels.

Less “people issues” increases momentum

Organizational change initiatives in any economic environment fail at an alarming rate.

According to the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania Executive Education Program on Leading Organizational Change, “Researchers estimate that only about 10 to 30 percent of companies successfully implement their strategic plans.” The primary reason Wharton attributes for organizations’ dismal track record managing change is “people issues.”

Empower people to drive change

Processes, technology, and people are the three components that drive and are affected by change. Processes designed in response to changes in market conditions are supported by technology, but ultimately, people implement the processes and technology.

Most organizations fail to pay sufficient attention to the role people play in the implementation of processes and technology to achieve change. And, in many cases, they take an autocratic, top-down approach to deployment models, a flawed strategy because people must understand and buy into change at the fundamental level.

Understand how people fit in change management

Understanding people’s key role in the success of change brings us to the three essential steps of the organizational change management life-cycle methodology:

- 1. Identify.** Clearly identify the need for change and communicate it throughout the organization.
- 2. Engage.** Make it possible for people at all levels to engage in the design of the implementation strategy.
- 3. Implement.** Facilitate implementing the change by actively involving people most affected by the change to ensure they embrace proposed changes.

With careful consideration as to how people are engaged in each phase of the change management life cycle, an organization can manage change to adapt to any business or economic condition while maintaining quality.

Identify and communicate the change

The identify phase begins with an initiative to change an existing process, reorganize organizational structure, or adopt new technology. The change need is typically identified with a description of the current “as is” state and a vision of the desired future state.

It may seem obvious, but organizations often fail to communicate the need for change in a consistent language so that it can be embraced, which is essential to successful change adoption. Leaders also need to acknowledge that people process change on intellectual, emotional, and even neurological levels.

While it's natural for quality to slip initially, during the identify phase, leadership must establish the expectation that there will be no degradation of quality during the change.

To ensure success, apply the following techniques during the identify phase to introduce a change effort:

Get people's attention. Change is disturbing and distracting to humans, so it's important to get their attention about impending change. Providing a break from the daily routine, such as meeting off-site, helps create a shared sense of urgency, and a focus on the change message, which encourages internalization.

Align disturbances. Disturbance describes a neurological conflict between the way a person thinks about something and the mental map needed to think in a changed state. To align the disturbances of people in the organization, create agreement between the gaps in their current mental maps and align them with the model needed to operate in the changed state. Without alignment, people will respond differently to the change and won't agree on the intent and direction of the necessary organizational response. Leaders can address gaps by continually communicating a vision of the future with the change implemented.

Leaders can make a compelling case for change by addressing need at every organizational level. The daily experience of staff should be considered along with bottom-line goals of top executives. Additional people-related items to consider when identifying change opportunities include:

- Possible frustrations in performing (new) work
- Clear job definitions and metrics that match the process
- Understanding the end-to-end process
- Cultural dynamics within the organization that may inhibit people from moving to a changed state

Engage people

With the need communicated, the next step is engaging people in planning the organization's response to the change. As organizations navigate change, it's rare that anyone states outright that they're going to maintain quality. However, as appropriate responses are being developed, this is a crucial time to call out quality so that it won't suffer.

During the engage phase, successive levels of the organization must participate in the dialogue to develop the implementation plan. This allows intellectual, emotional, and psychological reaction to the desired change and enables people to acclimate, identify problem areas, and contribute to process improvement.

As an example of what not to do, consider the following process change effort: An external consultant developed a new process with requirements from executives, but with little input from the organization. Upon completion, design and documentation were delivered to the implementation team who passively accepted the process, then aggressively refused to implement it, having no interest or emotional buy in. Team members later told project executives that they had actively sabotaged the new process because “consultants developed it although we’re the experts.”

Some other points about the engage phase to keep in mind:

Expect deviations. Instead of an inflexible plan, develop one in which on-the-ground adjustments can be made.

Avoid micromanaging. Change initiative quality suffers in an autocratic environment.

Build trust. Change is successful when there is a high level of trust in the organization, but trust is often first to go during a badly managed change initiative.

Implement the change

In the third phase, change strategies developed in the first two are translated into actionable tactics toward the desired “to be” state. However, unless sufficient time and attention are given to the identify and engage phases, this is where most change failures occur. Ideally, the effect of people on creating and implementing processes and technology for the change has been established, and their buy-in should secure their commitment to change and quality maintenance in phase three.

During implementation, people need to remember the rationale behind working for the change, and change leaders should continually reinforce the mission through a variety of media including e-mail, milestone celebrations, and open conversation.

Additionally, organizational leaders should ask themselves the following people-related questions to ensure successful implementation:

- Does the individual have the ability or desire to work in the new environment?
- Are additional skill sets needed to transition to the new job?
- Are changes to job descriptions needed?
- Are job grades or pay impacted by this change?
- Does the change affect short-term productivity? Quality? If so, will additional support be needed to ensure business success?

If organizations successfully complete the first two phases in the change life cycle, the implementation phase becomes a monitoring activity during which leaders need to assure that:

- Change-oriented tasks are being accomplished as planned
- Energy and enthusiasm are present
- Alignment still exists among the people
- Quality is not sacrificed

Take it personally

The effectiveness of engaging the people in an organization in order to find the best way to develop a desired future state shouldn't be underestimated. Good leadership makes change personal for everyone, not just for executives or shareholders. And, it recognizes end-user benefits, down to the day-to-day experience of the individual to create a receptive environment that fosters new ideas and maintains quality regardless of ongoing change.

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