

LEADING CHANGE ISN'T A SPECTATOR SPORT!



By Patrick Ibarra

In today's ever-changing world the forces for change among public sector organizations—declining revenues, contentious political pressures, and increasing demands for services—have been fairly constant. When change becomes necessary is when those forces gather momentum by meeting up with newer issues such as shifting workforce demographics and expanding technologies. In public sector organizations large and small, change is ubiquitous and often overwhelming, especially to those who perceive themselves to be on the receiving end. For organizational leaders, the struggles in managing change and achieving good outcomes lie in both corralling the forces for change and shepherding their organization and its members through the process.

Government organizations are encouraged to institutionalize best practices, freeze them in place, concentrate on execution, increase predictability, and get processes under control. These expectations stem from the idea that stability is the key to high performance. Consequently, public sector organizations are built to support enduring values, stable strategies, and bureaucratic structures—not to change. However, in today's chaotic world, organizations should be built to encourage, rather than hinder, change. Playing it safe is no longer playing it smart.

It has been said that not everyone is for progress. Many leaders are under the assumption that change can be accomplished via a mandate.

Actually, the merit of an idea or a change initiative has little to do with its being successfully implemented. Every organization has its own cemetery where good ideas often go. Why? Because leaders either try to strong-arm people into complying, or they believe that employees will simply accept the change after some period. Rarely does the former tactic result in employee buy-in, and rarely does the latter sort of acceptance occur. Instead, employees often will wait out the change under a this-too-shall-pass mindset or act as though they support it long enough to convince decision makers until attention is diverted to something else and they can return to work.

The best example I have found to illustrate the struggles people and organizations encounter with change, especially with regard to implementation, is one many readers can relate to: getting into better physical shape. People are extraordinarily gifted at talking about getting in shape, at chattering about change. Many people will even go so far as to join a health club, giving initial proof that they have bought into the solution. The problem surfaces when it comes down to actually visiting the health club and, while there, participating in some type of workout that will generate the desired outcome. Sound familiar?

Organizations and their members duplicate this same cycle, where employees and leaders chat about change, apparently buy into solutions, and falter when it comes to actual implementation. It seems something always comes up to derail good intentions.

Organizational development is the practice of managing change through the design and implementation of a series of planned events. For too long, however, the process of organizational change has been managed as if people function in lockstep, waiting for the next pronouncement from on high before they move on with their beliefs and thoughts. Quite the contrary is true about employees, according to organization development field researchers, who recognize that people account for at least one-third of the change equation and realize that people are complicated, ambivalent and, sometimes, downright messy. Moreover, those researchers' belief is that employees, heavily influenced by their work environment, routinely zigzag in their expectation about the results of a change initiative.

The balance of this article will describe the most common change scenarios organization leaders find themselves in in order to raise awareness of barriers to and pitfalls for change initiatives and to lessen the likelihood of these situations being replicated by outlining an effective approach to designing and implementing meaningful and sustainable change initiatives.

Typical Change Scenarios

The barriers that hinder, derail and often prevent well-intentioned change initiatives from achieving the desired outcomes are numerous and fairly predictable. Crucial to implementing a successful change initiative is being fully aware of the common mistakes even seasoned professionals can sometimes make. As you read the following scenarios, identify those which you have experienced.

Change Is a Solution Looking for a Problem

An executive or manager returns from a conference all fired up and wanting his staff to read about the latest management fad that will, like taking a magic pill, solve their problems instantly and painlessly. The solution is a series of simple, easy-to-take steps that, upon their isolated implementation will cure all current ills. Unfortunately, this practice does not take account of the organization's own history, culture and current state of affairs that, together, often work to resist change. Carrying out change this way is the equivalent of a person leaving an initial consultation with a personal trainer expecting to become an Olympic caliber athlete. A better goal, and probably the actual one to begin with, would be to get into shape for his or her upcoming high school reunion.

More Communication Is All We Need to Make This Change Successful

The notion here is that a better dose of communication will persuade all involved that the change under consideration is worth their extended effort. I strongly encourage leaders who reduce everything to a communication gap and often fall on their sword to prove their point, to reconsider their approach. Why? Because leaders often approach communication as a one-way street and focus more on telling instead of listening. Leaders and managers too often mistakenly believe they are the intended audience for their own messages. As a result, they begin with their point of view about the need for a particular change and believe that everyone should get on board with seeing the situation as they do. In reality, however, most employees are not at the same level of understanding about the situation and need more opportunities to examine the organization's current problems and the proposed solutions. Leaders often become frustrated thinking, "What's wrong with folks that they don't get it?" while forgetting that those folks have not been engaged in all the discussions that have brought leaders to the same point in thought.

We Need to Brainstorm Our Way Out of This Situation

This activity often reflects the quote from Albert Einstein at the beginning of this article. Thought processes are sometimes flawed, and doing more things in a flawed way only gets you worse and worse results. Moreover, managers who do little to cultivate the imagination of employees on a daily basis too often expect that convening those same employees in a stuffy room and feeding them day-old donuts and bad coffee will yield cutting-edge ideas. Most employees are pretty savvy when they are invited to participate in brainstorming sessions and realize early on that there will be lots of talk and that probably earnest efforts to implement some of the ideas generated, but little to no significant improvements will be made. Consequently, employees' participation will wane, and there is a direct correlation between this energy drain and the possibility that any change initiative will succeed. For too long, members in organizations have seen and heard too much of the same thing, and they now feel totally comfortable being spectators to events unfolding in their own organization. Leaders become frustrated with this type of mindset, but it is often the result of the organization's collective history with change initiatives. Employees have very long memories, and having often seen change initiatives simply get repackaged and ultimately fail, they become disillusioned. Quite frankly, there is nothing worse than a dispirited employee.

Let's Reorganize

Change initiatives are often designed to ease some level of pain, and reorganizations tend to be the most popular technique. Many organizations undertake reorganizations in order to deliver different and better outcomes without seeing many, or any, positive dividends. There are several reasons for this.

Leaders often pull the "let's reorganize" lever which is perceived by many employees as another in a series of misguided attempts at resolving what is often an isolated, but troubling issue. Moreover, there is a tendency to believe that simply reorganizing a function and moving boxes around on the organization chart will translate into substantive differences in how work is executed. Last, if organization members are not aware of what is supposed to happen once the situation has been remedied and the pain is gone, then that uncertainty plays a significant role in making employees unable to transition to the new way of doing business.

In summary, every organization is perfectly designed to achieve the results it gets. In other words, designing a reorganization without giving sufficient attention to identifying what else needs to happen beyond the reorganization will produce practically no positive results and may unexpectedly exacerbate other pressing issues.

One point to be drawn from each of the scenarios is that organizational change involves much more than just making a change in a process, procedure or program. Bringing about successful organizational change requires changing employees' performance for the better, as well. The problem with ignoring the human aspect of organizational change is that the organization will be leaving out a whole range of HR management programs that must be carried out in order for change initiatives to be successful.

Change efforts must focus on content, people and process. Content refers to what about the organization needs to be changed, such as its strategy, structure, systems, processes, technology and or work practices. People refers to the behaviors, emotions, minds and spirits of the employees who are being impacted by the organizational change. Process refers to how the policies and practices involving content and people will be planned for, designed and implemented. All three aspects must be addressed in a unified change effort. Often, there is an overreliance on the content aspect, and much less attention paid to people, which reflects an assumption that people know intuitively what to do once a change has been announced.

How to Successfully Implement Change Initiatives

Traditional organizations, like those in the public sector, are built to resist change. Their numerous rules, regulations and policies limit experimentation, program in traditional behaviors, and reward consistent performance. They have many checks and balances in place to ensure that the organization and its employees operate in the prescribed manner. All of this is consistent with the objective of achieving success under current business conditions, but it is entirely inconsistent with achieving continuing success when conditions change. In today's world change must become the new norm; it should be contagious among members of every organization. Organizations should always be changing, both to adapt to new circumstances and in anticipation of future circumstances.

Essential to successful change initiatives is the designation of the type of change being undertaken. In other words, not all change is created equal. Planned change efforts can be characterized as falling along a continuum that ranges from incremental changes that involve fine-tuning the organization (which can be conceived of as change with a lowercase c) to quantum changes that entail fundamentally altering how the organization operates (which would be Change with a capital C). Using vehicle maintenance as a metaphor, it is crucial to distinguish the type of change in an organization. Is it the equivalent of a routine oil change, or is it a major engine overhaul? Too often, executives overdramatize the change for even slight modifications so employees may view change with a healthy dose of skepticism. Therefore, distinguishing where on the continuum the desired change lies should be one of the first steps an organization takes when planning a change initiative.

For change to occur in an organization, there must be some dissatisfaction with how things are. Also, leaders and managers need to foster a work environment that involves employees in the performance and future of the organization and to create and sustain a workplace environment in continuous learning and seeking feedback are encouraged. By doing so, leaders will develop their organization's capability by building up their people.

Leaders' focus should be on creating a culture in which employee engagement serves as the main lever to initiate change. Such a culture can be created through a variety of means, including providing feedback about the agency's performance organizationwide and engaging employees in random discussions about the impact of trends on the organization, to name just two. In the spirit of the idea that what gets talked about gets done, substantive discussions should be regularly held at all levels about the forces for change and how the organization should respond. Penetrating the cocoon that can insulate public sector organizations should not be left until the annual budgeting process or the occasional staff meeting. Instead, this needs to be part of the fabric that makes up the organization's collective mindset. If an organization wants its employees at all levels to exercise initiative and act as leaders, then it is imperative for the organization to not only an advocate for change, but also to be an active participant in its own development and implementation.

Organizational change can be viewed as having two distinct phases: determining the change needed and implementing the change.

Phase 1: Determining the Change Needed

As was described in the section on typical change scenarios, many change initiatives are misguided from the beginning. The common theme shared by those scenarios can be summed up as being the desire to see immediate improvements among leaders and managers who have done little thinking and planning beyond the proverbial gut check to determine what needs fixing and how to fix it. There is sometimes a tendency to speed through the phase of assessing the problem so one can get to the more active phase of implementing a solution. However, change management is, at its core, a problem-solving process. If insufficient time and effort are spent on determining current conditions, the likelihood that a change initiative will succeed is small.

As an alternative to the gut check, an analytical process that focuses on evaluating current practices and conditions, as well as anticipating potentially impactful trends, should be used. A process that can be held up to scrutiny and is consistent with the standards of due diligence is precisely what is needed.

Inexperience and a we've-always-done-it-that-way approach can stifle the identification of problems and their causes. The challenge in this phase is to break free of the psychic prisons that prevent people from seeing old problems in a new light. Analysis suffers and effectiveness deteriorates when managers and leaders cannot reframe issues because when people don't know what to do, they do more of what they know.

Unfortunately, few public sector organizations can accurately be described as being proactive. Most are too reactive. In reactive organizations, changes occur in response to crises, and those changes are viewed by employees as punitive.

While most public sector organizations do not have the equivalent of a research and development department, this should not prevent them from utilizing an R&D process to anticipate changing conditions that will require organizational change. The R&D process is incredibly well-suited for informing change planning. Essentially, R&D is focused on evaluating current and future conditions, assessing those conditions' impacts on organizational performance, and developing responses to those impacts. To simplify, conducting change-oriented R&D is akin to engaging in a continuous SWOT—strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats—analysis so the organization is constantly attuned to the necessity for change. An effective R&D process will be able to distinguish what organizational changes are needed, as well as the magnitude and interrelatedness of those changes.

This is consistent with the maxim that “problems drive solutions.”

Two important aspects are often overlooked during the problem identification phase.

1. Occasionally, the change solution should focus on what the organizations should stop doing. Public sector organizations excel at performing more of the same, but they find themselves in a straight-jacket when deciding what to cease. For example, in many organizations, there are dedicated, earnest, hardworking employees who prepare reports no one reads. In such organizations, it is probably time to evaluate the value of what each and every employee is contributing to organization’s mission. The activities that are found to have little value should then be stopped. Sometimes, the most important thing anyone can do to institute change is to refrain from doing what seems normal (i.e., what has always been done).

2. Overreliance on best practices and benchmarking can inhibit an organization’s ability to fulfill its mission. Benchmarks can assist with forecasting workload requirements, but they often have little positive correlation to organizational outcomes. Public sector organizations are in the business of producing positive outcomes, not merely more outputs. Best practices are often self-proclaimed by agencies without any outside review of the practices’ validity or adaptation to the culture and circumstances of the organization into which they are imported. Furthermore, utilizing best practices for every service and program an organization provides is not only unrealistic, it’s unnecessary.

Phase 2: Implementing Change Efforts

Fundamentally, change is about improving employees’ performance and organizational effectiveness. Strong, focused and sustained commitment is required to successfully implement any change initiative. With many change initiatives, there is an inclination to simply do that which is easiest or least controversial. While that may be the most politically expedient course of action, it may produce fleeting results.

Executives must be visible advocates of the outcomes being generated by the change initiative. In that respect, employees invariably have expectations about the results of organizational change. These expectations can play an important role in generating motivation for change. The expectations can serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy, leading organization members to invest energy in change programs that they expect to succeed. When an organization’s members expect success, they are likely to develop greater commitment to the change process and to direct more energy toward engaging the positive behaviors needed to implement it. The key to achieving these positive effects is to visibly communicate realistic, positive expectations about the organizational change initiative early and often.

A variety of approaches exist to implement change effectively in organizations. The one thing each approach has in common is that each requires support from top managers from the beginning and throughout the entire change process. Beyond that, the following 10 steps are recommended.

Step 1. Define Change as a Compelling Element of Organization Strategy

Unless the proposed change finds its way into a grander set of organizational priorities, it is unlikely that the change will be sustainable over time. The reality in most organizations is that organizational priorities are driven by the annual budget. It will be difficult to sustain the change effort unless there is a clear and unambiguous reason for it. Linking the change to organizational strategy creates such a purpose.

Often, change is designed as though once it is in place, it will be permanent. On the contrary, many changes should be temporary, even if the prescribed period is several years. The notion that anything put in place is permanent and needs no further attention is incorrect.

Step 2. Put an Infrastructure in Place: A Change Management Coalition

Get the right people involved in the change effort as members of a change management coalition, and define the roles and responsibilities for these people. The coalition, to be effective, must include people from within the organization who are influential and can influence employees' opinions because of their personal integrity and credibility. Nothing dooms a change initiative faster than if the people overseeing have tarnished reputations. As has been stated, the merit of the change is no guarantee of its success, especially when if the change is being led by people whose credibility is questionable.

Depending on the scope of the change initiative, the change management coalition should pursue bold actions that are highly visible and which demonstrate that things are now very different around here. These moves should be emphatic signals that send unequivocal messages to employees about the new direction the organization is taking. Bold actions should not indict the past, but rather honor it without prolonging it. The actions must address both content and people changes.

As an organizational effectiveness practitioner, my role is to serve as a change advisor, and within this arrangement there are definite limits on my ability to influence change. Consultants can play a pivotal role, but they cannot be seen as the face of change. Instead, a strong partnership must be established between the consultant and the organization leaders who are overseeing the change initiative.

Step 3. Work From an Implementation Plan

Implement the recommendations resulting from the analyses performed while determining what change was needed, and be sure any new policies or practices are rigorously managed.

Step 4. Recognize the Investment and Commit to the Long Haul

Ensure that the change project does not become some flavor-of-the-week effort. Help people understand that change takes time to implement if it is to be successful.

Step 5. Think Small

Break the change effort into elements that are small enough to ensure quick wins and build momentum. The change management coalition should divide the change initiative into several phases, with each phase having its own milestones and measures of success.

Step 6. Build Alliances in Support of the Change

Learn to play the politics of change. Find champions for the change effort and understand that successful implementation will be determined by internal and external customers who are affected directly or indirectly by the change.

Step 7. Align Recognition and Rewards to Support Implementation

Employees will generally achieve what they are rewarded for or assessed for doing. Provide positive recognition when expectations are met, and negative consequences when expectations are not met.

Step 8. Translate the Change Into Job-Level Details

Make the change meaningful to the people who will be responsible for implementing the change. In the end, the employees whose jobs are affected by the change will be the people who decide whether the change lasts and helps the organization. Unless the change can be translated into specific actions or activities for these individuals, there will be too many opportunities for misunderstanding and unnecessary time will be spent tracking down glitches in the implementation process

Step 9. Integrate the Change Into Management Systems

Incorporate the change into systems such as the organization's strategic plan, budget, performance measurement, compensation, succession planning and employee orientation and training. Integrating the change into these systems will help prevent the change from dissipating over time. It can create as an early warning system if the change effort jumps off the tracks.

Step 10. Follow Up Relentlessly

The need for short-term results drives most organizations' actions, and change requires time to become sustainable. People must be held accountable for their commitments. Establish regular opportunities to review the progress of change implementation, including status reports, project review meetings and meetings with key stakeholders.

The idea behind the 10-step approach is that executing a change initiative cannot be left to chance and must be done according to a coherent plan for, at least, the technical aspects of the change initiative. At the same time, it is crucial to recognize that employees may not transition smoothly through each of the steps. Keeping this in mind will help organization leaders actively engage their employees in the change effort and, thereby, increase the likelihood of their continued success.

Sustaining Change

The initial excitement and flurry of activity that make the launch of an organizational change initiative often dissipate in the face of the practical problems of trying to learn new ways of doing business. A strong tendency exists among organizations' members to return to doing what they already know how to do. However, just as diets should lead to long-term changes in eating habits if the desired results are to be achieved, organizational change initiatives must take hold and become part of the fabric of how the organization and its employees conduct business.

Two maxims about change management are essential to remember throughout the change journey:

1. Changing is what organizations do, not what you do to them.
2. Organizations don't change people; people change organizations!

And finally, remember that conversations are the oxygen of priorities. So begin the dialogue about change now, and enjoy the ride!



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