OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO CHANGE

Recently, the chair of a nonprofit board told me that he was looking forward to a planning session that would result in real change at his organization—not just some "feel-good" activities. Strategic planning at his organization had not always produced tangible results. This organization was not alone. Research shows that the vast majority of organizational change efforts are failures. Most do not get implemented properly. Many that do get implemented produce lackluster results. Most failures can be traced to one or more of the following barriers:

- Lack of board or top management commitment to the change
- Lack of personal accountability
- Inadequate or unclear expectations about the outcomes desired

Lack of Board or Top Management Commitment to the Change

If the board and senior management are not truly committed to the change initiatives, no change will occur. Change is difficult, and it requires support, sponsorship and resources and at the top of the organization.

Support at the Top

Due to various reasons, not all of the board or management team may actually support a proposed initiative or position, and that is understandable. What clearly is not acceptable is feigning support or not speaking up with concerns about the initiative. The more functional the culture of an organization, the more likely such concerns will be aired. The resulting solution normally will be more robust as a result of the dialogue. For example, at one family-owned business, the sole shareholder/CEO makes it a point to engage his key people in discussions, some of which are very spirited, about his ideas for dealing with change and profitably growing his business. Because of his direct and respectful approach, his people are comfortable talking about the hard issues.

On the other hand, consider the CEO of another group of family-owned businesses. One of his senior managers, a fraternity brother from college, was growing increasingly ineffectual in his position. Over a period of several years, the CEO reorganized a couple of times to try to limit the damage this manager could cause, but problems continued. Finally, the CEO hired an international consultancy to tell him what to do. They suggested that he demote or terminate the manager. The CEO was not committed to doing this. Therefore, business continued as usual for another couple of years until matters became even more unbearable. Ultimately, we worked with the CEO and his senior managers to achieve the desired outcome—once the CEO was ready to make the change.

Sponsorship and Resources

Normally, desired change does not just happen on its own. It takes time and resources, as well as sponsorship by people with influence. The people with influence are the board and senior managers. Even if a change initiative has a sponsor at the top, it needs resources—money and people's time—for execution.

We are working with a large, international company creating a management succession and development plan. Senior management there recognizes the need to budget time and capital to implement the plan. It also recognizes that management development will result in some indirect costs arising from learning curves as managers go through their paces and gradually pick up new skills. There is a cost for everything, and the cost must be included in the budget if implementation is to succeed.

Lack of Personal Accountability

Perhaps more than any other reason, lack of personal accountability will sabotage any proposed change. Personal accountability is incredibly important, yet so often overlooked in organizations of all sizes, both for-profit and non-profit. Sometimes it seems that the larger the organization, the less accountability there is, yet lack of accountability also plagues smaller organizations.

The incoming board chair of a trade association recently shared his concerns with me about the lack of traction under some of the prior year's strategic planning initiatives. As we discussed the chair's concerns, it was obvious that the executive director was not being held accountable for implementation of all of the changes. Whether he successfully implemented the changes or not, he still had a job, and he continued to receive the same amount of pay. Unless and until the board holds his toes to the fire, they are likely to get more of the same from their executive director.

And consider the normal modus operandi of many non-profit organizations. Every year, a new chair takes the helm and rolls out his or her focus for the year. This focus may or may not be tied to the overall vision (if the organization even has one), and it often does not have much to do with the immediate past president's focus. On one hand, these flavors-of-the-year are difficult on paid staff who are constantly shifting their focus to try to keep up. On the other hand, the lack of focus from year to year creates lack of accountability for the staff. It can be avoided by leading from a long-term vision that creates consistency with flexibility for the organization.

In any event, what gets measured gets done. What gets rewarded gets repeated. If an organization is to successfully carry out change, people must be held personally accountable for the end results desired, with consequences for success and for failure.

Inadequate or Unclear Expectations about the Outcomes Desired

Even if the board and managers are committed to change, and even if people are held accountable for results, change still may not occur. Unless the desired outcomes are clear and measurable, and they are clearly communicated, planning efforts will be an exercise in futility.

Lack of Identification of Specific, Measurable Outcomes

In order to clearly communicate expectations about desired outcomes from pending changes, planners must identify clearly and unequivocally what those desired outcomes are. One way to get at these outcomes is to ask the question, **"How will we know this initiative is a success?"**

For example, a membership organization might use the following specific, measurable outcomes related to membership growth:

- Increase the percentage of annual member renewals to aa% in 12 months, bb% in 24 months, cc% in 36 months.
- Increase new members signed up by xx% in 12 months, yy% in 24 months, etc. (readers can fill in the blanks—each organization's goals will be different.)

There are many examples of measurable outcomes. Senior management of a privately-owned electrical contracting company rolled out a growth initiative with specific goals for increases in the dollar volume of work won and completed year-by-year over a three-year planning horizon. A non-profit housing-related agency, wanting to increase the number of people it helped, identified the targeted increase in first-time home buyers assisted by the agency annually over a three-year period.

Too often, participants in a planning session will rush to develop action plans without having a clear understanding of what will be different if the action plans are implemented successfully. In today's dynamic environment, even if an organization follows the action plans to the letter, it may not realize the desired results. To borrow a phrase from the bumper stickers we all have seen—"stuff happens," but it does not have to derail change if everyone understands the end game.

Inadequate Communication

Strategic change requires the coordinated effort and cooperation of a lot of people. Most of these people will not have sat through the strategic planning meetings. What seems as clear as a crystal to someone who was in the planning meetings may be anything but to the folks back at the office, at the plant or out in the field. Research shows that leaders need to communicate a change message a minimum of six to seven times to be sure that their people understand it and understand the importance of the change and what they can and must do about it.

In my experience, most boards and managers under-communicate their change initiatives. Take the case of another membership association. The board conducted a series of strategic planning sessions and developed clear and measurable outcomes to revitalize the organization. At the beginning of the next fiscal year, the new board chair took charge and never even mentioned the vision, strategic initiatives or expected outcomes in her speeches and articles in the newsletter! In a period of six months, communication dried up, as did the change initiatives.

Take Charge of Change

Change is hard. Leaders should not make it any harder than it has to be. By overcoming these barriers to implementation, boards and managers can create effective, successful change at their organizations. Ignoring these barriers, however, will create a significant risk of failure.

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