

The Problem with Change Management

by Joe Kilbride, May 2015

What is wrong with change management and what can we do about it?

Organizations of all sizes find themselves managing almost continual change. The reason for change may be implementation of new systems or technology, a merger or restructuring, outsourcing certain functions or centralizing others, changes in regulations, or implementation of an organization-wide strategy or improvement initiative, such as Baldrige, ISO, Lean or Six Sigma.

In each case, leaders recognize the need for change management to successfully navigate the challenges ahead, but the perspective adopted and approaches taken are often fundamentally flawed. The problem and a prescription for better change are summarized in the table on the next page.

Too often, the primary focus of the effort is on the “thing” that is changing and not the improvement in business results that is the reason for the change. The organization gets focused on the new technology, the new structure or regulations and the project is considered a success when the new thing is implemented, not when desired business results are achieved. Simply adopting a perspective that focuses the change on achievement of improved business results will often dramatically alter the approach taken to manage the change and will almost certainly increase the likelihood of success.

Preoccupation with the thing that is changing also contributes to a failure to recognize that real change is messy, that worse before better behavior patterns are typical and immediate improvement almost never occurs. As a result a “big bang” approach is often taken to roll out the new thing. A better approach is to manage change with a continuous improvement mindset in which you assess the results achieved, prepare for and deploy changes in an iterative fashion, and continue until the new operating routines are fully hardwired into day-to-day operations and consistently producing improved results.

When an evolutionary approach is taken, measures of success for the change are no longer preoccupied with timeline and milestone completion. Instead, you measure each stage of the change, including completion of the activities used to implement the new approach, adoption of the new processes or behaviors, and the extent to which these new approaches result in the desired business outcomes.

A major flaw in most approaches to change is the almost exclusive focus on communications and training as the way to get people to adopt new behaviors. These are necessary but insufficient as a way to achieve and sustain real change. Instead of a campaign to convince people to do something new, the focus should be changing their day-to-day operating routines and the larger system in which they perform. More effective levers for change are to redesign work processes, set goals for new or different measures, and change people’s accountabilities and reporting relationships.

The final ingredient for better change is to think differently about the leader’s role in the process. Most change models emphasize the need for leaders to sponsor the change and provide resources. This is not enough. To achieve and sustain major change, leaders cannot just be cheerleaders and benefactors, they too must change. Leaders must both model the change and hold themselves and others accountable for the results. When this occurs, change can happen and change can stick.

Change Management – The Problem and a Prescription

The Problem	The Prescription
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Foreground is the “thing”, i.e., the new technology, structure, etc.2. Expect immediate and linear improvement.3. Change managed as an event and rolled out in “big bang” fashion.4. Measures focus on timeline and milestone completion.5. Tactics are to package and push the change through communications, training, rewards.6. Stakeholders managed through ad hoc events and one-way communications.7. Leaders’ role is to sponsor the change and provide resources.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Foreground is desired business results and new operating routines used to achieve them.2. Expect peaks and valleys (worse before better).3. Change managed as an evolutionary process with continuous improvement mindset.4. Measures of implementation, adoption and outcomes used to monitor and adjust.5. Tactics hardwire change via alignment of strategy, structure, process, measures and leadership practices.6. Business leaders engaged through structures established to involve the voice-of-the business.7. Leaders’ role is to model the change and manage accountability.