

BY JEFF MARSEE

10 STEPS FOR IMPLEMENTING CHANGE

Managing effectively the human aspects of organizational change is central to your success as a change leader.

SUCCESSFUL CHANGE LEADERS ARE RARE BIRDS. WHETHER THE effort to implement change is institution-wide or focused at the departmental level, the reason for failure can nearly always be traced to a lack of effective change management skills exhibited by the leader. More specifically, it is most often a leader's misunderstanding of organizational culture and human relations within that culture that prevent successful implementation of change strategies.

While observing and participating in numerous attempts to implement organizational change within both nonprofit and for-profit organizations, I have advised leaders to follow 10 essential steps.



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1. Align Leadership Style With Organizational Culture

Many leaders don't fully understand that, by nature, most organizations resist change. Employees create patterns of behavior to reduce stress and eliminate the unknown. Change creates uncertainty, stresses the culture, and alarms the *culture keepers*—those individuals who resist change at all costs. It is the leader's responsibility to reduce undue stress on the culture caused by change initiatives.

For instance, if a leader's orientation is external—focused on market or customer needs—and the organization's culture is primarily inward or tradition-oriented, a leader will face difficulty when attempting to realign the organization in response to external issues and challenges. This difference in orientation—external versus internal—can result in a workforce that fails to support a change initiative.

Instead, successful leaders must learn to adapt the change process to the *culture*. It's easier for an organization to adapt to change if it is allowed to do so through the preferred methodology of its culture. It's also easier for a leader to change his or her leadership style than it is for the organization to adapt unwillingly to an unfamiliar change process.

At the same time, while culture keepers are valuable during periods when maintenance is the norm, status quo behavior must be placed in check when change becomes the expected norm. While this is a tough message for some leaders to convey, they may get some valuable assistance from the change missionaries and change agents within their organizations.

2. Don't Overuse Your Change Missionaries

Change missionaries are those committed individuals who are willing to step away from the status quo and place additional effort behind a cause. I call these individuals missionaries because they are driven by a belief that their cause is correct and the outcome will better serve the organization. These individuals may not have the drive to be in the spotlight typically exhibited by change agents. However, when it comes to providing the muscle to get the work done, this group of core supporters makes the difference. And yet, many leaders who understand the importance of this group often over-rely on them.

Because leaders are eager to implement change and do not want to gamble with untried or seemingly apathetic staff, they tend to return to the same doers again and again. But even missionaries may burn out, tire of being under-compensated, and ultimately become ineffective in managing both their ongoing operations and change initiatives.

Real-world example: One university's senior leadership team, in the midst of a major software conversion effort, decided that consolidating several operations into a one-stop student service center would improve customer service. The project objective was correct, but the timing was off. The consultant who was engaged to facilitate the one-stop project recognized that the organization's key missionaries were burned-out because of their involvement in another software conversion project already in progress. Judging burnout as a barrier that could not be surmounted, the consultant recommended placing the one-stop student center project on hold.

The senior leadership team, unable to add staff or provide additional resources, concluded that they were not ready to support the new one-stop project. Staff appreciated that management acknowledged what was achievable at that time and, that as a result, staff could focus on completion of their current project.

3. Protect Your Change Agents

Change agents are those individuals who believe they must initiate action to improve organizational effectiveness. They thrive in an environment where change is the norm, which often puts them at odds with the organization's culture keepers.

As self-starting problem solvers, change agents are typically moved through the ranks of the organization quickly. Sometimes these rising change agents are strong on task resolution but lack experience with people skills. This accelerated rise through the organization places change agents at extreme risk when the leader is not willing to guide them.

As with change missionaries, the tendency to overuse change agents may be the downfall of a leader's attempts to implement change. Consistently placing these important organizational assets on the front lines of change can result in their getting beat up by the peers they have been promoted past and the superiors they may be challenging. To protect against change agent burnout, leaders must clearly set the agenda for change, take personal responsibility for initiating change, and make it clear that obstructionists will be reassigned and replaced by people who understand the importance of the change agenda.

Real-world example: At one university, the members on a project team became divided about the scope of the project, with some not seeing the need for any change. Hearing about the conflict, the president joined the group at its next session. She began by making it clear that the project, objective, and vision were her responsibility even though they were established through a highly participatory process. She noted that all members of the work group were responsible for developing and implementing the

necessary change initiatives. In addition, she made clear that she would hold the entire group responsible for success and would not tolerate individual efforts to sabotage completion. Placing the president's agenda at the forefront of the effort made clear that attempting to stop progress in general, and giving grief to the committed change agents and change missionaries in particular, would not be permitted.

4. Define the Problem

In addition to misunderstanding an organization's culture and the human relations within that culture, a recurring reason for failure in the change management process is an unwillingness to adequately diagnose the environment. Strategic plans with weak diagnostic assessments too frequently result in missed opportunities. Since placing efforts in the right direction is as important as identifying resources and maintaining effort once the decision for change has been made, completing a serious environmental scan also helps ensure that change efforts are meaningful.

Real-world example: A provost leading a strategic planning effort completed an environmental scan for his university—something that had not been done for many years. The first step was to compare the actual environment to the university's historical mission statement and objective, which proclaimed that the university specialized in granting degrees to engineering and finance students destined to mainstream into the New York marketplace (70 miles away) and the international marketplace. In short, the university perceived itself to be a provider of global workforce leaders.

When the provost shared the results of the environmental scan with the strategic planning work group, it was apparent that the organization had changed. The university had shifted to a female student majority where the typical student was a single-parent head of household who, upon graduation, stayed in the community to run the banks and businesses. The rapidly declining traditional student (18 to 22 years old) no longer wished to live on campus. Dorm occupancy had dropped to 70 percent. In addition,

ARE YOU READY FOR CHANGE?

Before implementing significant organizational changes, a leader must answer critical questions regarding organizational culture, human relations, problem definition, and project management. This checklist can help you review your change management initiatives.

Culture Alignment

- Is it clear that you as the change leader are committed to a long-term change effort?
- Have you established the urgency for change?
- Have you adapted the process for change to fit the organization's culture?
- Have you disarmed the culture keepers and minimized organizational resistance to change?
- Have you determined how you will reward success and emphasize a culture of change?

Human Relations

- Are the change agents and change missionaries assigned to carry out change initiatives truly available?
- Have you established adequate resources and shifted responsibilities

for each member of the team responsible for change efforts?

- Have you included new recruits along with experienced and reliable staff to ensure a fresh base of participation?

Problem Definition

- Have you clearly defined and stated the problem or change objectives?
- Does a diagnostic review support the change initiative?
- Is everyone clear on what the outcome of this change effort will look like and what will constitute successful completion?

Project Management

- Have you established milestone and incremental deliverable dates?
- Is it understood that fully defining a barrier (identifying each issue), quantifying the impact, and assigning responsibility

to an individual are the responsibilities of the project team?

- Is it understood at all levels of the project team and organization that the project will terminate if a significant barrier cannot be removed?
- Is it clear how the change leader will monitor the project via progress reports, target deadlines, and communication with project and oversight teams concerning barrier removal?
- Is a formal appeals process (usually the senior management team) in place for issues that cannot be resolved at the project team level?
- Is a process in place for periodically bringing the change leader into the project to review progress and reaffirm group commitment?

the university's evening courses, typically filled with female students, were being held off campus in a forbidding part of town.

As a result of this assessment, the strategic planning process moved in an entirely different direction. Following new action plans, the university converted unused dorm space into single-parent accommodations with evening childcare facilities for both resident and nonresident students. Evening courses returned to the main campus where students felt more safe. The curriculum was changed to better serve the students and their community. As a result of these changes, university enrollment increased substantially.

5. Maintain Focus When the Project Drifts

When leaders are distracted with operational issues or new initiatives, ongoing change efforts may lose direction. Understanding how to recognize early drift means that leaders must monitor the key indicators that led them to initiate change in the first place.

In their work *Corporate Culture and Performance*, authors John Kotter and James Heskett observed that the outstanding companies in each industry group they studied had a strong focus on the cus-

tomers and (external) market environment, a good grasp on the employee (internal) situation, and a positive relationship with stakeholders (board members, legislators, donors, and so forth). Organizations that failed to focus on any of these three areas exhibited operational inefficiency and mediocre results. Staying equally focused on the three areas helped these companies ensure a timely response when redirection was necessary.

6. Identify and Remove Barriers Before Implementing Action Plans

Projects may become mired in issues not originally intended as part of the implementation process. The same barriers typically recur when historical reasons for project failures are identified. These may include lack of resources, policy issues, and staffing conflicts. The importance of removing such barriers is often overshadowed by the desire to immediately implement action plans.

A successful barrier-removal strategy is critical for change efforts to succeed. This can only occur when the appropriate people are assigned responsibility for identifying and removing barriers.

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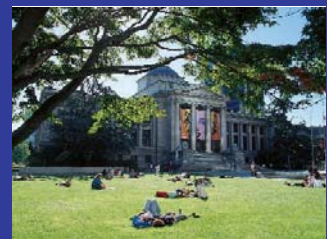
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7. Assign Responsibilities to Individuals

Placing the responsibility upon individuals for removing barriers or deciding to terminate a project dramatically alters the importance of the problem-resolution process. No substitute exists for the personal pride of removing a barrier. Likewise, no burden is as great as personally taking responsibility for not removing a barrier that results in terminating a change effort.

Successful barrier removal usually requires empowering two change groups within the organization—the project team and the oversight (senior management) team. While collaborative, their emphasis and influence is unique in the change process, with senior management being tapped for issues that cannot be resolved by the project team.

Successful barrier removal means defining the issues, quantifying the impact, and assigning responsibility to an individual. These are all empowerment responsibilities that must be made clear when creating the project team.

8. Empower the Project Team

Project teams often err by not being specific enough in defining barriers. For instance, if additional technology is required to implement a change, the project team must document exactly what is needed and at what cost. If additional staff members are required, how many will be needed? At what level? From where (transfer or newly hired)? And how will they be used? If policy changes are required, what, specifically, must be stated in the new policy?

Taking the time to properly define each barrier helps determine who in the organization can resolve the issue and what success will look like when each barrier is removed. To help project team members accept responsibility, require that the project team submit regular follow-up reports to the oversight team. These reports should identify specific action plans, milestone due dates, and assignment progress. An alert supervisor can set a corrective course of action if intervention is necessary.

9. Create a Sense of Urgency

As for the role of the change leader, foremost is the need to create a sense of urgency. The fear of uncertainty that change brings upon an organization's culture must be overridden by the fear of what will happen if change does not occur. Michael Hammer and James Champy, co-authors of *Reengineering the Corporation*, emphasize the need for establishing urgency in organizational change efforts. They submit that if a culture is threatened and no sense of urgency for change exists, employees will react negative-

ly because they do not believe the pain caused by change is worth the effort.

10. Celebrate Milestone Achievements and Completion

It's difficult to maintain project effort and interest beyond 18 months, and most efforts that exceed 36 months fail from lack of inertia. Failing to identify incremental evaluation checkpoints sets the stage for projects to go stale. Likewise, failing to set frequent milestone deadlines delays determining that a project is in trouble. Waiting for completion before checking on the project can have disastrous results if the project inadvertently went in the wrong direction.

In addition, leaders often forget the importance of recognition and celebration when trying to create a new environment or when trying to reinforce the impact of a successful change effort. Whether change agents and change missionaries are rewarded is a strong indicator of how important change is to the culture.

Real-world example: At one university, after the completion of each major project, the project team is invited to a celebration lunch with the senior administrator responsible for initiating the project. Imbedded in this culture is a supportive model for rewarding change that also provides a means for senior leaders to get to know the institutional change agents and change missionaries.

And Don't Forget...

Because change is most often the norm for organizations these days, you must constantly watch for up-and-coming change agents and missionaries. After all, expanding this base of core supporters improves your ability to implement increasingly more complicated and important change initiatives in the future.

One way to identify new recruits is to ask those on whom you currently rely to suggest individuals they think are ready for a change assignment. As for your organization's culture keepers, you may be surprised by the powerful outcomes that can result from eliminating their fear of change. Don't forget to include this group, exercising care to adapt the change process to your organization's culture. Doing so will help redirect the negative energy that so often blocks the effectiveness of a change leader.

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