



AVOID THE TRAPS

WORDS MICHAEL CARMAN

WHEN ATTEMPTING CHANGE IN YOUR ORGANISATION, IT PAYS TO KNOW WHAT NOT TO DO.

Organisational change does not come easily. The conditions must be favourable, the right tools must be skilfully applied, and the key players have to buy in.

Further, the whole process has to play out with enough persistence and intensity over a sustained period to overcome the inertia, entrenched interests and other forces often arrayed against it.

Here are six pitfalls that organisational change and development efforts often fall into, grouped into strategy and implementation considerations, and some measures to combat them.

PITFALLS IN CHANGE STRATEGY

1 The absence of a change strategy

The first and most critical shortcoming of a change program is that there is no strategy underpinning it.

As obvious as this sounds, in the rush to be seen to move in a new direction, the direction itself is often left unstated or is only so general that it provides no guidance.

A change strategy is meant to include the underlying view of the imperatives driving change, what or how the organisation has to change, and how these link with an improvement in the organisation's capacity to produce results.

The best anchor for a change strategy is a clearly stated set of strategic issues or business problems that must be resolved for the organisation to improve its performance. This ensures not only the direction of the change effort, but also its relevance.

If there is no clearly defined problem or strategic issue being addressed, there is a high risk that the effort will be change for change's sake. When you have solutions in search of a problem, you're only likely to end up with more and larger problems.

2 Treating customers as an afterthought

As Peter Drucker observed, an organisation fulfils itself by the contribution it makes to the outside environment.

For all the browbeating about being customer focused, many change efforts are in fact internally directed, and treat customers or end users only as an afterthought. These efforts will fail, no matter how crisp the strategy or excellent the deployment: the

best you can hope for is an increase in effectiveness in minor or irrelevant areas.

This is not to say that internal processes should not be subject to change efforts; rather that the change needs to be carried out with constant reference to the impact on customers and end users.

3 Change strategy not visible

The only thing worse than having no change strategy is having a strategy kept hidden.

Many management teams launch straight into structural change without explaining the rationale to their people. How will this restructure help people do jobs better or improve customer services?

If a strategy exists but is not communicated, people won't be able to buy into it or effectively implement it. And if the focus and communication around a change effort revolves solely around structure then you'll get movement (players jockeying for position and profile) but not real change.

CHANGE STRATEGY REMEDIES

There are many tools available for developing a strategy to underpin a change effort. An analysis of the organisation's external and internal environment can lay the basis for strategy development by identifying the strategic issues on which a change strategy can be based. A 'search conference' is another tool that can be used to create a new future for an organisation, which can form the basis of a change strategy.

PITFALLS IN CHANGE IMPLEMENTATION

4 No clear mechanism for taking the change effort forward

Many organisations fall into the trap of having a pristine change strategy but no clear mechanism for its implementation. (I refer to efforts such as these as 'management by magical thinking' and they are notoriously ineffective.)

While there is always a risk that management arrangements can fossilise and become bureaucratic, no change effort can be achieved without it taking form in structures such as steering committees or working groups, or having mechanisms in place to

ensure accountability and performance such as action plans, performance agreements and regular reports.

5 Unclear or absent communication

People need to know what's going on around them. If they don't receive this information, the vacuum will be filled with gossip, rumour and speculation. And if they receive inconsistent and conflicting information, they will resist the change. (What people resist is not change, but ambiguity.)

Not only must communications flow from change agents to troops, but where the environment is complex and fluid, it is advisable for them to flow the other way, especially from customer-facing staff. This will enhance the organisation's ability to adapt quickly.

A change strategy may, in fact, encompass reorganisation to allow a better flow of information from the periphery to the centre. This is less a reflection of an abstract commitment to 'participation' than a recognition that having a mechanism for staff ideas to be captured and flow up the line may constitute a source of competitive advantage.

6 Politics

It's futile to try to immunise a change effort completely from organisational politics. It is more realistic to aim for politicking to be channelled in the direction of the change effort's objectives.

If people want to win Brownie points and enhance their careers, then don't fight it; utilise it in favour of the change strategy.

CHANGE IMPLEMENTATION REMEDIES

Communication mechanisms are easy to set up and monitor, and include intranet sites, email updates, newsletters, and an email postbox for staff questions. Ensure communication to staff is handled by one person or unit to ensure consistency.

Staff forums (such as General Electric's 'Work-Outs') can be formed to gain staff input and garner ideas on how changes can be implemented locally.

Stakeholder and force-field analyses can also be used to plan how individual interests and political agendas can be marshalled in the direction of the change program. **MT**

Michael Carman is a management consultant.



Michael Carman,
Michael Carman
Consulting

IMAGE: GETTY IMAGES