

Five Ways Leaders Screw up their Change Initiatives

Published September 15 2009 9:58 AM

The reported failure rate of change initiatives is about 70 percent. It ranks right up there with reengineering efforts (and for many of the same reasons). The success rate of change initiatives could be greatly improved if those who launch and lead them would stop screwing them up. That's right, the high failure rate of change management initiatives owes to some basic blunders by change leaders. In this post I'll review the five blunders listed below.

- Making people the target.
- Ignoring objections.
- Phony involvement.
- Quashing resistance.
- Putting consultants front and center.

Making people the target. A centerpiece of most change efforts, if not *the* centerpiece, is people; in particular, their behavior. You might as well declare them the enemy. That's too bad; they should be your allies. When you, as a change leader, point to the people of your organization and say "Your behavior has to change," you just lost the key to a successful transformation: the commitment of your people. And in making *them* the target, you exempt yourself whether you mean to or not. As a leader, your rightful place is in the thick of things, not above or apart from it all. The targets of a transformational change effort should be the organization, its systems, its processes, its policies, and its structure, but not its people. After all, organizations don't do anything, people do – and if you want to make change work it is people who will have to do that. Want some advice? Stop drawing a bead on your people!



Ignoring objections. Unless you're an absolute genius, whatever change initiative or program you're launching could probably be improved. The starting point for improvement is with honest criticism and well-founded objections. People see things wrong with what's coming down the pike at them and they give voice to what they see. Does anyone listen? No! Instead, they are told they are not "team players" (whatever the heck that is) and their objections are ignored or they are punished for giving voice to them. As a change leader, you are cutting yourself off from vitally important information about your change program when you ignore objections. Get in the habit of listening to objections and criticisms and, better yet, understanding them.

Phony involvement. Ah, yes, involvement – the supposed key to getting people on board. Well, what happens most of the time is that the involvement is phoney; it's nothing more than a sham, undertaken because someone believes that paying lip service to involvement will obtain buy-in. It doesn't. Instead, people spot right away that their supposed involvement is just another

management ploy. There is no real involvement; what people say doesn't matter and it doesn't change things one iota. Only when what people say actually makes a difference is involvement genuine. Only when they can actually shape the form and nature of the change program is their involvement genuine. And only when their involvement is genuine does the change become theirs and genuine commitment shoves make-believe buy-in to one side. The solution is simple enough: Open up your change program to real influence by the people of your organization.

Quashing resistance. There is always resistance to change and often for good reason. Far too many change leaders are primed and prepped to quash it the moment it rears what they see as its ugly head. In so doing, they cut themselves off from the positive side of resistance. There might be a fatal flaw in the change program that its sponsors can't see; the change program might inadvertently be trampling on some strongly-held values and beliefs of great importance to the people of the organization – and to the organization itself; those who want to sign on are turned away because they want to remove a few of the blemishes from the program; and the informal leaders who are seen as leading the resistance are driven underground where they wage guerrilla warfare against the change. Sabotage is not unheard of. Don't quash resistance; embrace it, exploit it, take advantage of it – and, most important, listen to what it and the resisters are trying to tell you. Turn your opponents into your allies.

Putting consultants front and center. This is perhaps the worst and most egregious blunder of all. To totally transform an organization is to change it from top to bottom; its culture, its systems, its processes, its structure, its products, its services, its markets, its relationships with customers and suppliers and the larger environment, and its relationship with its people. It is to change a way of life. This kind of change cannot and should not be handed off to consultants; it has to be owned and led by those in charge and by the people of the organization. To put consultants front and center is to position the change effort as a job for hire, as something beneath (or beyond) the leadership of the organization. You, not the consultants, need to be front and center. Putting consultants front and center is basically an abdication of responsibility for leadership and the people of your organization will view it as such. Can you make good use of consultants? Sure you can; they can provide extremely valuable insights and ideas. But if you genuinely believe the organization needs to be transformed, then step up and lead the effort yourself; don't hand it off to consultants.

About the Author: *My name is Fred Nickols. I am a writer, an independent consultant and a former executive. Visual aids of one kind or another have played a central role in my work for many years. My goals in writing for SmartDraw's Working Smarter blog are to: (1) provide you with some first-rate content you can't get anywhere else, (2) illustrate how important good visuals can be in communicating such content and (3) illustrate also the critical role visuals can play in solving the kinds of problems we encounter in the workplace. I encourage you to comment on my posts and to contact me directly if you want to pursue a more in-depth discussion. I can be reached at fred@nickols.us.*

