

Seven Mistakes Organizations Make When They Embark on Change

“When the rate of change outside an organization is faster than the rate of change inside the organization, the organization is doomed.”

Jack Welch

In over 25 years of working with organizations dealing with change, I've seen more than my share of change failures. In agreement with my observations, a *Harvard Business Review* article by Nohia and Berkley cites a survey showing that 75% of the managers they polled were unhappy with change initiatives underway. Why? I've come to the conclusion that those unhappy own manager's behaviors contribute significantly to failures they're experiencing.

Here are seven leadership behaviors that impede the progress of the very changes that leaders initiate and desire.

1. Change their change programs.

Consultants are hired. Trumpets sound. Meetings are held. Change is announced. Plans are made. Initiatives start. People resist. Leaders huddle. New consultants are hired. Different programs are planned. *New and improved* is touted. (Repeat steps several times.)

When this cycle exists in an organization, cynicism flourishes. Any initiative is labeled a *program du jour*. Employees figure out that if they keep their heads down, continue business as usual, those grandly begun programs will disappear and they won't really have to change anything. Neat.

2. Forget that context is king.

When a change is announced, explaining **what's** going to happen is usually outlined in detail. Unfortunately, **what** isn't enough to help employees understand and embrace a change. It's not until leaders present the context in which the change decision was made, the **why** of the change, that employees start to see the rationales behind the need for the change.

Context also allows employees the opportunity to learn so that they might be better, more informed decision makers when necessity requires they take independent action. Employees who are lead by people who don't understand the power of context revealed are developmentally shortchanged.

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3. Underestimate the pull of the Comfort Zone.

Grab a piece of paper and create an illustration for me, would you please? In the middle of the page draw a circle about two inches in diameter. Outside that circle draw another circle about one inch further out. Finally, draw a third circle outside the other two. You should have three concentric circles. Label the inner circle the comfort zone, the second one the stretch zone and the third, the panic zone.

Ignoring this simple model goes a long way to guarantee change initiative failure. In the Comfort Zone, nothing changes. Why should it? The Comfort Zone is filled with the things and people individuals already know as well as the behaviors they routinely practice. Nothing changes in the Panic Zone, either. A person or organization in the Panic Zone is consumed with survival issues. Thoughts of change pale when disaster feels imminent. It's only in the Stretch Zone where change can happen. Leaders must be skillful during change to protect their teams from the Panic Zone while prodding them into the Stretch Zone.

4. Under communicate.

A while ago there was a survey reported in USA Today. Employees were asked if their leadership communicated enough. Then, leaders were asked if they thought they communicated enough with their employees. Think the responses were the same? Actually the gap was wider than even I imagined it would be. The graph didn't tell if the survey was taken during a time of great change, but I am confident the gap would have been bigger if it had been.

In times of change, leaders have a terrible urge to hide. "We don't know anything for sure," they say. And then proceed to say nothing. What those leaders forget is an immutable law of organizational communication. When faced with no information, people will make up their own information. The information that people make up is almost always negative. Being visible and saying, "Hi guys. There's nothing final to report and here's what we're currently working on" is not only acceptable, but it is desirable.

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5. Forget that however logical the rationale is for your Change Initiative, at its core, change is about emotion.

I have two slides in my presentation, *Leading People during Turbulent Times* that make this point. The first reads *Sooner or later, all change is about emotion*. An obvious statement – one that many leaders seem to hope and act as if it isn't true.

The second slide says *People's emotions come from different places*. Some people have a negative reaction to change because of fear. Some because of past experiences. Some because of issues at home. Some because of personality preferences. You name a possible emotional knee-jerk and someone in your organization is experiencing it. You, however, are responsible for dealing with those reactions no matter where they come from. Hey, no one says this leadership stuff is easy.

6. Underestimate resistance.

Fear causes people to do many things. Most significantly, this Panic Zone reality, drives people to hold on more tightly to what they already know and have. Change is tough under those circumstances. My friend and colleague, Rick Maurer- find him at BeyondResistance.com- has built his practice helping leaders and their teams deal with this issue. Check out

his site for lots of helpful tools that address resistance to change. Thanks, Rick!

7. Forget to build accountability in their change plan.

Imagine pouring over seed catalogs, ordering the perfect seeds for your climate, tilling the soil, planting the seeds, watering them for the first month, and then figuring Mother Nature and normal weather patterns will provide enough water for the rest of growing season. No gardener would ever think this plan would lead to an abundant harvest; no leader should either.

In all the discussions I've observed about change initiatives – planning and kick-offs – I've noticed that very few of those conversations cover the second month's sustain-the-change plan, the one-on-one leader with team members meetings, and how will we hold everyone, including ourselves, accountable? plan. Without serious consideration to these parts of a change plan, success is elusive at best. Accountably is to change, like water to plants. Ignore managing accountability at your peril.

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Leaders send their organizations on the path of change because they want things to be better. I often think they believe if launch the right initiative; get the troops in line inspired to do their best, their job is done. Far from it. H. Jackson Browne reminds us, *“Never underestimate your power to change yourself; never overestimate your power to change others.”* Since all these mistakes fall within a leader’s control, your work is clear. You can do it. I know you can!

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