

The Key Steps for Leading Successful Change Initiatives

Alas, change is one of the few constants in the world we live in. Organizations initiate change efforts for a variety of reasons. But, one reason underlying all change initiatives is something is not right. The executives know that the system is broken, this is not working, and something is missing. Otherwise there is no reason to change. "If it isn't broken, don't fix it" is a standard response to any change agent.

Every company is continuously confronted by change. There are changes in markets, competition, technology, and customer concerns. Changes in the business environment occur on a continuous basis. Failure to successfully handle these changes can cause a business failure.

The motivation to change may come internally as a result of recurring breakdowns in the organization, or from forces outside the organization such as customers, competitors, or suppliers.

Numerous writers and speakers on change see a consistent picture. A few change efforts are very successful and a few are complete failures. However, the majority of change efforts lie between the two extremes, meaning they achieve some level of success, but fail to achieve all the change objectives.

From our research and experience, there are eight key steps leaders need to know to lead meaningful change. Leaders leading change need to:

1. Take the responsibility to continuously interpret changes in the market, competition and customer concerns and their potential impact on the organizational system. Initiate the appropriate change narratives to address these potential impacts. Create a sense of urgency by predicting the consequences to the organization if the organization does not change.
2. Enroll the appropriate people within the organization to build a shared interpretation of continuing with current situation, and a shared interpretation of the required changes. This is an enrollment process requiring deep listening to and acknowledgement of alternative interpretations. Build alignment and commitment to the necessity for change and renewal.
3. Create a compelling vision of the renewed organization. How would it look? What would it be doing? What will be its competitive posture? What would be its new identity to its customers, market and competitors? What does it mean to the people within the organization? How would it feel to be part of the renewed organization?
4. Create a powerful discourse around the vision and the process to bring the vision forth. Communicate, communicate and communicate to everyone inside and outside of the organization. Enroll and reenroll everyone in the discourse. This can not be done once and forgotten. Reenrollment has to occur at every opportunity.
5. Create a structure for fulfillment to bring the vision into reality. This means empowering the key individuals to act, creating accountability and responsibility for results, removing obstacles, and effectively resolving breakdowns.

6. Focus on and celebrate short-term successes. Publicly acknowledge accomplishments. Use the celebration to reinvigorate the team to bring forth changes called for by the new vision of the future.
7. Conduct lessons learned reviews to reflect on what worked, what didn't work and how the process can be improved.
8. Lock-in the changes and communicate the results. Demonstrate how the changes have positively impacted the organization. Continuously measure the results and handle any deviations quickly. This will institutionalize the changes. Call for continuous improvement as part of the management process.

In some respects, the eight key steps seem to be very logical and straight forward. So why is leading change so difficult?

Based on our research, we believe there is a fundamental misunderstanding concerning the entire change phenomenon. This misunderstanding causes change initiatives to be less effective. The purpose of this paper is to provide access to an enlightened view of change that is fully operational.

There are two ways to look at change. One way is to look at change as a change in state, going from one reality to another reality. This is the traditional view of change. This view holds that there is something wrong with the current reality. That there is something wrong and that there is an actual current reality shows up like an objective fact to the people holding this view. This is the way it is! And since this is the way it is, like a fact, everyone should see it the same way. Within this traditional view, the obvious next step is to postulate a different reality that fixes the current reality. This new reality also shows up like something real, like a fact. This will fix the problem. It's obvious; everyone should see and accept the improvements. If they don't there is something wrong with them. The final steps in the process involve moving everyone from the "wrong" reality to the "right" reality. This invariably causes resistance which has to be overcome by persuasion, or threat. Obviously, the resistance is "wrong".

When you look at traditional change efforts this way you can begin to see they set up the seeds of their own failure. They set up a right/wrong position. Any position that is in opposition to another position has to be displaced. A contrary position has to be overcome. This means you make a lot of people wrong. Everyone knows instinctively this approach creates difficulties. That is why so many books are written to teach leaders "enlightened" ways of overcoming resistance. But, these "enlightened" ways still come from the point of view that what is so is so, and I just have to find a way to "con" some people into my view of the world. Get the picture?

So, what is another perspective that can provide a more powerful working theory to guide the change process? Again, our research indicates there is a powerful perspective to help guide successful change efforts. You have to shift from seeing change as moving from a current, fixed reality to another improved, fixed reality, to seeing change as a shift in the conversations within the organization. This view sees real, sustainable change resulting from changing the organizational conversations. This may seem abstract, but bear with us and it will be worth it.

From this perspective organizations can be seen as a network of conversations. While we think of an organization as a living entity, it is really a legal abstraction. The people within the organization are the living entity and they constitute who they are as a result of the discussions they have and don't have with one another. Let me give you some examples.

- Every business starts with a grand idea. Every entrepreneur's vision is to create a business to take care of breakdowns they see in the world.

- Every entrepreneur forming a company does so by declaring certain human concerns are not being addressed, and then declaring a solution that will address these concerns. In business speak, we say, “there is a problem and we offer a value proposition to address the problem.”
- The entrepreneur then declares the formation of a company and the company is formed as a legal entity. But, behind the actual legal formation there is a vision of what the company will become.
- The entrepreneur then enrolls people to join the company to bring forth the declared vision. Those who see it the same way join and those who don’t opt out.
- The people who join generate the corporate strategy and the operational systems through the discussions they have with one another. There is no other way to create the strategy and the operating policies and processes except through these discussions. This creates the organizational system that produces the results.
- The on-going discussions people have or don’t have keep the system in place.
- Since their conversations put the system in place, if they don’t like the results then they have to change the conversations.

Does this give you a new picture? From this perspective everything is based in language. Organizations are socially constructed starting with the first entrepreneurial declaration stating that something can be improved to on-going discussions. These conversations create a socially constructed reality. This socially constructed reality creates the system called the company. Every company is a system and as a system it is perfectly designed to produce the results it’s producing. If you want to change the results you have to change the design. This means, from a linguistic perspective, you have to change the conversations in one or two domains. One is the strategic domain; the second domain is the operational domain.

The ability to change the conversation depends on the conversational dynamics of the organization. The quality of the organization’s conversational dynamics is directly related to what can be accomplished by the organization. If you have a great deal of withheld communications or highly charged confrontational discussions, change will be very difficult. If you have open, highly collaborative conversations change will be easier and will naturally flow from the shifting conversational patterns.

We believe the reason most change efforts do not achieve their objectives is because change is “pushed” throughout the organization. This is the traditional method. When you push change you always get resistance. This resistance, which can be either active or passive, has a subversive quality to it, and undermines the change initiative. The non-traditional approach looks at change from a “pull” perspective. This view follows the eight key steps outlined above. Using the eight key steps, change is pulled into existence by enrolling the organization in a new vision of the future and showing the organization how to bring that vision forth.