

Why change efforts typically fail

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Have you ever been part of an organizational change effort that failed miserably or didn't last anywhere near its intended mark? Many leaders have complained to me that the change they tried to implement often reverted back to the way things were. Why is this?

Research and real-world experience have shown that most change efforts get derailed or fail for predictable reasons. Many leaders don't recognize or account for these reasons. As a result, they make the same mistakes again and again. You've heard the saying, “Insanity is doing the same things over and over and expecting different results,” right?

Fortunately, there is some hope. By recognizing the many reasons change typically gets derailed or fails, leaders can be proactive, thereby increasing the probability of success when initiating, implementing, and sustaining change.

Here are fifteen predictable reasons why change efforts typically fail:

- 1) People leading the change think that announcing the change is the same as implementing it.
- 2) People's concerns with change are not surfaced or addressed.
- 3) Those being asked to change are not involved in planning the change.
- 4) There is no urgent or compelling reason to change. The business case is not clearly communicated.
- 5) A compelling vision that excites

people about the future has not been developed and communicated.

6) The change leadership team doesn't include early adopters, resisters, or informal leaders.

7) The change isn't piloted, so the organization doesn't learn what is truly needed to support the change.

8) Organizational systems and other initiatives aren't aligned with the change.

9) Leaders lose focus or fail to prioritize, causing the infamous “death by 1,000 initiatives.”

10) People are not enabled or encouraged to build new skills.

11) Those leading the change aren't credible--they under-communicate, give mixed messages, and do not model the behaviors the change requires.

12) Progress is not measured, and no one recognizes the changes that people have worked hard to make.

13) People are not held accountable for implementing the change.

14) People leading the change fail to respect the power of the culture to kill the change.

15) Possibilities and options are not explored before a specific change is chosen.

When most people see this list, their reaction depends on whether they have usually been the target of change or the change agent. Targets of change frequently feel as though they have seen these reasons up close and personal. Change agents often get discouraged

because they realize how complicated implementing change can be and how quickly many things can go wrong.

The reality is that while every organization is unique in some ways, they often struggle with change for the same reasons. So where should you start? Which of these fifteen reasons should you concentrate on first?

If you can understand and overcome the first three reasons why change typically fails, then you are on the road to being an effective leader of change. In fact, you can reword all of these reasons in a way to make them into a positive checklist for successful change. For instance, #3 could be reworded to read: “Allow those being asked to change to be involved in planning the change.” And #12 could read: “Measure progress and recognize the changes that people have worked hard to make.”

Despite your best and smartest approach in implementing change, there is no guarantee that everything will work out as intended. But one thing is for certain: if you want to understand something, try to change it--that's when everything you over-looked, under-looked, or never-looked at leaps out from the shadows and bites you where the sun doesn't shine. In the end, though, having a process that avoids these fifteen reasons of failure I revealed will greatly improve your chances of success when implementing change.

~ The End ~