How to Avoid Pitfalls in Change Management Projects

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In today’s business environment there is an ever-increasing need for experts who can help an organization successfully navigate change. The focus of this movement to date has been on how these teams can partner with an organization to define education, training and communication platforms that help to support the change initiatives and concerns of company employees.

While a project team is important for success, a senior level advisor to partner with the project leader is invaluable. An outside trusted advisor can partner with executive leadership to avoid some of the common pitfalls that change management projects often fall into. There are four key areas where an Advisor should act as this resource.

1. **Strategy Definition – Where do we start?**

   Great ideas for organizational change are a dime a dozen, but before any program can begin organizational changes must be aligned to company strategy. Too often executives are sold on an idea only to realize as the change begins that they need a different outcome, tool or process to be successful. How do you adjust outcomes when you have already committed? A strategy for change that is aligned with the organization and its goals will be a platform on which a leader can create the buy in and urgency that will be needed to drive the process forward.

   An outside senior advisor with a unique perspective of the organization should play an important role in the shaping of this strategy. This partnership between senior advisor and executive should begin as early as possible in the process. A good change management lead will help an executive to explore the strategy they are defining and whether it will truly create the outcomes they desire. This upfront partnership can save countless dollars on the back end of a project, by avoiding costly re-scoping of initiatives.

2. **Building A Coalition – Do You Play Well With Others?**

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Once the correct strategy has been set and the urgency for the project has been established, executives must reach out across their functional and geographic work streams to build a large cohesive team to support the project.

“...in big companies, the coalition needs to grow to the 20 to 50 range before much progress can be made in phase three and beyond...Because the guiding coalition includes members who are not part of senior management; it tends to operate outside of the normal hierarchy by definition. This can be awkward, but it is clearly necessary.” – Dr. John P Kotter, New York Times best-selling author, award winning business and management thought leader, business entrepreneur, inspirational speaker, and Harvard Professor

The definition of this team can be a pitfall for many executive who do not have the network to support it or have not played well with others in the past. A good senior advisor will be able to guide an executive though these interactions, how to navigate the various areas of the organization and speak to the needs of executives in each area to define what they need from the change.

As a senior change management practitioner, it is important that you help leaders of the organization craft the correct message. While leaders often know what it is they want and see the urgency for themselves, the outside view that a coach provides can support the development of a team around that platform. A coach can help to navigate the strategic and political interests in linking the change to the interest of multiple team members.

Kotter suggests that for a change to be successful 75% of the company’s management needs to “buy into” the change. With that much commitment needed it is important that the executives sponsoring and supporting the engagement are able to reach across work streams, geographies and politics in order to build an urgency for the change across the organization. The change management lead, can act as a trusted advisor to help them navigate those relationships and put their strategy in perspective as they implement it across the various groups.

3. Communication – What are we saying and why are we saying it

The importance of communication within an organization around the change cannot be mentioned enough. Executives often fall short on communication in two key areas, not communicating the right message and not communicating it frequently enough across the organization. It is often thought that everyone else in the organization is on board and understands the change as that is the reality the executive is experiencing. A senior advisor can apply consistent pressure to the leader of the change around the need for communication and its messaging.

Part of the communication will be the support the urgency in messaging. “My way or the highway” is not an effective communication message. Senior Advisors can work with executives to tailor their message to each area of the organization in order to define content that is important to them. Executives will have to talk about the vision of the change and show each group they speak with about how the change will support that vision and impact the various areas of the organization.

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Research by Towers Watson shows that “only two-thirds (68%) of senior managers say they are getting the message about the reasons behind major organizational decisions. Below the senior management level, the message dwindles further. Only half (53%) of middle managers and 40% of first-line supervisors say their management does a good job of explaining reasons behind major decision.”

The cascading of information does not work as well as it is believed and consistent communication around the change will be necessary at all levels of the organization. As a trusted advisor it is important that Executive Coaches encourage the executive to lead by example in both their messaging and participation in the communication of the change messaging.

4. **Maintaining The Change – The finish line is not the end of the race**

With only 25% of change management initiatives being successful over the long term, the final step could be the most important. It is key that as a change effort reaches its completion or go live date, but the leaders of the change need to recognize that the process does not end there. Executives are often keen to declare success of a project and move to the next, especially if it has lasted a number of years, but the role of a Senior Advisor will be to guide them to the idea that work must be done to maintain the change over time. Maintaining change does not mean that an executive must own the project forever, just that they take the necessary steps to see the change become a lasting impact. This can be done by integrating the change into the corporate culture and measuring final results to show both the success of the change as well as areas for future improvements. In order for the change to last it needs to be proven a success and integrated into the company culture.

The outside unbiased perspective that a Trusted Advisor or Change Management Lead is crucial to the success of a change management program. The leading executives can truly benefit from a partner who is able to highlight some of the less than favorable truths or realities they may be facing and challenge their assumptions were necessary. It is this type of relationship that will help to drive change across an organization that will outlast the leaders who initiated it.