

Knowledge Worker

Five Easy Ways to Screw up a Change Effort

(January 2013)

The reported success rate of change efforts is about 30 percent. Turned around, the failure rate ranks right up there with the abysmal performance of many reengineering efforts and for many of the same reasons. Why such a dismal success rate? Lots of reasons are offered by those who claim to know but I think the basic reason boils down to outright blunders by those who launch and lead them. Put bluntly, change efforts could succeed more often if people would simply stop screwing them up. In this month's column I'll review five of the most basic and apparently easily-made blunders.

1. Taking aim at people
2. Suppressing criticism
3. Paying lip service to involvement
4. Putting a damper on resistance
5. Giving starring roles to consultants

Taking Aim at People. People are the focal point of many change efforts, if not most of them; in particular, their behavior is targeted. They might as well be declared the enemy. They should be seen as allies. When those leading a change effort point to the people of the organization and say “Your behavior has to change,” they just tossed away the key to a successful change: the commitment of their people. In making *people* the target, change leaders exempt themselves whether they mean to or not. The rightful place



of a change leader is in the thick of the fray, not above it. The rightful targets of a change effort are the organization, its systems, its processes, its policies, and its structure – anything but its people. Remember, organizations don't do anything, people do – and if change is to happen it is people who will make it happen. Here's some free but not gratuitous advice: Stop taking aim at your people!

Suppressing Criticism. Any change initiative or program that is launched can doubtless be improved. Improvement begins by being open to honest criticism and well-intended objections. People look at what's coming down the pike at them, they take stock of what they see, and they inevitably spot flaws. But no one listens. Instead, they are accused of not being “team players,” of not going along with the program. Their criticisms are pushed aside and, often as not, those who raise them are punished for raising them. In doing so, change leaders cut themselves off from vital information about the change effort. Those closest to the action know the most about what goes on there. Smart change leaders form the habit of not just listening to objections and protests but, better yet, working hard to uncover, understand, appreciate and act on them. Actively seek out critical views of the change. They are often worth their weight in gold.

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Paying Lip Service to Involvement. Involvement is the oft-cited key to getting people to buy into a change. What actually happens more often than not is that efforts to obtain involvement are fake; they are nothing more than pretense, a way of paying lip service to involvement. But such efforts don't obtain buy-in; instead, people quickly see that such efforts are just another management ploy. Consequently, there is no genuine involvement or buy-in. It quickly becomes clear that what people say doesn't matter and doesn't change things one whit. It is only when what people say actually makes a difference does involvement become genuine. Only when people actually shape the form and substance of the change effort is their buy-in genuine. And only when buy-in is genuine do they develop genuine ownership of the change. This is when authentic commitment shoves false buy-in to one side. If you want genuine involvement and authentic buy-in, open up the change effort to equally genuine and authentic influence by the people of the organization.

Putting a Damper on Resistance. Resistance to change occurs to some extent in all change efforts and for good reason most of the time. Unfortunately, far too many change leaders rush in to quash resistance the moment it makes its first appearance. Thus it is they deprive themselves of the positive side of resistance. It is entirely possible there is a fatal flaw in the change program that its proponents did not recognize; it's also possible that the change effort tramples on strongly-held values and beliefs that are of great significance to people and the organization; it's often the case that those who want to sign on are refused because they make it clear that they would like to put in place some important fixes to the change (and fixes that should be made); finally, and perhaps worst of all, informal leaders who are seen as spearheading the resistance are targeted whereupon they go underground and subsequently wage guerrilla warfare against the change. In case you haven't noticed, change efforts can be and are sabotaged. Instead of quashing resistance, learn to embrace it, extoll its virtues and use it to your advantage. Most important, pay attention to what the resisters are trying to tell you and turn the opposition into allies.

Giving Starring Roles to Consultants. Totally transforming an organization entails changing it from top to bottom: culture, systems, processes, structure, products, services, markets, relationships with customers, suppliers, the community and employees – all are “on the table” so to speak. To transform an organization is to change a way of life. Handing off this kind of change to consultants is to give them starring roles and transformative change has to be owned and led by those at the top as well as by the informal leaders within the organization. Putting consultants center-stage positions the change as “work for hire,” as something beneath (or perhaps beyond) the capabilities of the formal leaders of the organization. They, not consultants, should be front and center. Giving consultants starring roles is an abdication of responsibility and the people of the organization will see it that way. Can good use be made of consultants? Of course. But if the organization really requires transformative change, the leaders – formal and informal – must step up and lead the effort instead of handing it off to consultants.

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About the Author

Fred Nickols, CPT, is a knowledge worker, writer, consultant, and former executive who spent 20 years in the U.S. Navy, retiring as a decorated chief petty officer. In the private sector, he worked as a consultant and then held executive positions with two former clients. Currently, Fred is the manager partner of [Distance Consulting LLC](#). His website is home to the award-winning [Knowledge Worker's Tool Room](#) and more than 200 free articles, book chapters, and papers. Fred is a longtime member of ISPI and writes this monthly column for *PerformanceXpress*. A complete listing of all Knowledge Worker columns and access to them is available [here](#).