

The Three Greatest Barriers to Organizational Change

By Gayla Hodges

The need for rapid organizational change is a fact of life in today's business environment. While there may be a few companies whose leaders are committed to a belief that it is good for everyone to "shake things up" from time to time, most organizational change is undertaken to accomplish key strategic goals. No matter how necessary change seems to upper management, many barriers must be broken down if a planned strategic change is to be implemented successfully. The key to successful change is in the planning and the implementation. The three greatest barriers to organizational change are most often the following.

- 1. Inadequate Culture-shift Planning.** Most companies are good at planning changes in reporting structure, work area placement, job responsibilities, and administrative structure. Organizational charts are commonly revised again and again. Timelines are established, benchmarks are set, transition teams are appointed, etc. Failure to foresee and plan for resultant cultural change, however, is also common. When the planning team is too narrowly defined or too focused on objective analysis and critical thinking, it becomes too easy to lose sight of the fact that the planned change will affect people. Even at work, people make many decisions on the basis of feelings and intuition. When the feelings of employees are overlooked, the result is often deep resentment because some unrecognized taboo or tradition has not been duly respected.
- 2. Lack of Employee Involvement.** People have an inherent fear of change. In most strategic organizational change, at least some employees will be asked to assume different responsibilities or focus on different aspects of their knowledge or skill. The greater the change a person is asked to make, the more pervasive that person's fear will be. There will be fear of change. More important, however, there will be fear of failure in the new role. Involving employees as soon as possible in the change effort, letting them create as much of the change as is possible and practical is key to a successful change effort. As employees understand the reasons for the change and have an opportunity to "try the change on for size" they more readily accept and support the change.
- 3. Flawed Communication Strategies.** Ideal communication strategies in situations of significant organizational change must attend to the message, the method of delivery, the timing, and the importance of information shared with various parts of the organization. Many leaders believe that if they tell people what they (the leaders) feel they need to know about the change, then everyone will be on board and ready to move forward. In reality, people need to understand why the change is being made, but more importantly, how the change is likely to affect them. A big picture announcement from the CEO does little to help people understand and accept change. People want to hear about change from their direct supervisor. A strategy of engaging direct supervision and allowing them to manage the communication process is the key to a successful change communication plan.

There are other barriers, to be sure, but the three outlined above are extremely common and highly likely to create havoc in the organization. By planning and dealing with these three areas thoroughly, carefully, and sensitively, people will be most likely to get on board and help implement the change and adapt to organizational change far more readily and supportively.

About Gayla Hodges

Gayla Hodges is the President and Principal Consultant of Change Agents, Inc., a company that specializes in energizing workforces to achieve strategic goals. She has extensive experience in instituting corporate transformational change. She coaches executives and managers on leading

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