

Change Management – Five Colossal Mistakes to Avoid

By Ann Latham

Change Management, Process Improvement, New Directions - call it what you wish, but avoid these common mistakes:

1. Fanfare

"Here we go again." "Another program to weather." "This too shall pass!" Sound familiar?

All too often organizations announce big changes and new programs with big events and fanfare, but then very little actually happens. The initial energy and enthusiasm fades, specific changes are never identified let alone implemented, results aren't realized, managers don't adjust, or maybe something even better comes along leading to a new "launch" with new fanfare.

The easy part is the announcement. And the fanfare is fun and contagious. But if your staff isn't capable of the details, the follow-through, the implementation, then your program will die and the cynics will reign supreme, ever bolder in their determination to out-last any new program.

Furthermore, while ostensibly trying to generate energy, the fanfare simply signals big change and thus, raises anxiety. An impoverished understanding of the program purpose, path or impact will leave most people uneasy.

2. Controlled Messages

If it tastes like manipulation, smells like manipulation and sounds like manipulation, it is manipulation! Respect your employees enough to know they will recognize manipulation when they are the victims of it.

I've seen organizations so determined to control messages that they plan every communication, ration information, create concentric rings of need-to-know circles, and pretty much eliminate all honest, straightforward, two-way communication. I can't think of a better way to widen the Us vs. Them gap within a company. Nor a better way to erode trust. Never mind the productivity sacrificed to scheming and whispering on one side, guessing and fuming on the other.

3. Closed Door Planning

Who are you kidding? Do you really think you can mastermind a new way without involving the people who know the situation best? Trying to "Do It To Them" is both arrogant and misguided.

4. Extensive Training

Extensive training is a cornerstone of many change programs. But many people return to their old habits the minute they get back to their desks despite the excitement exhibited during training. And if the training is filled with new acronyms, complicated techniques, and secret decoder rings, people will either give up or become distracted by the means at the expense of the goal.

5. Big Hairy Audacious Change

More likely, Big Hairy Audacious Embarrassment. Part and parcel of the others – the boisterous fanfare, dramatic unveiling of goal and plan, and massive training – add huge expectations. Everything big. More "big" than substance. Almost like announcing that you intend to win Wimbledon when you've yet to hit your first tennis ball.

The purpose of change management is to make change successful. The largest component of many change management programs often involves managing people's reactions. Unfortunately, as the above list suggests, many change management efforts actually create anxiety, the exact opposite of their intentions.

For a better chance of success, consider the flip side of each mistake:

1. Save the fanfare for celebrations of genuine success

Celebrate genuine success, even small steps, in order to build momentum. Success increases energy, enthusiasm and the appetite for more success. It's contagious. Start small and others will line up to join the improvement process.

2. Think in terms of increasing communication rather than controlling it

First, be sincere. Maintaining trust is as important as ever. People can handle a lot if they trust they are being treated honestly and fairly.

Help people understand the current situation, why improvement is important, and the reasons for focusing on a particular area. Be clear about desired outcomes; be open to discussion about methods of achieving those outcomes. Listen to concerns and try to understand how they see things so that you can help them gain a greater understanding of the situation and implications. Appeal to their self-interests by clarifying their contribution

to and dependence on company success. Tell employees what you know and admit what you don't know. Express the desire to work together to achieve the desired outcomes.

3. Open the doors

Change is most alarming when it is done to you and the destination is unknown. Be clear about the destination and then involve employees in determining how to get there. Reveal the current state fully, float alternatives or provide tools for developing alternatives, reiterate the goals, particularly the reason they need to care, and let the improvement opportunities speak for themselves.

Most of the time, you won't make good choices without the help of your employees. You certainly can't succeed without the help of your employees. Partnership is critical when trying to make substantial improvements.

4. Use Just-In-Time Training

Provide tools and techniques as they are needed so that employees are motivated to learn and have immediate opportunities to apply what they have learned. Also, appeal to common principles and familiar thought processes in order to leverage existing strengths. Cryptic techniques and jargon intimidate. The most successful approaches are usually the simplest.


5. Leverage Success

You can and should leverage success every step of the way to significant improvement.

- First of all, target specific, important, but manageable, areas that are ripe for improvement.
- Develop a systematic, repeatable approach to improvement. One advantage of starting small is that you have an opportunity to test drive an approach and tweak it to match your company's culture and skill level.
- Build interest and commitment through a series of small successes.
- 'Spread' the systematic approach to new projects, primarily to those eager to participate in the success they have witnessed.

This leveraged approach lets your organization learn how to change and helps to develop a culture that seeks opportunities to improve.

Change Management, in capital letters, seems to have become a goal in and of itself, rather than a means for achieving other goals. People can get so preoccupied with "Doing Change Management" that they have become distracted from the real goals. Be clear about your reasons and your destination. Then listen and you will know what to do.



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