

Changes that “Stick”

How to integrate change management strategies to improve project success

When managing projects, leaders are often tasked to implement them with little time, tight budgets, and limited resources. Many times, they are asked to deliver the impossible, and yet, despite all barriers, still manage to produce a product, service, or result to meet the needs of their stakeholders. When the leader is done implementing the project, they move on to the next one. Months later, when a post-project review is performed, the organization begins to realize that some of the objectives of the project didn't actually stick. Why is that? Usually, it's because the appropriate change management principles were not applied.

The reality is that every project is a change. Whether a leader encourages people to act differently, follow a new process, or use a new system, they are essentially asking people to change. Change management is a critical part of any project that requires people to accept new technologies, values, processes, or structures. It helps to lead, manage, and enable people to transition from their current way of working to a desired way of performing. So, how can change management strategies be built into the plan to improve the success of projects and sustainability? Let's examine possible change approaches that could be applied to the five project management phases – initiating, planning, executing, monitoring and controlling, and closing.

Let's Start the Change

During the initiation stage of a project, it is common to create a charter that outlines what the project is about

and assign a project manager. Rarely at this point do leaders think about getting people ready for the change, or even consider the impact of staff reactions to the overall project. When a change is announced, staff will have a variety of reactions – ranging from excitement to anger and resistance. Leaders need to anticipate these reactions and have a plan to address employee concerns to help gain commitment to the change.

It is important during this phase to conduct an assessment of the organization's readiness for change, which will determine if they have the capability and capacity to handle a new direction. According to John Kotter, leaders need to create a sense of urgency for the change to help individuals understand the need for it.¹ To increase awareness of the change, staff need to understand why the change is happening in the first place, what is going to be different, what will remain the same, and what the consequences of not changing will be. Ideally, if the impact of the change can be communicated in terms of how it directly benefits the individual, it will increase the likelihood that the change will be accepted and help to reduce resistance.

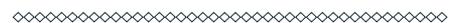
Planning, Planning ... and More Planning

In the planning stage of a project, the bulk of time is spent identifying what activities need to be implemented. Before tasks can be assigned to individ-

uals, a change team (or what Kotter refers to as a “guiding coalition”) needs to be established. This team is comprised of influential people whose power comes from a variety of sources, including job title, status, expertise, and political importance. Once formed, the guiding coalition needs to work as a team that continues to build urgency and momentum around the need for change. They need to create a shared vision of what the end state will look like by involving those impacted by the change.

With limited resources and the need to spend so much time planning the project itself, there is often not enough time or resources available to prepare a strategy to address how people will react to the change. Nor does there seem to be sufficient time to develop appropriate responses to those reactions to effectively lead teams through this transition. Consider having a dedicated resource on the team to manage the change processes. A stakeholder analysis is a great starting point to identify who needs to be informed and what they need to know.

In addition, a communication plan will also need to be developed to determine how change messages will be created and distributed. In the communications, people need to know



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1 John Kotter (2012), *Leading Change*, Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business Review Press.

what is expected of them and their job performance. Leaders can create a positive work environment for employees to develop new skills and behaviours by planning time to coach staff, building individual confidence, and promoting a successful training experience that enables employees to devote their full attention to learning concepts.

Making It Happen

Once a leader has scheduled activities, assigned responsibilities, estimated costs, identified risks, and approved the baseline plan, it is now time to execute the project. From a change perspective, any change requests and issues will need to be tracked and managed as they arise. A leader will also need to create excitement for the change by continuously communicating the vision in a captivating way that compels people to want to take action.

During this phase, people are in a state of chaos and flux. William Bridges refers to this transition as the “neutral zone.”² Individuals are encouraged to take risks, try new things, and be creative. It is important for leaders to empower action and generate opportunities for short-term wins to keep building momentum toward the desired future end state. Leaders can acknowledge action taken by staff that is in alignment

with the desired change by recognizing individual effort and team contributions.

What Else Has Changed?

Throughout the entire project, it is imperative to monitor and control the changes while making adjustments to the project plan accordingly, because many things change during the project life cycle. During execution, it is equally important to monitor people’s reactions to the change and where they are on the change curve. The Kübler-Ross grief model has been adapted and applied to the change curve.³ The transition that someone goes through when experiencing trauma or loss is similar to the feelings they experience during change. The five stages are: denial, anger (fear), bargaining (threat), depression, and acceptance. A leader will need to provide support to their team throughout the entire life of the project and even after it has been implemented. Meeting with individuals one-on-one will provide a leader with insights on how an employee is coping with the change and what supports are needed.

Wrapping It Up and Making It Stick

In the final closing phase, it is essential to perform a post-project

review. At this phase, it is common to recognize the efforts of the team and then move on to the next project. However, to sustain the change, it is critical to align organizational systems and structures with the change, as well as incorporate the changes into the culture. If this is not done, people will revert back to old ways of behaving. Review policies and procedures to determine what needs to be revised or created to ensure the change sticks beyond implementation.

Change management is about supporting individuals impacted by the change through their own transitions. It’s also about planning for and creating a project or initiative that will be sustained. Ultimately, the difference between good and great change management is when leaders can establish trust, actively endorse the change, and visibly participate in all stages of the transition themselves. The desired change can be realized when the project leverages the strengths of change management to make the initiative a success. [MW](#)

2 William Bridges (2009), *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change* (3rd ed.), Philadelphia: De Capo Press.

3 Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969), *On Death and Dying*, New York: Macmillan.

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