

Development and Learning in Organizations

Making organizational change stick: leadership reality checks

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Feature articles

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Organizations around the world are putting tremendous energy into the process of change so that they are in a better position to compete in a global economy (Friedman, 2005). Organizations frequently use a change cycle that identifies an improvement opportunity, analyzes the situation, develops a plan for improvement, implements the plan and measures performance. A critical part of this process is ensuring that performance improvement is maintained once the change is implemented. In our interviews and research with a wide audience of business leaders, we have found several patterns on making change stick that have strong implications for development and learning and that warrant discussion (Longenecker *et al.*, 2007):

- *Leaders have a tendency to declare victory prematurely.* Leaders can confuse improvement with success as they are frequently looking for information that tells them what they are doing is working and that they have won.
- *Managers can easily “take their eye off of the ball” once improvement begins.* Leaders are frequently involved in an overwhelming number of activities which result in a loss of focus causing slippage and/or a relapse to former practices.
- *For any improvement to be real and lasting, work group members have to change individual behaviors and habits and stick with those changes.* This requires ongoing focus, attention and discipline on their part because of the challenge of maintaining new behaviors in the face of ongoing work challenges.
- *Leaders must reinforce appropriate individual and work group performance/behavior on an ongoing basis until desired practices become habits.* If this reinforcement is withdrawn prematurely old habits return and sustainable performance improvement is in jeopardy.
- *Organizations have a wide variety of non-financial and financial rewards that can be used to reinforce desired improvement behaviors.* Yet these rewards are frequently not effectively or strategically used by leaders to reinforce desired performance.

All of these challenges make it tough getting improvement behaviors to stick. Frequently, leaders are so consumed with everything that is on their plate that they can become distracted and take their eye off of the task at hand when attempting to make a change effort part of their operating culture. This is especially true when they experience big change and everyone is excited about initial improvements. This interim success feels good personally and organizationally and provides a sense of relief that an objective has been achieved and that the changes are working. And, unfortunately, in many cases, those same busy people involved in the change then divert their energies to other activities/tasks, thwarting the momentum needed to ensure a true completion of the initiative at hand. This tendency to declare victory too soon can actually undermine development and learning at both the work

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group and individual level. In addition to that challenge, leaders sometimes fail to celebrate a successful change with all of the tools available at their disposal. In failing to do so, they have thrown away the opportunity to reward desired behavior and motivate people to do more of the same. Making organizational change stick is vital and here are three reality checks that can help you as a leader make change stick.

Reality check no. 1: make sure that improvement is real

For the leader of any change effort, it is imperative to know whether your team actually achieved the intended results that your improvement effort had been designed to achieve. Success or failure is not always easy to measure or apparent to everyone. To determine if your effort was a success, go back and review how you defined winning and success at the start of your improvement effort and look at improvement from the perspective of the key parties involved. To understand and evaluate how successful an initiative has been, you must:

- *Review your goals and definition of winning.* How do the metrics you used to measure your results compare to initial goals and definition of winning?
- *Consult your customer(s).* How have they benefited from what you have done?
- *Monitor your competitors.* What is their reaction and/or response to your change initiative?

Most of us realize that, ultimately, the customer's response on most initiatives is the true measure of success. Customer satisfaction must constantly be monitored and measured. The exact same issue can be true as it pertains to our competitor's response to changes. From the competitors' standpoint, your good news is often their bad news. And typically, it results in a response or reaction. Their reaction just might let you know that you really did improve and that you should be ready to respond in kind.

Reality check no. 2: do not declare success prematurely

Premature celebration causes leaders and teams alike to lose focus and motivation for doing the things that are necessary for improvement to hold up. The temptation to declare victory and celebrate all of our achievements can get in the way of making the necessary adjustments and providing the leadership and reinforcement necessary to make changes stick. This is truly a challenge for most leaders to fight the urge to claim the victory of a change initiative prematurely. The costs of doing so might include finding ourselves right back where we started (or even worse).

Reality check no. 3: lead so as to make changes stick

Making sure that change sticks really comes down to doing the things necessary to ensure that whatever changes you have made to produce improvements are maintained. This means that leaders and team members maintain their focus and discipline in doing the things that are necessary for the improvement practices to become habits.

There is an extensive amount of research about the challenges that we all face in attempting to take new behaviors and turn them into habits. None of us have to look too far to see the challenges people face in attempting to break old habits and replacing them with new ones. Business leaders are quick to point out that change efforts frequently fail when leaders do

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not do the things necessary to help people develop the ability and motivation to make changes part of their individual daily activities (Deutschman, 2005).

Make change stick

Given this background, we have learned a great deal about how to help organizations stick with changes. Your team has just executed a successful change initiative and the performance outcomes you were hoping for have been realized. Your team has achieved their goals and you want to declare victory but you are holding off until you are sure that improvement will hold. Here are some very specific things that have emerged from our research that can help leaders turn the behaviors/practices that led to improved performance into the work habits that will maintain better performance:

- *If you want change to stick, start with yourself.* You must demonstrate the behaviors that are necessary as a leader to maintain the performance of your team. Create a system for yourself that will encourage you to do this and consider using a mentor or personal coach to help you stick with your personal game plan.
- *Keep people focused on the positive aspects/outcomes of the changes that you are making.* Help people see that their hard work in the change process is making a difference and is worth the extra effort required.
- *Do not use fear as the primary motivator for a change effort.* Fear as a motivator gets old quickly and keeps people in a negative frame of mind which makes it easier for them to not want to think about change. Look for ways to inject excitement, healthy competition and even fun into change efforts so people equate positives with the change.
- *Continuously develop and train people to perform their new tasks/behaviors.* Equip your people with both the confidence and requisite skills necessary to perform with great proficiency while at the same time experiencing the advantages and motivation associated with personal development.
- *Create support groups of people who are going through or who have gone through a similar experience.* It is critical to create ongoing awareness, camaraderie, focus, counsel and accountability for maintaining new behaviors. Look for opportunities to bring team members together to discuss what they are experiencing and to encourage each other.
- *Foster individual accountability for new behaviors.* People experiencing change need to know that their performance is being critiqued and assessed on an ongoing basis. Increasing both formal and informal performance appraisals during periods of change can help create this accountability.
- *Continually reinforce the positive outcomes of successful behavior.* Leaders must creatively reinforce successful behavior with praise and other rewards on an ongoing basis while also addressing inappropriate or undesirable actions at both the individual and group level if change is to stick.
- *Use visual aids of appropriate actions and behaviors.* Visual aids can and should be used to keep appropriate behaviors in the forefront of team members thinking even after performance improvement takes place.

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These are just a few of the things that effective leaders do to help the members of their team develop and learn during periods of change. Do not assume that change efforts will turn into long-term success without leadership that develops and maintains these practices. Maintain the same focus and sense of urgency that enabled your team to get ahead in the first place and you will be in a better position to make positive change stick!

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