

Special Briefing

Driving Change? How Not to Crash and Burn

September 17, 2015

With so much insight and advice available on leading change, why do most corporate road trips to a desired future state end in shards of glass and twisted steel?

That's a question corporate executives are obsessing over more and more, judging from the volumes being written about managing the people side of change. In a recent Google search, the term "change management" yielded 27 million results.

Over the past 25 years, as organizations have embraced change management broadly as a discipline, a host of scholars, sages and scoundrels have weighed in with advice. We now know a lot about why individuals and organizations change. Or don't. Yet whether we call it "change," "transition," or "transformation," and whether we propose to lead it or manage it, studies repeatedly show that change initiatives fail 50 to 70 percent of the time—an atrocious record that hasn't budged over the past decade.

BARRIERS TO CHANGE

In eight longitudinal studies conducted over 16 years by Prosci®, a company that focuses on change management research, products and services, the lack of active and visible sponsorship was cited as the No. 1 obstacle to success. According to Prosci's research, the biggest mistakes executive sponsors make are:

- Failing to remain visible and engaged throughout the project
- Failing to demonstrate support for the project in words and actions
- Failing to communicate effectively about the need for change
- Ignoring the people side of the change
- Delegating or abdicating the role of the sponsor

So are the executives responsible for leading change texting while driving? Perhaps. But there is a lot of traffic on this road.

Prosci identifies the other four top obstacles to successful change as employee resistance, insufficient change management resources, division between project management and change management, and middle management resistance. Other studies from academia and consulting firms assert that the main culprits are the length of the change effort (too long), the size of the change undertaken (too large or too small), or the failure to make a compelling case for change (too much logic, not enough emotion). These factors are all real and often present.

Change is messy and complex in the best of circumstances. Each initiative is unique, and there's no one-size-fits-all model that will work every time. We often make it harder than it has to be, however. When we break down the components of successful change and the actions that the ideal executive sponsor would take, none of them are difficult. But in the real world, in which multiple corporate initiatives compete for resources, companies are rarely in a position to give change initiatives the full complement of resources recommended by the experts. Perhaps the scarcest resource of all is the executive sponsor's time and attention, but the executive sponsor is the most essential part of the equation.

"In times of change, employees look to and listen to leaders for direction, commitment and guidance," says Tim Creasey, chief development officer for Prosci. "An executive that shows up to a kick off meeting and then vanishes sends just as strong of a message as an engaged, active and visible sponsor. The quality of executive sponsorship is the greatest predictor of failure or success."

Fortunately, Prosci's research also shows that a little focus on the people side of change can yield a hefty incremental boost toward the return on investment. So if you're an executive sponsor, what should be on your short list?

TIPS FOR CHANGE LEADERS

If a skilled change practitioner isn't already among your stable of trusted advisors, that's your first move. When you're in the driver's seat, this is your navigator, so make sure you can stand being in the car together. You

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need a strategic thinker with strong communication and people skills and an eye for detail. Although communication is a critical element of change management, there's a lot more to it, and your navigator should have experience with a diverse set of tools and methods. Change is a dynamic process, so be willing to learn together and course correct quickly when the data alerts you to a wrong turn.

With your navigator riding shotgun, it's your job to lead from the front and show enthusiasm for the ride. If you're Miss Daisy, carping in the back seat, your team eventually will tune you out. Embrace your role as chief communicator—your navigator will help you—but remember that good communication starts and ends with listening. All change is personal, and the people you mean to lead ultimately get to decide for themselves whether they're going to follow you.

That decision will be heavily influenced by your middle managers, who are the linchpins of change. Employees depend on their managers to interpret and make relevant the messages you're sending out. One of the most powerful actions you can take is to provide "just in time" training for your middle managers on the front end of a change initiative. If you demonstrate trust in your managers by giving them information in advance, they will be more likely to trust you and champion the change. Make the effort to train and equip them and, over time, your managers will become more skilled and confident leaders of change, exponentially increasing your organization's change capacity.

Change is a journey that never ends. But with the right team, the right mindset, and a commitment to your essential role, you'll always end up in a better place than where you started.

Buckle up and enjoy the ride.



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