Simple Rules for Complex Change

Taking this careful approach to implementing change can make difficult transitions easier.

By HOMER H. JOHNSON and ALAN J. FREDIAN

One of the most difficult and frustrating tasks faced by managers, HRD specialists, and organizational development consultants is the management of complex organizational change. It is the type of change that affects several operating and support units (or even agencies) and significantly alters the way in which a large number of people do their work.

Because you must coordinate a variety of different activities at the same time, complex change can be very frustrating. Those activities cut across different positions of authority, some of which may not be totally supportive of the project. To complicate matters, the project coordinator may not have any real authority of his or her own. And to add to the anxiety, the change often must take place without disrupting the ongoing operations of the units involved.

So how does one overcome the problems and the frustrations and put through a successful change? Actually, it's not that difficult if you attend to a few simple rules. Below are listed some of the key points that must be covered. The list is culled from the authors' experience and the suggestions of Linda Ackerman, Richard Beckhard, and David Nadler. (See additional readings at the end of this article.)

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Phases and CSFs

First we need to recognize that successful change is best organized into three distinct phases, each having its own set of tasks and problems. The first phase is the preannouncement phase. It occurs after a decision has been made to initiate a change but before the change is announced to those involved. The second is the transition phase. Here, the changes and the new systems are put in place, hopefully without disruption of existing services. The third phase is the consolidation phase. The change is in place and the task now is to debug the new system, gain acceptance for the change, and evaluate its effectiveness.

Overcoming obstacles to change efforts isn't difficult if you attend to a few simple rules

In addition to the phases of change, there are three critical success factors (CSFs) to which you must attend in order to insure a successful change project. If these factors are not handled properly, the project could be jeopardized.

First, gain the support of the key people who have influence and authority in the organization. If they are behind the project, things will run fairly smoothly. On the other hand, if the influential people are not behind you, they have many ways to sink the project. Without good support, your first mistake may be your last. Gaining support of the key people is especially important in the preannouncement phase. You should always have your support lined up before the project is announced.

The second success factor is the development of a good project plan. Complex organizational change involves several work units and may involve changing the work procedures of many people. These must be carefully planned, coordinated, and timed. Otherwise, the change can turn into confusion and chaos.

Lastly, gain the support of the employees who will be affected by the change. Change often creates fear, apprehension, and resistance in those people who are most affected by it. You want to set up procedures by which you can channel those negative energies into constructive action that will facilitate the change.

To summarize, it is important to break up the complex change process into three distinct phases and attend to the three CSFs; each will appear (with different emphasis) in each phase. Putting the two points together, we can outline a process for carrying out successful change.

Preannouncement phase

The emphasis in the preannouncement phase is gathering information about the change and building support for it. Before the change is announced, it is important to know what the change implies for the organization. For example, what will change, who will be affected, what it will cost, etc. It is also important to develop

the necessary commitments from the key persons of influence and authority.

When the announcement is made of an impending change, its vision and implications should be clear, and there should be a public, unified commitment of support from the leadership of the organization.

There are several important steps in the preannouncement phase, all of which are done quietly.

1. *Information gathering.* The individual interested in change or the individual assigned to coordinate the change begins gathering information about the change and its impact. Important questions include:

- What change is desired, and how will it differ from what presently exists?
- What are the benefits and costs of the change?
- What departments, sections, agencies will be affected?
- Who are the key people whose support is needed? How can their commitment be secured?
- What are the biggest problems or obstacles to overcome? How can these be handled?
- What resources could be used to assist the changes?

2. *Tentative plan.* Based on the above information, develop a tentative transition plan. It should be brief and general; it is used as a discussion document. The plan should outline what changes are proposed, why the changes are important, who will be involved, and how the changes will take place (e.g., sequences). A one-page proposal is often sufficient for this step.

3. *Gathering support.* A final step in the preannouncement phase is to gather support from the key players in the organization, particularly those who will be affected by the change. Start with those people who would be most supportive and who have the most influence; they can be used to persuade others. Present the plan, discuss it, and alter it to fit the needs of the key players. One-to-one discussions are helpful here.

4. *Gathering vision.* One of the most important outcomes of this phase is a clear vision of what is to be accomplished by the project. Before the project is announced, there must be an agreement on what the intended achievement is (although its details may not be known). Make sure a clear vision is established and that the key people commit to it.

Develop commitments from key persons of influence and authority

Transition phase

Given that you get the necessary support and a tentative plan is approved, the next phase in the change project is the transition phase. Here two activities occur simultaneously. One activity is the normal service or business of the organization. In addition to this, a project team is planning and carefully introducing changes. This phase is successful if these changes are introduced without disrupting the normal activities of the organization.

In the transition phase, you continue to attend to the critical success factors; all are important in this phase. However, where the emphasis in the preannouncement phase was on gathering support of the key people, the emphasis in this phase is on project management. Some of the key steps to take in this phase are:

1. *Manage the transition project itself.*

- Establish a transition team and transition manager. This team is responsible for insuring that the change takes place. It is best if it represents all units affected by the change. The team should have a clear understanding of its mission and obligation. Above all, pick the best people for this team, not simply people who have a lot of free time.
- Develop a clear vision of the desired state, i.e., the end product of the change. Clear goals are easy to communicate. They avoid misunderstandings, unify people, and provide concrete targets. Make this vision public. Be honest up front: if the project is designed to cut costs or personnel, let people know about it and deal with it openly and constructively.
- Develop an activity plan describing who does what and when. Make this schedule public.
- Develop ways of monitoring and evaluating the change as it takes place.
- Develop mechanisms to insure transition team effectiveness, e.g., communication, conflict management, etc.

2. *Manage employee support.*

- Provide employees with a clear vision of the desired state: exactly what will occur and when it will occur. Some projects use a "kick-off meeting" to explain what the project is all about. Be especially sensitive to issues of employee concern; for example, "What is going to happen to my job?" Deal with these issues openly and constructively.
- Sell the need for change. Explain why the change is important to the employees and to the organization.
- Maintain open communication. Make sure employees are fully informed about transition procedures and schedules. Issue periodic progress reports. Use newsletters, meetings, announcements, etc. One organization used a telephone hot line for employees to call if they had questions or concerns.
- Involve the employees as much as possible. Make them partners in the change. Some organizations have formed mini project teams of employees in specific work areas to assist in making changes in those areas.
- Reward participation and support through both informal means (praise, recognition) and formal means, if possible: public thank-yous at meetings, in newsletters, or on bulletin boards.

3. *Keep the continued support of the key people.*

- Keep key people fully informed through regular meetings. Ask for their advice and help.
- Work through key people. Involve them in activities that affect their area of authority. Solicit their opinions, and also their help. Announcements or requests in each work unit should include the signature of the unit manager.
- Make use of leadership behavior and symbols. Leaders should be visible in "leading" the change effort. Their actions and behavior should indicate that they are supporting the change fully.
- Continue to remind key people of the benefits of the change. The transition may involve some disruption, but it will be worth the effort.
- Use plenty of thank-yous for key people. Let them know they are important and you appreciate their help.

Consolidation phase

In most organizational change efforts, a reasonable amount of thought is invested in the preannouncement phase and a considerable amount in the transition phase. Little or none is given to the consolidation or implementation phase. It is assumed that if the transition is handled well, all the changes will follow naturally. Unfortunately, this is rarely the case. Policies or procedures that seemed acceptable during

test periods sometimes fail to meet the rigors of day-in, day-out operations Sometimes, controls to monitor or evaluate the change are missing, incomplete, or inadequate. The consolidation phase needs careful attention and management. Here are some useful actions for implementation which will help complete the transition and consolidate the change.

■ Hold a celebration or kick-off dinner: a meeting signaling the end of the "old" and beginning of the "new" program or structure. Such an event can dramatize the new way of doing things. In one organization, the employees were asked to throw their old written procedures into a paper shredder ritualistically.

■ Mete out plenty of rewards and recognition to those who assisted or cooperated in the change. Explicit connections between their efforts and the successful implementation of the program should be identified, publicized, and rewarded. In a company where a new service emerged as a result of the organization change effort, all those directly and indirectly involved were given T-shirts sporting the new logo at the celebration.

■ Let the transition team become an implementation team. This team sees to it that the change is achieved and that systems, procedures, and routines are debugged. It monitors the movement of people, the changes in organization structure and procedures, and all other elements necessary to the successful change effort. In some cases "employee involvement teams" may be very helpful in debugging the process and identifying and correcting problems.

■ Make a formal evaluation of the change. Did it accomplish what it was supposed to accomplish? What couldn't be accomplished and why? You might write a brief evaluation report, distributed to the key people.

■ Hold a debriefing session with the transition team. What did the team do that worked out nicely? What things caused difficulty? What recommendations does the team have for future change projects of this type?

■ And last, but just as important, the team should end the project with a celebration of its own.

This set of "rules" of change can't guarantee that the change effort will be 100 percent on target. However, it provides an easy-to-follow guide, will take a lot of anxiety out of the process, and has been proven effective.

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