The Dogma of Moving Minds:

Managing Transition

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Curiosity, complacency, optimism, anger, loyalty, denial, paranoia, and inspiration are not what leaders discuss or plan for when embarking on organizational changes – but they frequently find these emotions are reality. We often speak in terms of strategy, alignments, gap analyses, SWOT reviews, processes, and project details, forgetting that there is a human element involved in any change effort – an element that can positively or negatively affect your transition program.

Research shows that the change initiatives that are crucial to organizational success fail 70 percent of the time. This sobering statistic should be a wake-up call to leaders. Failure of this magnitude comes at a great cost in time, dollars, and morale. This issue stresses the need to manage transition better, especially in a time when constant change is becoming the norm.

An effective transition program helps mitigate these issues and increases opportunities for success. Managing the transition process can ensure that necessary changes are identified and used to control how the transition will happen, effectively reducing its overall impact and increasing the effectiveness of the change strategy. In addition, with a transition management program, companies can understand and address resistance, increase strategic awareness, and arm employees with the tools to succeed.

This article discusses the need for a transition management process and outlines some of the critical factors for successful program implementation.

EFFECTIVE, EFFICIENT ORGANIZATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

A leader may have a clear vision for the organization, but how does that vision translate to execution and accomplishing the necessary functional alignments and priority shifts? More than likely, these ideas pique concerns about how the workforce will react to change, how to get teams to work together, and how to lead people through the transition. At the same time, it's important to retain the company's unique intangible resources, such as values and sense of identity, while fostering a culture of commitment to high performance and best-in-class execution. Adequate planning holds the key to meeting these challenges.

In major transformations, large organizations conventionally focus on devising the best strategic and tactical plans. But success also requires an intimate understanding of change from the human side; this requires efforts to align the company's culture, values, people, processes, systems and behaviors to encourage and reinforce the desired results.

Successful long-term transformation must embody four characteristics to endure and ultimately provide favorable ROI. Companies will reap the rewards of change only when these features are embraced by all levels

- **Speed of adoption** – How quickly employees begin using the new processes, systems, technology, or tools introduced. Also, how quickly they adopt their new roles and demonstrate the new skills and behaviors required by the strategic business goals and transition mandate.
- **Ultimate utilization** – The participation rate – how many employees are engaged and practicing the new way of doing things created by the project or initiative.
- **Proficiency** – How effective employees are when they implement the changes. Proficiency ensures ongoing improvements to the organization when new processes, systems, tools, organizational structures, and job roles are realized.
- **Reinforcement** – The most commonly overlooked aspect of change, reinforcement is, nonetheless, critical to the long-term success of any change project. Continued reinforcement not only verifies the desired actions, but also provides shining examples of how others can adapt to the change.

No single methodology for change fits every organization, but there are proven practices, tools, and techniques that can be adapted to the prevailing environmental conditions.

In contemplating the steps required for success, it's important to recognize the most salient norms that invariably accompany change. These issues must be addressed in order to build an effective change program and drive it throughout the organization.

Generally, an organization should keep in mind:

- Any change is going to be disruptive
- Employee resistance will happen – the best way to deal with it is to plan for it
- How to define the consequences to the organization: WIIFM + WIIFT (What's in it for me or us? + What's in it for them – the clients, customers, vendors, etc.?)
- Individuals' sense of personal control is the prime instinct that comes under threat
- Any alteration of future expectations requires time to allow messages to be clarified – be honest, clear, and concise
- People will take time to adjust to the new paradigm – and they adjust at different rates
- Negativity prevails when information and communication levels are low – unproductive rumors thrive in conditions of uncertainty

In addition to addressing these important norms, building an effective change program requires answering a few key questions. The answers form the foundation of communication and transition management process planning.

The critical questions:

- What is the current situation?
- Why are we changing?
- What should stay the same?
- What is the target or goal – the definition of success?
- What will work be like after the changes are put in place (on organizational, group, and individual levels)?
- What will the organization look like (on organizational, group, and individual levels) after the changes are in place?
- What is in it for us – and them?

Keeping these common norms and critical questions in mind, the following is an aggregate of transition management best practices for implementing changes and engaging the entire organization in the process. Understanding these fundamentals will help everyone navigate the challenges posed by change, from the organizational to the personal level, thus minimizing inefficiency and maximizing effectiveness.

IT'S ALL ABOUT PEOPLE.

Any transition is disruptive and it will live or die with the people's acceptance of it in the organization. It's always best to include and inform stakeholders in the transition process as early as possible. After all, changes will affect them in a variety of ways and at different times. Jobs will have to be redefined, work styles may shift, new behaviors and protocols will need definition, success measures must be updated (or perhaps created), and the workspace will shift to align with job needs and capabilities. These shifting priorities will increase employee uncertainty and resistant behavior. Don't panic – this reaction is normal.

Dealing with such high levels of complexity requires a disciplined, yet continually adaptive approach to planning. In contrast, managing transition using a reactive, need-to-know style will not only slow speed of adoption, limit ultimate utilization, and lower proficiency, but it will also affect stakeholder morale, increasing the potential for failure. A systematic, participative, stakeholder-centric approach that is fully integrated into organizational design and decision-making – one that informs and enables strategic direction – is key.

The approach should be based on realistic assessments of the organization's past changes, readiness for change, and current capacity for change. Ongoing key data collection, open communication, information sharing, and feedback loops must be in place to ensure that all aspects of the transition program implementation are addressed and understood throughout the organization. Most leaders dealing with the possibility of implementing organizational changes know that their people matter. However, executives can all too easily get lost in the planning and strategy and forget that they must be accessible to their human capital to be truly supportive sponsors of change.

IT ALL STARTS AT THE TOP – EXECUTIVE SPONSORSHIP AND WALKING THE TALK.

Successful change starts with strong leadership that is active, visible, and engaged in the process. Because transition is disruptive, leaders need to define what success looks like, why the change is important, and their commitment to achieving organizational objectives. They also must set the pace for transition by maintaining urgency, focus, and excitement while driving targeted and timely decision-making. Stakeholders look to senior leadership for clarity, guidance, reinforcement, and support. As a result, leaders should speak with one voice. A unified approach will benefit the organization as a whole.

These advantages can manifest themselves in many ways, but research shows that the majority of transition uncertainty is reduced when leaders over-communicate and communicate again.

What's more, above all else, leaders need to walk the talk – stakeholders look to them to gauge their commitment to the transition. Executive teams unified in their attitudes toward the transition and sharing a common vision will be poised for success. Visible, active sponsorship aligns stakeholders around the vision and empowers them to be part of the process, enabling them to efficiently manage business unit focus while optimizing enterprise resources and results.

BE ACTIVE. BE VISIBLE. OWN THE CHANGE.

Leadership must drive the transition – living and breathing changes as though they have already been achieved. As author Robert Allen wrote, "The future you see is the future you get."

Leaders must be visible and active, but they must also identify key transition champions who will actively endorse the changes within each business group. These champions should feel empowered to be part of the process. This requires more than traditional buy-in or passive agreement – it demands ownership and the willingness to accept responsibility for making the changes happen in all areas they influence or control.

Ownership is best created through a participatory process that empowers people to identify potential issues or opportunities. Engaging them in the program design and implementation ensures that changes filter through all levels of the organization. At each layer of the organization, trained champions must align with the company's vision, armed with the knowledge to execute their specific role, and motivated to make the changes happen. Clear, timely messages that communicate unified support for the transition and anticipate resistance should be shared throughout the organization. Finally the champions should be continually rewarded and reinforced – championing change is not an easy job. Often it represents an extracurricular activity added to their already-heavy workloads. Tangible or intangible incentives, such as a simple comment of appreciation heard throughout the organization, help show appreciation.

MAKING THE CASE FOR CHANGE.

Answering "why" is a critical step in the early stages of the transition process. As leadership defines what success looks like and why the organization needs to transition, stakeholders will inevitably question to what extent the transition is needed, whether the company is headed in the right direction, and whether they want to commit personally to making the transition a success. Leaders must remember that their people are their greatest asset. Creating shared understanding during times of transition will make the most of those assets.

Leadership must be armed with the answers. Over-communicate – then communicate again – the formal case for change, and reinforce the vision through all aspects of the project roadmap. When building the case for change, always bear these essentials in mind:

- Be real. State the current situation and the need for change in tangible terms and discuss how the transition plan will drive the organization into the future.
- Be confident. Develop a solid approach demonstrating that with the transition in place, the organization has a viable future and the leadership to get there.
- Be clear. Communicate the vision and provide a logistically workable road map to guide behavior and decision-making. Link process steps to the case for change, describing the transition in terms that matter to individuals affected by it.

STRATEGICALLY INTEGRATE THE ORGANIZATION.

Human resources, IT, corporate real estate, and communications are key functional groups in the success of any transition program. Integrating members of these groups into the transition team provides the foundation needed to make transition happen. The expertise of individual contributors at the functional levels of the organization must be engaged to support the overarching change goals. After all, when it comes to any strategic alignment and execution, when everyone works in concert, a business can perform at its best.

Leaders need to recognize that relevant behaviors must be defined, addressed, demonstrated, and aligned to match the business objectives – and that space can act as an enabler to those behaviors. However, changing space alone will not make behaviors change. People, process, and place factors must all be addressed and described in a clear, easy-to-understand, easy-to-implement manner to foster success.

Finally, remember that most transition team members have another job in the organization, and driving change is an added duty for them. They need to have access to appropriate resources, and leaders must help them make the transition a priority.

COMMUNICATE. COMMUNICATE. COMMUNICATE.

Communicate now. Communicate often. Systematic communication will drive a shared understanding that is critically important to the change process. Timeliness and clarity of communication will help reduce uncertainty and dispel rumors that often derail successful change. Too often, leadership mistakenly believes that others understand the issues, feel the need to make changes, and see the vision as clearly as they do. The most effective transition programs reinforce core messaging through clear, honest, concise, and timely communication that establishes a compelling reason for change.

Change communications must be both inspirational and practical. They should leverage existing and accepted channels within the organization. The most successful transition communications use the mediums people already access regularly – the intranet, blogs, town hall meetings, staff meetings, newsletters, etc. This must be specific to the organization. Channels should be easy to use, easy to implement, and easy to share with others once heard – think about social networks.

But what if there's nothing to communicate due to delays? Don't stop communicating – reinforce the vision and mission and be honest about when there will be something to say and what it might be.

Communication should be continually monitored and tested to insure the intended message is being received. Developing ways to solicit feedback and ongoing input will allow targeted communications to evolve with the transition program and employee awareness – allowing the right information to be provided at the right time. Such clear communication strategies can guide the expectations of every constituency affected by the change. Much of the resistant behaviors can then be redirected to more positive activities supportive of the new vision, eventually leading to self-reinforcing change behaviors.

"I WANT TO KNOW WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME…" KNOW YOUR TARGET.

As the transition program moves from building the strategy and defining success to process design and implementation, it will influence different levels within the enterprise. Employees spend many hours each week doing what they do best and doing it in the way they feel gets the job done. In fact, losing personal control over their work life represents the primary threat experienced by most employees facing change. They will react to what they see, hear, and feel regarding how the change program may interfere with these well-intentioned work habits, and they will actively solicit information from their informal social networks to find out what is going on.

Uncertainty will flourish if leaders are not as explicit as possible about the advantages of the proposed changes. Feeding this uncertainty is the first question on all stakeholders' minds – "What's in it for me?" In response, leaders must communicate the vision and define the key benefits of achieving a successful outcome – including how the change will help everyone perform their role even better.

In addition to these ongoing communication efforts, transition planning should include time and resources necessary for training and knowledge building. Individuals and groups need to understand where they will fit when the transition is completed. How will their work change? What is expected of them during and after the transition? How will their job performance be measured? What does transition success or failure mean to them and the organization?

A second key question that must be addressed is "What's in it for them?" There are transition stakeholders who may not be part of the organization – customers, vendors, contractors, subsidiaries, etc. Leaders need to include these constituencies in their communication strategies. Ideally, messages concerning the future vision, definition of success, and stakeholder benefits will be informed by the various contexts of these different groups, making them feel they are a valued part of the transition process.

UNDERSTAND YOUR CULTURE.

Leaders must appreciate and understand organizational culture, because it provides the context for change. As such, culture determines readiness for change, resistance to change, and the likely speed at which change can be embraced and adopted throughout the organization. Cultural diagnostics and related measures can identify not only potential problems, such as groups particularly resistant to change, but also opportunities, such as groups who might function as change agents or change champions. Armed in advance with this information, leaders can craft transition process strategies and communications to anticipate and address potential problems and adequately leverage internal experts, groups favorable to change, and other positive resources to ensure success. Baseline cultural diagnostics can also help demonstrate the benefits of change after its implementation by documenting any shifts in organizational climate that align with the goals of the change program.

PLAN FOR THE UNEXPECTED AND REACT QUICKLY.

No transition is seamless. People are dynamic and react in ways that are difficult to anticipate. Pockets of expected resistance may never surface, yet surprising challenges will no doubt arise. Effectively planning for and managing transition requires constant fine-tuning. Leaders must continuously monitor the change process and solicit feedback to move forward in an informed manner. Doing this will ensure that the program's impact and the organization's willingness and ability to adopt needed changes are on track. Adjustments of message communications informed by feedback loops are also critical. Such flexible refinements mid-stream will ensure that the transition unfolds in an efficient and effective manner.

APPROACHING THE FINISH LINE.

The majority of changes fail over the long term due to a lack of continued reinforcement. Therefore, transition efforts should not cease with project completion. In order to sustain desired behaviors and stay on target with business objectives, transition reinforcement is not optional. Neglecting to anchor the changes firmly in the corporate culture or declaring victory too soon can be very dangerous.

Left unattended, people will feel a sense of abandonment. Nostalgia for how things have always been done will begin to creep into the social architecture. Questions will arise – Was this just the strategy of the month? Is leadership really advocating this anymore? Instead of following this path to potential long-term failure, celebrate small wins and reinforce the desired behaviors and outputs. Highly visible rewards, such as promotion, recognition, and bonuses, should be provided as dramatic reinforcement for embracing change. Examples of lost opportunities should also be brought to light. This is a time to continue best efforts and communicate often about the vision, the success factors that have been met, and how the changes and the people are contributing to the organization's future business goals and objectives.