



The Hazards of Leading Culture Change

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Over seventy-five percent of culture change efforts fail. Many culture change initiatives started out with compelling rationales, committed leaders, and zealous launches only to have the wheels come off the wagon before promise could yield payoff.

When great starts have poor endings, it can leave change pioneers disappointed, hard working organizers disheartened, and skeptics with proof they were correct all along. It makes the next initiative more challenging to launch and the next set of resisters more defiant. However, without needed change the organization risks losing its competitive advantage. Losing its edge makes it harder to attract and retain the best talent and resources, and in today's economy, the death knell begins.

Planned change takes courage and tenacity. Even organizations with a burning platform, effective leaders, and well-crafted plans can sometimes miss the mark because they fail to recognize early signals that the seeds for derailment are being sown, or they fail to realize the power of the signals they are sending via decisions that are unsupportive of the culture change commitment. Derailment is much more likely during periods of organizational anxiety from economic challenge, organizational shift (like a major merger or new competitor), or a change in senior leadership. However, these high profile hazards are easier to spot and therefore simpler to combat. It is the more subtle shifts that can do the most damage before their presence is even noticed.

Spotting derailment hazards quickly and taking the steps to counter their influence can often mean the difference between a great intention and a superior impact. The lessons learned from successful and unsuccessful efforts can be instructive to leaders eager to get a return on their emotional and economic investment. Below are some of the more menacing hazards that can wreck a well-intentioned change effort.

The Appeal of Tactic Overcomes the Power of Strategy

Culture change requires a compelling vision and a clear set of strategies. It also takes concrete tactics. A vision or aim is the picture of the destination, strategies are the major areas of concentration that must be coordinated and managed, and tactics are the myriad of actions needed to implement a particular strategy. A military unit might have as a vision or aim to gain supremacy over a particular piece of geography. Strategies might include calculated deployment of troops, management of air support, an initiative to divert or surprise the enemy, coordination with allies, etc. Tactics might include insuring supplies are where they are needed, inserting intelligence units in advance, or determining specific communications protocols.

Execution is centered on carrying out tactics. Battles are won or lost by the effectiveness of troops on the ground, the accuracy of air strikes, or the adequacy of supplies. When we watch a war movie, most of what puts us on the edge of our seats is the execution of tactics. Tactics are vital, but tactics are also seductive. When executors—whether on the battlefield, in the boardroom, or on the factory floor—get so enamored with tactics that they lose sight of the vision and strategies, they can wind up being highly efficient (doing things right) yet highly ineffective (doing the wrong things). Culture change champions with a map and a compass focused on what can be are transformed into culture change mechanics with a wrench repairing what is.

Losing the bigger picture dooms the effort to becoming a victim to the swirl of minutia and swallowed up by organizational politics. Unplug the tactics from the strategy and they simply become tasks on a “to do” list. Tactics without a connection to a substantive strategy doom the strategy, and ultimately the vision, but not the tactic. Energy is invested but progress is imaginary.

The Critically Urgent Erases the Long Term Necessary

“When you are up to your backside in alligators,” goes the oft-quoted line, “it is hard to remember you were there to drain the swamp.” Organizations under pressure are fraught with alligators—those seemingly never ceasing crises that keep leaders up at night. But, if all the energy goes into simply fighting alligators, there will always be alligators. Culture change is about focusing on source, not symptom—cause, not contest.

Focusing on the critically urgent is enticing because it is easy to see immediate results. It gives leaders a feeling of progress and a sense of accomplishment. Leaders think they are “on top of it” and “taking care of business.” When customers are in the “critically urgent” mix, it can be particularly seductive. Customers do not call for a better culture, they cry for immediate repair to their concern. Transient symptoms, not systemic problems, get leader energy. Putting out a customer fire may quiet a complaint, but it rarely abolishes the arson.

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However, the illusion of advancement is far worse than none at all. Unless the leader sees the link between “alligator fighting” and “swamp drainage” they will remain in a maintenance mode and very little will change. Culture change takes “big picture” thinking and “make the link” communication. It requires a reaffirmation of the “why,” not just a reminder of the “what” and “how.” It takes leaders with a cause, not just leaders with a command. It takes leaders who make the time needed to sustain, as well as reinforce, the culture change message and keep initiatives alive and well—above the surrounding clash of alligator fighting.

Elegant Plans Convince Us Change Is in the Works

Three turtles sat on a log in the edge of the swamp. One decided to jump in. How many are now on the log? Nope, there are still three. Deciding and doing are not the same thing. Until you execute them, all decisions are just plain old intentions. Execution—putting skin in the game—is the true test of commitment. “I believe, I support, I approve” are all just weasel words unless they are coupled with visible demonstration.

Working with senior leaders in major organizations who struggle with the arduous journey of culture change, we are frequently reminded of what our mothers told us about “the road to hell.” Creating a great, compelling service vision is important. Crafting clear, customer-focused service standards and norms are vital. Selecting people with a service attitude is major. Training people in how to deliver great service (or how to effectively lead those who serve) is crucial. Determining the metrics and indicators of great service is imperative. But, in the end, all the planning and preparing is “just getting ready to.” Plans, no matter how elegant and well charted, are simply maps of a journey yet to be taken.

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The Familiar and Comfortable Rule the New and Awkward

Leaders sometimes achieve their positions through competencies other than the superior leadership of people. Likewise, organizations reward leaders for proficiencies other than people management. While there are obviously administrative and process management aspects to all culture change efforts, the core of success comes from the effectiveness of leaders at inspiring, modeling, coaching, affirming and communicating with people. Consequently, any change effort requires all leaders to engage in behaviors that don't always play to their strengths. Leaders naturally want to demonstrate competence to their associates. Their self-esteem can sometimes cause them to be hesitant to rely on behaviors that are awkward to them personally.

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Sustainable culture change requires a commitment to substantive change methods. Processes and programs are vital tools that help people learn new skills related to the change. Planned change without learning support is like giving a kid a new car before he has learned to drive. There might be excitement and gratitude, but it is a prescription for an unhappy ending. Training that works leaves people with new skills as well as new perspectives. And sending out a "to all employees" DVD or colorful brochure associated with the change is just like using that same methodology to teach a kid with the new car how to drive. Without hands-on trial and error and confrontation of outdated behaviors—all done with a helpful but unswerving facilitator—employees will not likely give up

obsolete habits. It also takes careful attention to support the transfer of learning from the classroom to the work setting. Affirmation and recognition of the required new skills and behaviors by leaders brings substance and real worldness to the learnings from the classroom.

If there is obvious commitment, a compelling rationale, and iron-willed tenacity on the part of the majority of leaders, culture change is likely to be successful. However, those are a lot of “ifs.” The “fits and starts” nature of all culture change efforts implies that some things will not work—requiring a return to the drawing board. Leaders abhor failure, even if it is short-term and results in important learning. Aversion to failure underscores the necessity for deep-seated belief in the ultimate success of the culture change effort and a relentless commitment to stay the course, despite initial set-backs and hiccups. It takes leaders with a purpose they value, not just a plan they implement.

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Naysayers Have More Proof than Visionaries

Culture change is not only disruptive for employees—it can be equally disruptive for customers. Change implies “doing things a different way.” Employees do not fast forward from novice to mastery. There is an inevitable learning curve required. Old ways can die hard—for employees and for customers. Even if the old way has been a negative to customers, they have learned to deal with it. They also can harbor some of the same cynicism as employees, and may actually work to sabotage new efforts.

All this provides the cynics and naysayers with clear and present evidence that they were right to resist the change. Pointing to a temporary setback the uncommitted can, with great confidence and irrefutable confirmation, call for an immediate return to “the way things have always been done.” When leaders have even the slightest doubt about the worth of the vision or the correctness of the strategies, they can acquiesce and soften their resolve before the culture change effort has had a chance to gain a solid footing.

Leaders Get Tired Before They Get Change

Culture change is hard work and requires enormous patience. Many leaders are by nature impatient people who think results can be produced with the snap of a finger and completed by the end of the week. Culture change takes a long time because it is complex and disruptive. Culture change involves unlearning old habits and acquiring new ways of thinking and behaving. Many employees have invested years in performing the way they are, typically with great rewards. Getting people to abandon their old ways and embrace new ones cannot be accomplished through an edict, a pronouncement, or a “to all employees” memo. And, the larger the organization and more dispersed the employees, the more challenging and time consuming the change effort.

Leaders sometimes think their role in a culture change effort is simply an occasional meeting in which the topic is one of many on the agenda or visiting the troops on special days. Culture change involves daily actions that can be easily witnessed by employees. Think of the effort this way: how much leader time is presently devoted each day to efforts related to the budget, the bottom line, administration or operations. If the culture change effort is not elevated to at least that level, it will be viewed as an extra, not as the pursuit of a new way of working. Employees have many priorities competing for their limited time and resources, and the “extras” ultimately get ignored or left to chance.

Employees are watchers of signals. Signals are read as mirrors of the real truth. When leaders say “customers come first” and then make decisions to the contrary, the signal says the customer does not come first. When leaders send out memos advising everyone to cut all unnecessary costs, employees remember the ill effects customers suffered through from the last round of expense reductions. They read the memo or conversation about “customers come first” as a lie. Effective change leaders understand and manage the power of signals. They know that culture change requires relying on substance as well as symbol. Real change leaders commit to the long-term nature of the culture change initiative.

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Prescription for Leaders

What separates the culture change winners from those that drop out of the race? It starts with a vision that is clear, compelling and constantly used both as the anchor for judgments and as a lens for alignment. It takes a set of strategies that, like pieces of a puzzle, fit together to insure aligned, coordinated management of divergent efforts toward a common end. And, it takes tactics that support the strategies and contribute to the vision. It also requires the active participation of those impacted; substantive and continuous communications; alignment of core processes and practices so they “fit” the vision; and the selection, on-boarding and coaching of employees with the goal of insuring consistent performance in harmony with the vision.

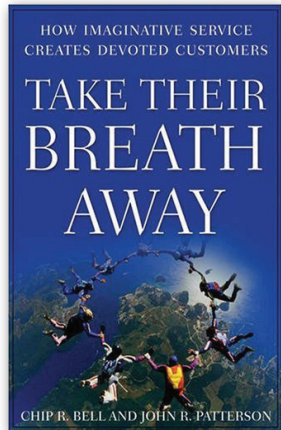
Bottom line, culture change requires leaders who are passionately committed to growth and excellence.

The real make-or-break component, however, is leaders who demonstrate three traits: congruence, consistency and courage. **Congruence** means leader actions are in sync with the vision, i.e., they “walk the talk” under the floodlight that highlights for watchful employees their actions, beliefs, and values. Modeling is not about on-a-pedestal perfection, it is about leader signage of what is priority. **Consistency** suggests leaders stay the course rather than simply engage in superficial pap and shallow pomp. It is borne out of the fact that the first time a leader acts in sync with the new change it is viewed by their employees as amusing. The second leader action that is in sync is assumed to be in response to an edict from on high; the third time as a likely “good soldier” acquiescence. It is

not until the fourth time employees view consistent action as the possible beginning of something new. Too often, employees never get to see consistent action beyond the leader's first or second try. **Courage** involves defying the skeptics, recruiting the undecideds, and taking bold steps forward that depart from the more comfortable and complacent past. It means championing the vision even in the face of temporary setbacks and defeats. Courage is not about being foolhardy or reckless. It is a demonstration of character that comes from a deep conviction for what is right and best for the organization—and those it serves. Courage includes the commitment to working on the culture change throughout the journey to successful change. It is an acknowledgement that culture change requires hard work over an extended period of time.

Bottom line, culture change requires leaders who are passionately committed to growth and excellence. John Ellis in his article "Strategy" in the October, 2002 issue of Fast Company wrote: "Here's what real business leaders do. They go out and rally the troops, plant the flag, and make a stand. If the issue is confidence, they conduct themselves confidently. If the issue is trust, they make their company's business transparent. If the issue is character, they tell the truth. They do not shirk responsibility; they assume command. Because a fundamental ingredient of business success is leadership. And the granular stuff of leadership is courage, conviction, and character." 📖

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