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Change:

The Importance of the Process

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How one undertakes a project, how one plans for it, and how the people affected are engaged by that project are as important as its outcome. The process is critical to the long-term success of a project and the long-term health of an organization. The measure of a successful change initiative is the organizational legacy that it leaves in its wake: does the project support and promote a healthy organizational culture and climate, or does it leave behind bruised feelings, mistrust, and animosity?

In my experience, completing a project takes the same amount of time whether you involve people or not. If you don't, questions and concerns extend the process well beyond the time frame envisioned by the planners. After the dust settles, you're left with anger and mistrust, making it as difficult, if not more difficult, to undertake the next major change effort.

If you do engage a broad range of stakeholders, the project will be planned to take longer than usual. The planning anticipates the requisite consensus-building and ongoing learning that must take place for the process to be successful. When such a project is completed, however, individuals are excited about the positive potential of change because they have experienced it firsthand. New

process skills have been developed, permitting the next project to take place more swiftly and efficiently.

A key element that is often overlooked in the success of a change process is the role of the assessment leading to the change. Disagreement over an approach or strategy is often rooted in disagreement over the assessment that change is needed or over the type of change that is needed. The assessment is likely to vary among individuals, depending on their type and depth of knowledge about the situation and their position in the organization. For this reason, information needs to be shared broadly and often before, during, and after a change initiative.

Just as a medical prescription hinges on the diagnosis, the type of change proposed will be driven by the assessment. Developmental change means doing something the same way but better, using techniques like process reengineering. Transitional change means finding a new way to do the same thing, such as the automation of a process. Transformational change means doing something different by creating new structures and new processes to fit new objectives.

A change process must start from where the organization is. Each organi-



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zation has a unique history, culture, and staff. The change strategy that is developed must take into account the organization's current capacity and capability for change. An assessment of these variables should be undertaken before a change process is engaged.

Three elements need to be considered for a successful change strategy: the



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people, the process, and the structure. Thought should be given to the skills and attitudes of the people involved. The process should be planned and should take into account the stakeholders, time frame, context, and outcome. The structure, the formalized relationships and organizational imperatives through which work gets done, should be flexible enough to be reconfigured and reshaped as needed with changing circumstances.

Transformational change is undoubtedly the most difficult type of change to undertake. It requires not just a change in the status quo but the development of a new framework that may bear no resemblance to anything the stakeholders have seen or experienced in the past. They must be convinced not only that the new construct will be an improvement over the existing one but also that it will work.

Process needs to be considered in the overall management of an organization. Today's workplace requires individuals to have the emotional and intellectual capacity to be flexible enough for continuous change no matter what their job or position. They need to have the skills to be successful within this context. At a minimum, a bias toward continuous improvement should be the norm. For an organization to thrive, a bias toward innovation is required.



References

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