

Requirements for Successful Organizational Change

Cummings and Worley (*Organization Development and Change*, 1995) describe a comprehensive, five-phase, general process for managing change, including: 1) motivating change, 2) creating vision, 3) developing political support, 4) managing the transition and 5) sustaining momentum. That process seems suitable for organizing and describing general guidelines about managing change. Whatever model you choose to use when guiding organizational change, that model should include the priorities and areas of emphasis described in the following five phases of change. The collaborative consulting model described integrates highlights from all of the five phases.

Motivating Change

This phase includes creating a readiness for change in your client organization and developing approaches to overcome resistance to change. General guidelines for managing this phase include enlightening members of the organization about the need for change, expressing the current status of the organization and where it needs to be in the future, and developing realistic approaches about how change might be accomplished. Next, organization leaders need to recognize that people in the organization are likely to resist making major changes for a variety of reasons, including fear of the unknown, inadequacy to deal with the change and whether the change will result in an adverse effect on their jobs. People need to feel that their concerns are being heard. Leaders must widely communicate the need for the change and how the change can be accomplished successfully. Leaders must listen to the employees – people need to feel that the approach to change will include their strong input and ongoing involvement.

Creating Vision

Leaders in the organization must articulate a clear vision that describes what the change effort is striving to accomplish. Ideally, people in the organization have strong input to the creation of the vision and how it can be achieved. The vision should clearly depict how the achievement of the vision will improve the organization. It is critically important that people believe that the vision is relevant and realistic. Research indicates that cynicism is increasing in organizations in regard to change efforts. People do not want to hear the need for the latest “silver bullet” that will completely turn the organization around and make things better for everyone all the time. They want to feel respected enough by leaders to be involved and to work toward a vision that is realistic, yet promising in the long run.

Often the vision is described in terms of overall outcomes (or changes) to be achieved by all or parts of the organization, including associated goals and objectives to achieve the outcomes. Sometimes, an overall purpose, or mission, is associated with the effort to achieve the vision, as well.

Developing Political Support

This phase of change management is often overlooked, yet it is the phase that often stops successful change from occurring. Politics in organizations is about power. Power is important among members of the organization when striving for the resources and influence necessary to successfully carry out their jobs. Power is also important when striving to maintain jobs and job security. Power usually comes from credibility, whether from strong expertise or integrity. Power also comes from the authority of one’s position in the organization.

Some people have a strong negative reaction when talking about power because power often is associated with negative applications, for example, manipulation, abuse or harassment. However,

power, like conflict, exists in all human interactions and is not always bad. It is how power and conflict are used and managed that determine how power and conflict should be perceived.

Matters of power and politics are critically important to recognize and manage during organizational change activities. Change often means shifts in power across management levels, functions and groups. To be successful, the change effort must recruit the support of all key power players, for example, senior management, subject matter experts and others who are recognized as having strong expertise and integrity.

A strong mechanism for ensuring alignment of power with the change effort is to develop a network of power-players who interact and count on each other to support and guide the change effort. Means to manage power can include ensuring that all power-players are involved in recognizing the need for change, developing the vision and methods to achieve the vision, and organization-wide communication about the status of change. Any recommendations or concerns expressed by those in power must be promptly recognized and worked through.

Managing Transition

This phase occurs when the organization works to make the actual transition from the current state to the future state. In consultations, this phase usually is called implementation of the action plans. The plans can include a wide variety of “interventions,” or activities designed to make a change in the organization, for example, creating and/or modifying major structures and processes in the organization. These changes might require ongoing coaching, training and enforcement of new policies and procedures. In addition, means of effective change management must continue, including strong, clear, ongoing communication about the need for the change, status of the change, and solicitation of organization members’ continuing input to the change effort.

Ideally, the various actions are integrated into one overall Change Management Plan that includes specific objectives, or milestones, that must be accomplished by various deadlines, along with responsibilities for achieving each objective. Rarely are these plans implemented exactly as planned. Thus, as important as developing the plan, is making the many ongoing adjustments to the plan with key members of the organization, while keeping other members up-to-date about the changes and the reasons for them.

Sustaining Momentum

Often, the most difficult phase in managing change is this phase when leaders work to sustain the momentum of the implementation and adjustment of plans. Change efforts can encounter a wide variety of obstacles, for example, strong resistance from members of the organization, sudden departure of a key leader in the organization, or a dramatic reduction in sales. Strong, visible, ongoing support from top leadership is critically important to show overall credibility and accountabilities in the change effort. Those participating in the change effort often require ongoing support, often in the form of provision of resources, along with training and coaching. The role of support cannot be minimized – despite its importance during organizational change, the role of support is often forgotten. At this point in a consulting project, it may be wise for you to ensure you have ongoing support (often from other consultants) that can provide you ongoing objectivity, affirmation, provision of resources and other forms of support. Employee performance management systems play a critical role in this phase of organizational change, including in setting goals, sharing feedback about accomplishment of goals, rewarding behaviors that successfully achieve goals and accomplish change, and addressing performance issues.