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The Fizzle Factor:

Why Most Big-Deal Organizational Change Programs Fail

The success rate for ambitious organization-wide, management-induced change programs is about the same as for diets: not impressive. A lot of the same syndromes are at work in both — will power, addictions, and old habits that are exceedingly hard to overcome.

Every two or three years, in typical large organizations, management will get stirred up about something. The periodic impulse to do something big and meaningful becomes irresistible. We need to revolutionize the quality of our products. We need to get more customer-focused. We need to get our costs under control. We're going to re-engineer the whole organization. It's time to launch a "program."

They set up the task force, bring in the consultants, launch the management meetings, print up the posters, run the employees through the motivational workshops, put the CEO on the company video channel, and do all the imaginative things they can think of to kick it off with great energy. Stereotypically, just as in dieting, the will power begins to fade and time shows that the habits aren't really changing. After a certain phase of excitement and determination, fatigue begins to set in. Various unexpected crises, emergencies, shocks, and disruptions begin to pull attention away from the program. At some point, left to its own momentum, the program begins to fade and ultimately dies off.

This "fizzle factor," as I call it, is so much a part of the management experience of trying to induce significant change that it deserves respect and careful study. If we're going to venture out into the wilderness of change, why make the same old mistakes that everyone else makes? Why not at least make some original blunders of our own? For the record, here are the most common reasons why big-change initiatives typically fail:

1. Executive apathy; authorizing lower-level people to go ahead with the program but offering no meaningful support or encouragement; setting it adrift and letting it fade into oblivion.
2. Splintered executive commitment; some executives are for it, some are against it, and some don't care. As a result the employees get confused.
3. Putting the wrong person in charge of a task force; an incompetent person, or one who has a hidden agenda, private ambitions, lack of credibility, or any of a number of other political handicaps can doom the program right from the start.

4. Bureaucratizing the effort with steering groups, committees, review boards, and splinter groups; too many "scientists" and not enough "hunchbacks;" taking forever to get organized and get things underway; degenerating into a rigor mortis condition of overmeasuring and imposing standards without employee participation.
5. Letting the program become a political football in the organization; middle managers may use it to "game" top management in a passive-aggressive struggle against top-down domination; it may become the focus of a pushing contest between headquarters and the field or become a casualty of other ancient political feuds.
6. The "I don't want to play" syndrome; the head of a major department doesn't want any part of the program and decides his or her mob is big enough to passively resist the thing and wait until it goes away.
7. Methodology battles among factions; different groups advocating their favorite approaches, theories, or consultants.
8. Trivializing the objective with a bunch of empty motivational messages and meaningless slogans; trying to "rev up" the employees without having a real message to share; smile training, cosmetic fixes, and advertising campaigns that try to hoodwink the customers and employees into thinking something has changed.
9. Jumping off too soon without a clear sense of timing, sequence, and momentum; getting people fired up and then allowing the energy to fade for lack of effective follow through.
10. Contradicting the whole meaning of the effort with opposing messages; such as imposing massive budget cuts and layoffs right after launching a service initiative, or shaking up the organization for no good reason right after preaching about participative management, shared vision, and all the rest.
11. Axing the whole thing the first time the organization runs into rough sailing; abandoning the business vision and direction for the reflexive "slash and thrash" budget cutting mayhem; an attitude of "we can't afford that now" telegraphs the fact that senior executives never expected much good to come of it in any case.

Many years of experience with big-change programs have convinced me that the two most important assets change leaders need to have, in great measure, are a sense of humility and a sense of ingenuity about how to get things done in organizational cultures. Big changes are indeed possible, but usually only if those behind them have the personal resources to guide the enterprise through them.