As we have learned previously, addressing the symptom of the problem will seldom, if ever, result in long term correction. Likewise, within a change initiative, unless the entire problem is uncovered and addressed, sustained change will not be possible. To address this problem, systems thinking must be employed with a commitment to accepting the brutal facts, whatever they may be (Collins, 2001) (Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994). This analysis can reveal many different barriers that serve as resistance to change, with some easier to address than others. What may be uncovered is that the established systems and structures may in fact be the barrier to change, while in other cases it may be in the people or culture. The challenge comes in removing these barriers, while creating the freedom to move forward with the change.

Kotter (1996) identifies several ways to remove the structural barriers including providing adequate training and aligning the new systems with the change vision. Employees must be provided with a reason for change, which we have addressed in the creation and communication of vision, but also the means, by which to accomplish change. To that end, perhaps it is the culture that needs to adapt and encourage an entrepreneurial spirit where bureaucracy is the norm or the compensation system that rewards narrowly defined targets at the expense of long term sustainment.

Training will be needed to inform and educate employees of the changes, but training should also become a vital part of the culture in which new skills must be developed. As this training moves forward and new skills and behavior begin to emerge as the new norm, resulting in successful gains, management must acknowledge and celebrate these changes as short term wins and as rallying points to promote further change (Kotter, 1996). In order for these short term wins to be communicated, management must establish viable and realistic metrics by which to measure this change. These metrics should reflect the new direction of the change and should be a contributing factor to the success of the change, and can be established as road markers on the path to achieving the new vision.

I tend to agree with Kotter (1996) in that the term empowerment, along with other business buzzwords, may be overused, but is no less applicable to the situation. Empowering employees does not give them carte blanche to do whatever they determine to be best, but rather involves giving them the freedom to operate within an established framework to accomplish their task (Collins, 2001). Collins’ example of a culture in which freedom and accountability walk hand in hand may not be the norm, but it expresses the dual nature of empowerment. To enable such an environment, management may have to address organizational alignment, compensation structure, performance reviews, and feedback loops, and the end result may be a loss of certain powers on the part of management. This is the time where management must be willing to walk the talk and accept and embrace these changes as the example to the organization of the importance of this change.

Barriers and resistance to change will never disappear, and must be addressed as they are uncovered. Whether the resistance is personnel or culture, in order for the big change to occur, many little changes will be necessary. Establishing the environment in which this change is not only accepted, but celebrated, is vital in anchoring the change vision into corporate culture.

References

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