Reducing barriers

One barrier to change can be lack of focus on the change. It’s easy to get distracted by the many things that demand attention. The way to deal with these distractions is by having the discipline to choose not to deal with the distractions. As Collins (2001, p 139 – 141) calls it, a stop – doing list is as important as a to-do list when trying to focus on change or moving from good to great.

Kotter (1996, p 102 -105) warns of four key kinds of barriers, structural, skills, systems and supervisors.

Structural barriers have to be watched out for. It might be easier to leave structure alone when trying to implement a change, but leaving the structure may also tend to leave the habits in place. A new structure will begin to force change, so that its harder fall back on old habits. Fragmented resources, layers of decision makers that can dilute a vision and slow change, over bearing procedures put it place to keep the wrong people under control and siloed functions can all contribute to structural challenges. Dismantling them can facilitate change.

New processes, systems, and structures may lead to a need for new skills. It isn’t unusual to plan for training at the beginning of a change. The scenario can often play out like this – “and that concludes the training. Are there any questions?” (Silence.) The conclusion here could be, and often is if there are no questions then the crew must be fully trained and comfortable with the new process, but they really don’t know enough about it to even know what to ask at this point, as Kotter’s example (p 107) states the training is “woefully inadequate.” Having follow-up training and experts or super-users to call on when questions do arise can help with inadequate skills.

Systems, from HR practices to software, can be barriers. Kotter (p111) warns that not every needed change can be identified at the start of a change process. The guiding coalition has to be aware of barriers becoming evident as change progresses, and dealing with them when they do. This is one reason it’s important to have the guiding coalition stay engaged in the change long after the vision statement is written.

Problem supervisors may have to be dealt with by demotion or elimination if they can’t be won over by early successes. Some supervisors may feel threatened in their authority by an uncertain future versus what they know they have now (Kotter p112 – 114). Honest dialog is the suggested way of trying to get foot dragging supervisors on board.

Measuring progress

Measurements and metrics can be critical in documenting change. Whether it is climate change or increase in rate of type II diabetes, metrics add impartiality and credibility to an argument that something has changed or is changing.

MindTools.com (n.d) gives an excellent framework for leading from benefits of the vision to measurement of the benefits. Because much of the work done today is knowledge work solid metrics can be tricky to come by. MindTools (n.d.) recommends measuring output of the work rather than trying to measure the inputs of knowledge work. Talley & Fram (2010) argue that metrics don’t have to have statistical rigor and sophistication to be valuable. In Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, (1994, p 345) Gauthier gives some examples of easier to produce and report metrics such as percent of people trained, number of consultants days per month on the project that can be used to mark early wins in a change effort. However, Baker (in Senge, et al., p 454) warns that measurement can be over done and add cost, also fear of bad numbers might be a factor in reporting inaccurate numbers. So be careful to not choke the project with metrics that don’t really add value or can be used for blame and disincentive.

Empowering Employees – skill and behavior changes

Collin (2001) lead idea for empowering employees is to have the right people on the bus and in the right seats. He also says that a culture of discipline is critical. As organizations get bigger these can be harder to do, but all of Collins good to great companies pulled it off.

Hirschhorn (2002) talks about a crafty change agent who harnessed things that were already happening in the company to support his change when resources were limited. These employees were empowered to do the tasks they were doing normally anyway. With a little re-packaging the probably delivered early wins on the change journey.

Kotter (1996) summarizes key points of empowerment on page 115. Briefly they are share a strong well thought out vision, align structures with the vision, train employees as needed, not only at the start, align systems with the vision and confront resistors. This should facilitate early wins (if they are well planned into the time line) and successes will reinforce the changes.

Cultural support

The change a change agent is trying to deliver isn’t complete until its part of the culture; just a normal way of doing things. The authors we read this week each have suggestions on how to do that. Piggy backing conversations on the desired change onto existing meetings (Hirschhorn, 2002) can make the change seem like a normal, natural part of the environment or culture, and keep visibility up. This can also help avoid death by more meetings.

Collins (2001) has a somewhat different suggestion with his Hedgehog concept. That is, if the change doesn’t fit within the narrow focus and three circles of the hedgehog concepts, don’t do it. That plus modeling and enforcing a culture of discipline will make adherence to the change seem natural. As long as it supports the narrow goal resistance should be minimal. (Oh, man! That makes it sound so easy.)

Kotter (1996) talks about the value of lifelong learning in chapter 12 of his book. A culture that is open to lifelong learning will be less afraid of the future a change will bring. Learning new things, and as importantly, learning to learn, can make changes easier to deal with.

Its kind of hard to paraphrase several books and articles into a reasonable length post. There’s just so much information out there.

References:

Collins, J. C., (2001). Good to great: Why some companies make the leap and others don’t. New York, HarperCollins.

Hirschhorn, L., (2002). Campaigning for change. Harvard Business Review, 80:7, p 98-104

Kotter, J. P., (1996). Leading change, Boston, Harvard Business School Press.

MindTools.com, (n.d.). Managing knowledge workers: Getting the most from them. Retrieved from http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMM\_45.htm

MindTools.com, (n.d.). Benefits management: Getting the greatest possible benefit from a project. Retrieved fromhttp://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newPPM\_75.htm

Senge, P. M., Kleiner, A., Roberts, C., Ross, R. B., & Smith, B. J., ( 1994). The fifth discipline fieldbook. New York: Currency Doubleday.

Talley, J. L, & Fram E. H., (2010). Using imperfect metrics well: Tracking progress and driving change. Leader to Leader, 2010:55, p52-58.