

Always start a new page



Terry W. Yetsko, PMP
P.O. Box 549
Hampstead, NH 03841
www.nepmc.com email: tyetsko@nepmc.com

Toll Free (Voice/Fax): 1-866-86NEPMC
In MA: (978) 957-2662 In NH: (603) 329-8189
Mobile: (508) 259-8680 Fax: (413) 208-9160

The Failed Change Agent

Sometime back I was hired at a small engineering concern (approximately thirty five employees) which specialized in the development and deployment of custom test equipment solutions. At that time, the company had been in existence for approximately six years. I was personally familiar with most of the organization's staff as I had worked with them previously for many years at GE Automated Systems in Massachusetts. To fully understand the environment, a little history about the organization is required.

In the mid-1990s, when we all worked at GE Automated Systems, it was decided that the facility would be closed, merged with other similar operations, and moved into existing facilities in Orlando, Florida. This move was based mostly on potential synergies and reduced infrastructures costs and was not indicative of the relative success of the Massachusetts organization within GE. A good indicator of this was that nearly half of the organization's 300 employees were offered position transfers to the new facility. Also, as it relates to the cultural issues discussed later, that although the organization had approximately 300 employees at the time of the closing, organizational changes and consolidations had reduced the employee count from the thousands and this larger complement of staff was more indicative of the organizational culture that existed at the time of the closing.

When the GE facility was finally closed, a small group of older professionals, with no desire to pick up and move, decided to form a small engineering and financial services company. The age of the individuals is mentioned, not in a discriminatory tone, but with respect to their experience base and its longevity, its influence on the strength of their mental models, and their propensity for the prospects of change. Most of these individuals had worked together at the GE facility for decades. They were able to port a lot of the processes and procedures from their GE experience to the new organization and develop a workable infrastructure fairly quickly. As with many new organizations, a majority of their marketing was rooted in networking with contacts developed during their many years at GE and in fact many of their initial contracts were related to supporting their previous customers and technology base.

At that same time, I took a job for several years as a Project Manager with a relatively small technology company with a global customer base. The operation there was fairly agile and aggressive and out of necessity, they placed a fairly high emphasis on efficiency and competitiveness. This was a very different environment than I had grown accustomed to at GE and proved to be a good learning experience for me.



My initial attraction to rejoining my former colleagues was my perception that they felt they had gone as far as they could relying solely on the networking approach to marketing and they were ready to make the necessary changes in both their marketing approach and in their internal operational processes and procedures to improve their competitiveness and grow their organization. This was not a blind assumption on my part but was based on conversations during the interviewing process, mainly with the hiring manager.

On joining the organization, however, I found that there was no overall change strategy (and even worse, none was subsequently created). Instead individual elements of their business operations were examined and analyzed to determine their perceived efficiency and benefit. This analysis was based on the experience I gained at my previous position and changes were proposed on a case by case basis in areas where the payoff might be the greatest. In general, these proposals were made to my immediate manager with little initial buy-in from the senior level staff. Although there were a few successfully implemented changes, the majority of the proposed changes were either rejected outright, or failed during the implementation process primarily due to a strong resistance to the change within the organization's staff. Resistance ranged from corporate politics and complaints in the case of rejected proposals to passive noncompliance for some of the authorized changes. The resistance was largely based on how things have been "done effectively for twenty years" independent of whether that approach was applicable given the current environment.

Eventually, my enthusiasm dampened and the change effort scaled back with blame assigned to the overwhelming resistance to change that was experienced. Unfortunately, this response was typical. Many studies indicate that most change efforts fail to achieve their stated goals with the typical reaction being to blame the resistance to change within the organization. This has the effect of shifting the blame for the failure from the leaders and the change agent to those "no-good followers". (Duck, 2001)

The reality is that resistance to change can exist for many reasons and is a normal part of the process. The leaders and change agents must identify the causes and follow a process that effectively deals with that resistance. Kurt Lewin's force field analysis model indicates that the current state of an organization is due to an equilibrium between driving forces for change and forces resistant to change, that always exist. To effect organizational change, those forces must be unbalanced (sometimes referred to as unfreezing) either by increasing the driving forces or decreasing the resistive forces. Once the change is achieved, the new balance must then be maintained (sometimes referred to as refreezing). The maintenance of the new balance often involves a cultural buy-in with systems in place to reinforce and support the new way of doing things. (McShane & Von Glinow, 2003)

John Kotter defines an eight step process for the implementation of change. In addition, he indicates that failure to accomplish anyone of these steps can cause the change process to fail. The eight steps are as follows (cited in Kreitner & Kinicki, 2003):



Unfreezing phase –

- 1) Establish a sense of urgency - Define the reason for the change and why is it needed now (increase driving forces). Articulation and communication of this information will also help weaken the resistive forces.
- 2) Create a guiding coalition - This should be a cross-functional team to maximize organizational buy-in (reduce resistance) with enough power and authority (increase driving forces) to implement the change.
- 3) Develop a vision and strategy - See below
- 4) Communicate the change vision - Successful change requires many things, but a clear, well-articulated vision of the desired outcome may be the most important. It provides everyone with a sense of direction and an indication of how individual behavior should be modified to achieve the desired change. It can also help lessen employee's fear of the unknown by providing a clearer picture of the end result. For the change agent, it provides the objective criteria to measure the success or failure of the change effort.

Changing phase –

- 5) Empower broad-based action - Helps eliminate barriers as well as encourage risk-taking and creative problem solving.
- 6) Generate short-term wins - Shows progress toward the ultimate goal and recognize the staff's contribution so far.
- 7) Consolidate the gains and produce more change - Builds on the accomplishments and successes to date.

Refreezing phase –

- 8) Anchor the new approaches in the organizational culture - Modified approaches need to be supported by the organizational systems and culture in order to remain the norm.

Like a bad golf shot on the eighteenth hole, I found myself wishing for the allowable Mulligan but it never occurred. The place to start in the process was to create a comprehensive vision, communicate it, and verify I had the appropriate authority to implement it. One can disagree on whose responsibility it was to create those things, but as a Project Manager, I was clearly responsible for recognizing that they were not present.

I have since moved on, and as a consultant who often finds himself implementing change, the situation differs slightly in that my presence in itself represents an acknowledgement of the need and benefits of change, at least at some level within the organization. In addition, more times than not a general overview of the ultimate goal has been established, albeit sometimes involving assistance from my firm. Still, the first step would be to analyze the readiness of the client's organization to change, including analyzing the motivations and skill levels of the participants in order to establish the



coalition and anticipate resistance. Next, the authority to implement change needs to be established. Although the power and authority of members within the organization can be established by classical means, consultants rely almost exclusively on expert power and occasionally referent power (based on the level of the individual who hired you) to establish authority. Analysis of these things will provide you with a good indication of how successful the change process will likely be.

References

- Duck, J.D. (2001). *The change monster: The human forces that fuel or fail corporate transformation and change*, New York: Crown Business.
- McShane, S. L.& Von Glinow, M. A. (2003). *Organizational Behavior, Second Edition*. New York: McGraw-Hill, Chapter 16, Organizational Change and Development.
- Kreitner, R. & Kinicki, A. (2003). *Organizational Behavior, Sixth Edition*. New York: McGraw-Hill, Chapter 19, Managing Change and Stress.