Getting the Most Out of Your Business Initiatives

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Doing things the way you've always done them and maintaining the status quo is fine as long as the status quo is delivering a sustainable competitive advantage. When it isn't, the status quo is no longer your friend and it's time for a change. Or more likely, it was time for a change awhile ago.

As the proverb says, the only constant is change. Yet individuals and organizations struggle with change. As a part of our human nature, we are programmed to resist change. We favor what we have and what makes us comfortable. In a study conducted by Dan Ariely of MIT and detailed in his book, *Predictably Irrational*, he found that shortly after people stood in a long line for a chance at premium college basketball tickets, those who were lucky enough to get the tickets valued them dramatically more than those that didn't. Given that both were in line to buy the tickets, they should have valued them equally, but they didn't. Those that bought the tickets on average wouldn't part with them for less than $2400 each, yet those that didn't get the tickets were only willing to pay $175 each – a difference of fourteen hundred percent.

This says a lot about human behavior and why seventy percent of organizational initiatives fail to deliver their expected benefits. On the surface, people blame improper project scoping, inadequate requirements gathering, poor project management and so on, but at the core of most failed initiatives is people. More specifically, it is people's inability to change and give up what they have. Sure a software implementation could have benefited from a more in-depth evaluation or a new sales approach should have been more aligned to the specific market, but if you want to get to the true root cause, look beyond the symptoms.

Many business initiatives, strategic plans and training programs fail to deliver their full potential because they are implemented as impersonal isolated quick-fix programs. Standalone and impersonal might work for installing a new piece of equipment, but where behavioral change and individual improvement are required, they aren't effective. For an organizational initiative to be successful it must deal with the impact on the individual and how much change is required of them.

To effect change that entails people giving up something they currently enjoy or that moves them beyond their comfort zone, ensure you embed the following seven enablers of behavior change into your initiative:

1. **Feedback** – Help the change-resistant individuals understand their tendency to avoid change and how it prevents their professional growth.
2. **Motivation** – Explain the "why" behind the change and allow people to become invested in the rationale for it.
3. **Symbols** – Give proof that the new initiative will succeed and deliver the expected benefits by giving examples and promoting early success stories.
4. **Small Steps** – Execute a plan that involves steps small enough that people can realistically accomplish them and avoid their natural tendency to resist.
5. **Resources** – Provide the systems, people, training, practice, documentation, time and other resources that are required to make the initiative easy to implement.
6. **Rewards** – Encourage people through incentives and rewards which reinforce the desired behavior.
7. **Leadership by Example** – Endorse the new initiative starting at the top of the organization and follow it without exception. As soon as an exception is made, the initiative is doomed.

Embed these elements into the fabric of your organization and watch your initiatives flourish. And if your organization offers a product or service that requires change on the part of your customers, embed these enablers into your offerings as well and watch your sales grow.

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