

# Change Management: Maybe you can't get it right

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I was recently in a senior management meeting at a company going through a restructuring. People were very concerned about change management, and shared the view that their organization hadn't always handled it well in the past. There was a lot of very well-intentioned talk about "getting it right" this time, and the leadership team was increasingly anxious about having the proper systems and processes in place to successfully manage the change for their people.

My colleagues and I have often listened to such concerns. And I propose a different perspective: What if you took the case that it's actually not possible to get change management right – or at least not change management, per se? What if you accepted that there is no exact system or process to ensure what you're calling "change management" will go well?

You do need systems and processes. But however good these are, issues will inevitably arise. The key here doesn't lie in avoiding the issues, but how people relate to them. So if you can have people embrace challenges or short-term disruptions as opportunities to embed the change—versus trying to avoid any hiccups along the way—the change effort can continue to support the desired performance gains, in spite of any setbacks.

Certainly, you've got to have your change management plans and processes in place. But the make-or-break variable here is your people's relationship to the change. And that—shifting people's perspectives, their views and beliefs—is a function of leadership.

Consider the experience of another client company taking on a world of change as it was sold off by a multi-national energy giant. After 100 years of being a distant cog in the parent company's operations, the spin-off and its new CEO were dealing with a misaligned senior team, an awkward mix of downstream assets including hundreds of service stations, and a legacy "big oil" culture. At this critical juncture, the CEO hired my firm, but not to help with change management. The focus was on leadership.

The CEO had worked with us before, and we agreed on this: Extraordinary performance is a function of extraordinary leadership. We started with a leadership development program for the top 25 leaders in the company, the first-ever for most of them. They galvanized not only around extremely ambitious goals, but more importantly, a set of statements about what the organization and its people stood for – which was compellingly communicated throughout the organization,

all the way to the service stations’ “people at the pumps.” A number of amazing things happened in a two-year time frame, including a record-setting IPO, a more than 100% increase in book value, and the fast ascension of a brand for a company named one of three “Top Companies for Leaders” in the region.

In the process, massive change was rolled out successfully. But with the focus on leadership, managing that change was one of many sustainable results, including significant and measurable enhancements in customer service, investor confidence, and a range of key financial indicators.

When you think about why certain business plans come to life or not, why certain board room aspirations end up embraced on the front lines or not, or why certain processes deliver desired results or not, it really comes down to leadership. When people at the top rungs of leadership can put pressures and distractions aside and

see eye-to-eye on what is possible, from there they can figure out how to make the rest of it work. The systems, proper alignment of assets, and refinements in business activities will flow from there. And as the rank and file can begin to see and believe in their role in creating successes they didn’t even know were possible, they can embrace the work required to make it happen.

From our perspective, if you define the success of change management only through the lens of smooth implementation of systems and processes, then success may be elusive and/or short lived. But if assessed alongside the exercise of effective leadership, then change management—can leave a lasting capacity for organizational resilience to change in the future.

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