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Advice

26/09/2008

Making Change Stick

Quortex

Organisations often need to effect change within a particular area of their business, rather than across the whole enterprise, for example to drive improvements to efficiency or effectiveness, or as part of some organisational change.

So if you are faced with this situation, how can you make sure that it really sticks and is sustained longer term?

Who holds the real expertise for delivering change?

In most cases you'll find that the real knowledge and energy to improve the way things work is already there, buried within the business itself. However businesses aren't always able to harness this capability due to politics, lack of trust or loss of focus, especially if the linkage between the true goals of the organisation and 'how I / my team contribute to those goals' is lost. These conditions can build up insidiously over time and act to diminish the natural enthusiasm and commitment for change, resulting in disengagement and disinterest. On the surface people may be hugely busy chasing actions and doing tasks, but somehow real progress is not being made.

In reality it doesn't take a rocket scientist to resolve most business problems although the burgeoning of the 'old world' consultancy industry would suggest that not everyone agrees with this perspective. The challenge is really about getting traction and energy for a project, and creating an environment which sustains new ways of operating. Ultimately, for change to be sustained, people need to feel involved and have ownership of the solutions that they themselves, drive through. This isn't 'buy-in', it's genuine contribution and commitment.

Often, focus is most likely to settle on the 'hard' side of change - tasks and activities that need to be done. Or they may focus on some of the 'soft' side of change - "Let's do some team building". Either of these in isolation is unlikely to deliver what Stephen Covey[1] calls a 'sustainable superior performance'. So how can you unleash that underlying energy and motivation to make change happen for the better?

Creating a 'bubble' of change

Change happens when it has credible sponsorship and leadership in the eyes of those impacted and there is congruence between what the leaders are saying and what they are actually doing. It inherently combines both 'soft' and 'hard' dimensions because it engages with people's feelings. This is the emotional level - the source of all personal energy for each and every one of us and is pivotal to what we do and how we behave.

If you are transforming an organisation, this has to come from the top. But smaller change can also be led from within a part of the business. Creating a 'bubble' of change can be a useful way of conceptualising an approach that can be used in such circumstance.

The concept is to create an area - the bubble - where different rules can apply. What lies inside the bubble represents those things that can be directly influenced or changed by a given initiative. What lies outside the bubble defines those areas which you may (currently) have less influence over, or little ability to change and you may simply have to acknowledge and accept.

The key is to create a different context inside the bubble for all the people involved. This place is a safe place, where new rules can apply and old sacred cows are destroyed. The power of creating this new 'context' should not be underestimated. After all, international tyrants and organisational barons alike have understood its power for centuries.

Within this new context there is a new freedom to communicate, to engage, to express and to behave, differently. It frees up how people relate to each other, what their focus and priorities are, and most importantly, how they react when things go wrong. Outside the bubble □ in a different context - life may remain the same, with the same old norms, old rules and old politics still operating.

The things that are truly different inside the bubble come from addressing three key questions:

- * What are we aiming to achieve and why is it important?
- * What does real success look like for us?
- * What will really make the difference this time and what are we going to do about it?

By collectively exploring the answers to these questions you will be on the road to creating your 'bubble'. The answers will, by their very nature, span both the 'hard' and 'soft' aspects, because you will be engaging with what really matters to the individuals involved - their emotional response. The answers will therefore provide the key to unleashing people's appetite and desire for change as well as the agenda for making the change real. Be prepared though. The answers are also likely to be challenging, cutting incisively to the heart of the real reasons why a particular area of the business is not operating as well as it should.

The 'bubble' can start with just two or three people. Over time (days, weeks) others can be brought into it, engaging each time with their answers to the key questions, challenging and empowering them to be different within the safety of the bubble.

Having opened the door to change, the key to maintaining the bubble is for the leader(s) to make genuine commitments about what they can influence and change and what they can't. They then need to visibly deliver on their promises in the eyes of the team, and require the same of the team. This can be a sobering experience but should not be dodged as it creates a new bond of trust embedded in the day to day experience of the individuals.

As the bubble expands and grows, some things should remain rock solid, a 'steel thread' that runs through the core of everything that happens. You might call this the vision and values for the change. But it's better if they are expressed in more tangible ways and embedded in the new behaviours and new norms of what is acceptable and what is not. For example, a commitment for two groups to 'communicate more openly and honestly' is meaningless if outside the meeting, one group remains dismissive of the efforts of another.

So the biggest test of leadership is likely to come when the new norms are challenged. Maybe it's a situation of unproductive behaviour, or individuals back tracking on agreements they made. Failure to visibly tackle these head on will simply confirm what the sceptics had been saying from the start □ that you weren't serious about real change after all.

If you take this type of approach, things will really start to happen. What seemed previously like insurmountable barriers will somehow dissolve. These may reveal new problems not previously visible, but these are likely to be tackled with a creative energy not previously experienced. And when that happens, you will have taken the first steps to making real change, stick.

[1] Best selling business author □ '7 habits of highly effective people' and 'the 8th habit'.

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