

To change organization, the leaders can't let up

By Mimi Bacilek

Democrat and Chronicle: December 23, 2007

Rapid and continuous change is endemic in today's business environment. Creating organizational change that succeeds for the long term is one of a leader's greatest challenges.

What makes that so? Lasting change requires culture change. And changing a culture is a massive undertaking. Dictionary.com defines inertia as the "property of matter by which it retains its state of rest or velocity." As with matter, organizations and people are driven to remain the same. That is the core of the challenge in implementing change. Organizational culture is like a flowing river. It carries with it information about how to behave, make decisions and address errors.

Just imagine what it takes to redirect the mighty Mississippi. Small efforts may deliver a small, temporary shift in the flow, but they will never re-direct that river. People are comfortable with the status quo, even when it's unpleasant.

The starting point in creating change rests with leaders. When leaders change, their organizations change, too. Leaders must demonstrate the change in the organization from the very beginning. For example, if the change is renewed focus on customer service, leaders must serve employees as customers, acting as role models for what they want. Leaders who exemplify the behavior they seek are rewarded with the success they seek.

Successful leaders know that employees are the generators of organizations' results, making employee involvement and commitment essential. Leaders may be the change innovators, but more importantly they must be its champions, bringing passion about the change into every conversation and demonstrating absolute confidence in the ability of staff to create success. Successful leaders place staff in roles critical to the change, such as architect or builder.

Leaders must succinctly express a compelling picture of the future. That picture must be so appealing it draws people away from the current state and into the new way.

When leaders do this they encourage staff to choose the new way of doing things. Susan Mitchell Bridges describes this choosing as a transition phase where employees experience a "personal and psychological reorientation." People must mentally and emotionally move through this transition before they can change; that creates a lasting change in the organization. Leaders who ignore this critical beginning do so at the risk of their own success.

As an organization or, more appropriately, its people agree to move forward, leaders must keep continuous, gentle pressure on forward movement. The change must be grounded in everyone's everyday actions, organizational success measures and even meeting agenda items. The intent is to reinforce the new and minimize the tendency to return to the old at the very first opportunity.

Reward and recognition is a fabulous tool for moving things forward. Successful change leaders don't wait until ultimate success is achieved to reward people for making the transition; they reward early attempts as well as ultimate successes. It is essential to demonstrate the leader really cares that success is achieved and help everyone see that success is possible.

While the inertia of the status quo is powerful, the inertia of the change is equally powerful. Wise leaders seek every cause for celebration and make a big deal of even the smallest gains. This focus on continual forward movement and frequent celebration create a process everyone wants to be a part of.

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