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Barriers To Culture Change

Last week, I shared the 8 steps to culture change. In your culture change project, it is important to note that there are many barriers that may make your change effort ineffective. Understanding what they are and dealing with them will assist you in helping your organisation manage them more effectively. Change needs to be structured as a gradual, ongoing "process" rather than an abrupt alteration of current systems and structures. Basic assumptions, inherent in an entrenched culture cannot be overthrown at once, as this creates cognitive dissonance and resistance.

Some culture changes occur naturally over time as the company evolves, while others are planned. The process of initiating change may also differ based upon the stage of the organisation (Schein, 2004). As a group is formed, the decisions made by company leadership also establishes workplace culture, such as hiring practices and resource allocation. At this stage, culture is likely to be strongly adhered to, as "(1) the primary culture creators are still present, (2) the culture helps the organisation define itself and make its way into a potentially hostile environment, and (3) many elements of the culture have been learned as defences against anxiety as the organisation struggles to build and maintain itself" (Schein 2004).

Once the organisation is established and successful, however, its culture is difficult to change. It often takes a catastrophic event to spur change, such as a major loss or product failure. "To embed new assumptions in a mature organisation is much more difficult than in a young and growing organization because all of the organization structures and processes have to be rethought and, perhaps, rebuilt" (Schein 2004).

Several barriers to rapid cultural change have been identified and they include:

A) THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUBCULTURES

"No real-world company works as one uniform whole" (Vilet, 2013). Schein (2004) characterized three types of subcultures: operations (drivers of daily activities), engineering (focused on technology), and executive (often focused on financial matters). Cultural change may occur via systematic promotion of members of a selected subculture, however this is a particularly slow process and the basic underlying culture of the organization may overshadow any attempts at change (Schein, 2004). Furthermore, a worker who is transferred between subcultures requires "time to adjust and get acclimated as if she/he were a brand new employee.". Furthermore, corporate culture may be more complex than anticipated, as the organisational culture typically descends from, or is influenced by its broader social culture (Weeks, 2004).

B) EFFECTS OF THE EXISTING CULTURE

The existing culture of the organisation may be one of resistance to change, or the desired culture may clash with the existing one (Smith, 2003). In a case study of the company "Eurel" (a pseudonym), it was stated that "the company culture of tolerance and its aspiration in being an employer for life, perhaps created an amount of stagnation in terms of being slow to change" (Ryan, 2005). Other cultures that experience difficulty with change include those that are inward-looking, bureaucratic, and autocratic (Kotter & Heskett, 1992).

C) TOO MANY INTERRELATED, COMPLEX PIECES OF THE PUZZLE

It is difficult to change culture because "an organisation's culture comprises an interlocking set of goals, roles, processes, values, communications practices, attitudes and assumptions. The elements fit together as a mutually reinforcing system and combine to prevent any attempt to change it. That's why single-fix changes, such as the introduction of teams, or Lean, or Agile, or Scrum, or knowledge management, or some new process, may appear to make progress for a while, but eventually the interlocking elements of the organisational culture take over and the change is inexorably drawn back into the existing organisational culture" (Denning, 2011).

D) INEFFECTIVE OR SLOWLY TRANSITIONING LEADERSHIP

New leadership does not necessarily mean a shift in culture. Grooming new leaders takes time. When a leader selects and trains a successor, it is often someone from within the company, usually in the leader's own image. Less resistance to new management may be expected if the leader is "one of us."

Cultural shifts may occur if new outside leadership is established and workers who do not adhere to new standards resign or become forced to leave. As with the promotion of internal employees, however, new outside leadership does not necessarily translate to a change in culture. Culture change may also be stimulated by bringing new employees from outside of the company into jobs below the top management level and allowing them gradually to educate and reshape the thinking of company leadership. This is most likely to happen when the new employees serve as managers of subgroups, reshape the cultures of those subgroups, become highly successful, and hence, create a new model of organisational function (Kuwada, 1991; Schein, 2004). This process takes time.

E) EXCESSIVE TURNOVER

High turnover in an organisation will also effectively serve to delay and short-circuit the development and/or implementation of culture change

F) A LACK OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

A worker may feel anxious when learning new information or methods (Schein, 2004) or when his/her role or value within an organisation is unclear (Abdul, 2014; Hill & McNulty, 1998). To create psychological safety requires a significant investment of time and effort into training. Furthermore, staff members "are not going to change their way of seeing their job and their own role overnight" (Hill & McNulty, 1998).

G) THE NEED FOR CONFIRMING DATA

It takes some negative experiences to spur change; it will take some positive, confirming data to stabilize and internalize a new cultural viewpoint. If these positive data are not presented, further change may be catalyzed (Schein, 2004). Depending upon the outcome measures, it may take time to see the effects of a cultural shift.

H) UNCLEAR OR INEFFECTIVE PROCESSES FOR ATTAINING GOALS

A new goal may be established, but senior management may not be clear about how to attain that goal, leaving the employee to adopt a "trial and error" approach. While perhaps time-consuming, this approach of employee involvement often leads to greater internalization of a new value system (Schein, 2004).

I) ISSUES RELATED TO RESOURCES AND CONTROLS

A lack of working capital or other resources, or poor resource allocation, may inhibit change (Abdul, 2014).

J) CHANGES ARE NOT CARRIED FORWARD

Successful strategies may not be passed down to new leaders, or memories may become blurred regarding why strategies were successful (Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Smith, 2003).

While the barriers seemed insurmountable, do remember that understanding them helps you to anticipate issues and plan your project using the 8 step method more efficiently.