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 efficiently. 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 change agent, you are often perceived by company leadership as an autonomous change maker, and the leader of the culture change initiative. The company culture is typically descended from, or is influenced by its broader social culture (Weeks, 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).

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

A) THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUBCULTURES

“Non-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 performance). Cultural shifts may occur when subcultures attempt to redefine themselves, and to do so, they require the support of key personnel to function at their potential level of culture shift. If the new general manager is unable to gain the support of subcultures, the new general manager may become demoralized.

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 “Cure” (privacy protection), 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 able to change” (Ryan, 2005). Other cultures that experience difficulty with change include those that are inward-looking, bureaucratic, and autocratic (Morgan & Heidt, 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 practice, attitudes and assumptions. The elements fit together as a mutually reinforcing system and combine to prevent any attempt to change it” (Ryan, 2005). Other cultures that experience difficulty with change include those that are inward-looking, bureaucratic, and autocratic (Morgan & Heidt, 1992).

D) INEFFECTIVE OR SLOWLY TRANSITIONING LEADERSHIP

New leadership does not necessarily mean a shift in culture. Growing new leaders take 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.”

E) HIGH TURNOVER

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

F) 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 under threat. Schein (2004) characterized three types of psychological safety: (1) the worker must feel secure in the company’s immediate environment, (2) the worker must feel secure in the company’s long-term future, and (3) the worker must feel secure in the company’s culture. 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 invisibly drawn back into the existing organisational culture (Denning, 2011).

G) THE NEED FOR CONFIRMING DATA

It often takes a catastrophic event to spur change, such as a major loss or product failure. “To change culture it is often necessary to work through the inertia created by strong cultural norms” (Vilet, 2013). Schein (2004) characterized three types of psychological safety: (1) the worker must feel secure in the company’s immediate environment, (2) the worker must feel secure in the company’s long-term future, and (3) the worker must feel secure in the company’s culture. 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 invisibly drawn back into the existing organisational culture (Denning, 2011).

H) UNCLEAR OR INEFFECTIVE PROCESSES FOR ATTAINING GOALS

A goal 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. 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 company’s culture. Leadership is not necessarily expected if the leader is “one of us.”

I) 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). Strategic initiatives are often thought 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).

J) ISSUES RELATED TO RESOURCES AND CONTROLS

A lack of working capital or other resources, or poor resource allocation, may inhibit change (Abdul, 2014). Bureaucratic, and autocratic (Morgan & Heidt, 1992).

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References

Abdul, 2014
Kotter & Heskett, 1992
Schein, 2004
Smith, 2003
Vilet, 2013
Weeks, 2004