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INNER GAME OF WORK

BASIC TRAINING

Seven rules for how—and how not—to manage change.

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Given the speed at which business is moving these days, companies are thinking a lot about change. Often, they say they will train employees to operate in new and improved ways. Yet, walk into many corporate training centers and you find an interesting phenomenon—classrooms occupied by *other* firms and local civic groups. The centers even host weddings and bar mitzvahs on the weekends to pay the bills.

What gives? If companies and individuals are trying so hard to cope with violent change, why are these training facilities struggling to find ways to keep themselves occupied? Isn't there some hypocrisy here?

In truth, formal training alone is a poor catalyst for change. A major department-store chain found this out the hard way when it began selling goods from a new Web site and trained all its salespeople in how to get customers to use it. Because the chain still compensated salespeople only for purchases made in stores, they fought the new Web site every step of the way. With the new business opportunity in conflict with employee paychecks, the result was plummeting morale, increased turnover, and confused customers.

Still, training can play an important role in helping people adapt—but only if you pay attention to all the intricacies of how people change. You can teach people any number of things, but helping them embrace change is much more complex.

When training is ineffective and change withers on the vine, organizations waste more than money, time, and effort—they squander employees' trust.

Meaningful change becomes the “flavor of the month.” Most worrisome, subsequent change efforts become increasingly difficult and costly.

So, here are some pointers on how to effectively use training to support change:

DON'T PUT IT OFF. Preparing employees for change must begin early in a project, when the overarching objectives first become clear. If people are trained when they are ready for change, they are much more likely to embrace it.

A consumer catalog company, about to deploy its first e-commerce site, instituted a training effort just one step ahead of the onrushing implementation. With no time to digest what was happening, most of the employees focused only on what might change for them personally. The result was a monumental lack of readiness, costly delays, and technical glitches—the death knell for on-line business.

ONE SIZE DOESN'T FIT ALL. Don't assume everyone needs the same training—or even that everyone needs training at all. In particular, managers may need to be treated differently. They're the linchpins in any successful change, because they need to not only understand it, they also must communicate and support it. “Change leadership” is a critical component for success at all levels of the business, not just at the top. After all, no corporation-wide change program can overcome the local boss who doesn't back the change project, or is determined to kill it.

At one food-products company, everyone was well-trained in how to use a new software system, known as ERP, that tracks resources and facilitates sharing of information company-wide. But managers received no guidance on helping their people through the tough transition from the old ways, resulting in frustration, cost overruns and disruptions in customer service.

TRAIN FROM START TO FINISH—AND BEYOND. When everyone goes for a day or two of training, employees may gain a better understanding, even some acceptance—for a while. But new skills and attitudes can't be sustained through such short, one-time events. Training must be sustained. Otherwise, old behaviors will re-emerge; people will decide that their training was inconsequential; and they won't come back.

MEASURE FROM THE OUTSIDE IN. Training directors sometimes grow enthusiastic over internal yardsticks of success. Unfortunately, “training 20% more people this year than last,” for example, is no gauge of profit growth, revenue increases, or any other external measure of a business's health. The issue isn't how many people were trained, how many days of training they received, or how well they liked it. The sole issue is what employees do with what they've learned.

CREATE A LEARNING CULTURE. Companies must move beyond formal training to continuous learning and change management. In other words, formal classroom training rarely is enough. The change management action is often elsewhere, most likely in places closer to where change is actually happening—on the job. Companies should use peer mentoring and manager coaching to augment training. They should also take advantage of

technological improvements in knowledge management—such as Web sites that provide instant information and knowledge, rumor management, on-line suggestion boxes, refresher training, real-time contact with experts, bulletin boards for best practices, and more.

PUT PEOPLE AT THE CENTER. Re-engineering projects have often collapsed when they failed to make the needs of people paramount. The same is true for effective change.

A telecommunications company that was integrating a newly acquired business focused its change efforts through a “command center” with every wall covered with flowcharts full of excruciating detail. With process and organization charts taking center stage, the impact on employees became an unfortunate afterthought. Employees were shown colorful, upbeat presentations about why the acquisition was so wonderful. But, in the employees’ view, they were being fed propaganda, so they ignored it.

LET IT ALL HANG OUT. If you want change to fail, then hide all the critical information from the employees. Assume that they can’t be trusted.

At one company, secrecy gave birth to a rumor mill that, from the employee perspective, was the most reliable source of information in the company and that top executives couldn’t hope to control. Employees resisted change, and senior leaders were dumbfounded. But they should have understood that if people can’t see what’s in it for them, change just seems like too much work. People also have often-unrecognized incentives for maintaining the status quo, or face painful consequences if they embrace something new.

The big mistake here is thinking that if you train someone, acceptance will automatically follow. The only way to break through the barriers is to take a multidisciplinary approach. Don’t just decide to have a training event and be done with it. Deal with communication, motivation, incentives, environment, and learning—all of it, all at once.

My favorite light bulb joke goes like this:

Q: How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb?

A: You need only one psychiatrist, but the light bulb has to really want to change.

That’s about how things work with change management. Change can be meaningful and invigorating when people really want to move with you on your change journey, and aren’t dragged through it kicking and screaming. But you’ll have to help them every step of the way.

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