

Article 1

The Implementation Challenge: Growing Past the Barriers to Change

Introduction

Over the past few years, a certain pattern has become more and more common in organizations. It begins with an organization acknowledging the need to change, with management and staff working hard to implement major changes. Typically, there are Early Adopters, eager to experience the benefits of the anticipated change. There may even be the beginning of a second wave of Buy-In from others who are beginning to see the potential. There are likely still some Resisters, but they are under increasing pressure to Come-on-Board. But then, seemingly without warning, the pattern shifts a few months down the road. Enthusiasm flags, and resistance begins to grow, sometimes even among those who were leading the charge at the outset. The commitment to follow through with the change initiatives weakens and, eventually, dies.

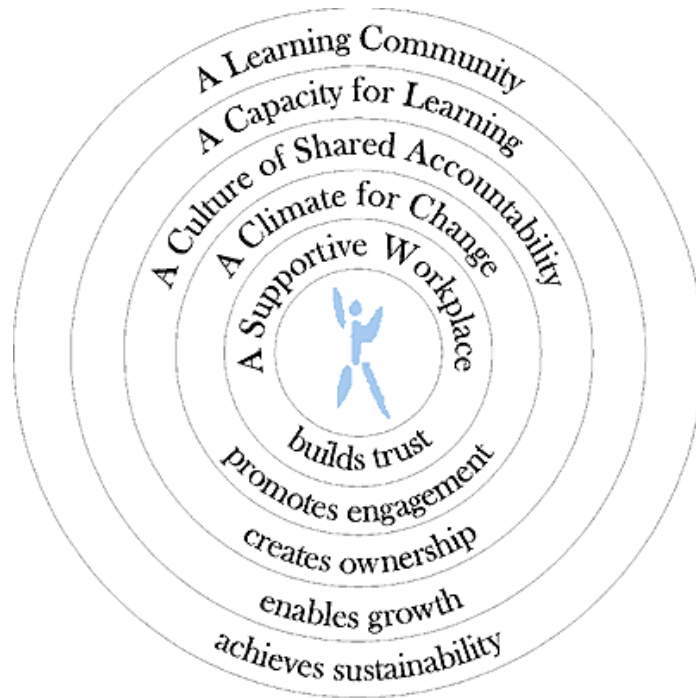
In recent years, many organizational leaders and consultants have been searching for insights into the underlying causes of this pattern. Their efforts are providing some helpful insights into why certain organizations are more successful than others in implementing change initiatives, and why some organizations struggle or fail despite being just as creative and sincere. In short, the key missing ingredient in many organizational change efforts is readiness. Simply put, some organizations are more ready than others to meet the implementation challenge. These organizations succeed despite having fewer resources, bigger obstacles, or even less well-conceived strategies and plans.

So, what factors determine readiness? At this point, there seem to be five key elements, linked together in a five-level developmental model. By that we mean that an organization, just like a person, must successfully meet the requirements of one level in order to be fully ready to face the developmental challenges of the next.

The five levels are:

1. providing supportive workplace conditions
2. creating a climate for change
3. building a culture of shared accountability
4. enhancing capacity for learning
5. nurturing learning communities

The diagram below illustrates the relationship between these five 'levels.' This model places the individual at the centre of organizational health. Beginning with the provision of a supportive workplace, each successive developmental level supports the individual's growth in commitment to the work of the organization, and their relationships with others who share their commitment to that work. At the 'highest' level, this commitment brings committed people together in communities of practice that transcend traditional organizational divisions, and create truly sustainable joint ventures.



1. Providing Supportive Workplace Conditions to Build Trust

This most basic level of organizational development involves putting into practice some fundamental changes identified through the work of people like Carleton University's Dr. Linda Duxbury. Her ongoing study of such important aspects of working life as work/family conflict have led to important insights into what makes for a supportive workplace. In a nutshell, Dr. Duxbury challenges organizations to begin treating people as people. People with lives that go beyond their job descriptions; people with competing demands on their time and attention; people who need to feel valued and supported for who they are, not just for what they produce.

2. Creating a Climate for Change to Promote Engagement

This second level extends the principle of valuing the individual further. At this level, organizations need to act in ways that make clear their commitment to equipping and supporting the change efforts of their people. In most organizations, we can identify four key areas where specific support is needed in order to encourage full participation in organizational change efforts...

Communication - how information is shared, how input is sought, and how decisions are made
 Support - equipping staff for the challenges of the future, both organizational and personal
 Structure - creating a sense of 'connectedness' - an organization where people are committed to the 'work', and also to each other
 The Future - engaging as many people as possible as co-creators, indeed, as co-owners of the organization

3. Building a Culture of Shared Accountability to Create Ownership

This third level deepens the commitment to the individual, which was the basis of the first two levels. Shared accountability aims to create what leading management consultant and author Margaret Wheatley calls the 'leaderful organization.' According to Wheatley, and a growing number of leading organizational development thinkers, the most sustainable and most productive organizations of the future will look very different from our traditional 'command and control' hierarchical 'machines.' Shared accountability both requires and nurtures the free flow of information to everyone within an organization. It also demands a major organizational investment in building and maintaining a wide variety of relationships and networks through which the organization's work is done. And, it requires a commitment to the ongoing practice of refining and affirming a shared vision to which everyone contributes.

4. Enhancing Capacity for Learning to Enable Growth

It is at this fourth level - and only once the developmental challenges of the first three levels have been met - that an organization is able to implement the principles and practices of what we call the 'learning organization.' The reason is simple - the underlying values of the learning organization are the same values that compel an organization to face the challenges of the first three levels. Conversely, failure to attend to these challenges sends a confusing message to the members of an organization. It's like saying, 'Do as we say (or claim), not as we do.' It's no wonder that so many organizational change efforts prove to be unsustainable, when people are given such obviously mixed messages. On the other hand, when an organization genuinely affirms the value of its people, supports their engagement in the change process, and equips and empowers them to exercise shared accountability, the result is tremendous energy, and a natural thirst for continuous individual and organizational learning.

5. Nurturing Learning Communities to Achieve Sustainability

But, there is a fifth level, which is also critical to the long-term sustainability of any change initiative. It involves broadening the base of support for ongoing learning and change. It means establishing 'learning communities' that cut across organizational lines, engaging a widening circle of people committed to collective learning and action. We sometimes call these 'communities of practice', and they have been extremely influential in bringing about system-wide change in many areas of human endeavour over the years. Anthropologist Margaret Mead summed up their role when she said, 'Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world, indeed, it is the only thing that ever does.'

Conclusion

A few years ago, several researchers at the Harvard School of Business completed an evaluation of a large number of organizational change initiatives, arriving at some very clear conclusions. First, they suggested that there seemed to be two fundamentally different strategies for bringing about change. One strategy they termed fear-based, and the other they termed hope-based. The first seeks to motivate employees by means of the threat of organizational failure, and its attendant dire consequences for workers. The other focuses on improving employee confidence, and encouraging engagement in the change process, by providing the kind of supports outlined above. Their findings suggest that fear-based strategies tend to produce quicker results, but rarely sustain these early gains in the long run. On the other hand, hope-based strategies take longer to show results, but have the capacity to be self-sustaining - in fact, often produce accelerating change and growth.

Once again, the central lesson is that we should be focusing on the health of our people first if we are serious about maintaining the productivity of our organizations, and of increasing our capacity to create healthy change.