

The Tough Work of Managing Change

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Easy, Hard and Tough Work

My husband, James Bulloch, is a very successful real estate salesman, broker and sales manager. He spent a lot of time working when it seemed the rest of the world was playing, especially on weekends. Eventually he decided to partner with another agent and was looking forward to time off for vacations and special holidays that he had not enjoyed previously. But soon he became disappointed and a bit puzzled. "I can't understand it," he told me. "My partner is not prospecting anymore, and most of the listings we have lately are the ones I have gotten. He works hard setting up viewings, showing properties and doing all sorts of paperwork, but he just isn't bringing in the listings like he did before we partnered. What happened to him?" After discussing the issue at length, we hit upon the answer to his question: He wasn't prospecting because it's tough work. Prospecting, whether done over the phone or by knocking on doors, exposes you to rejection. And rejection is an emotional experience that most agents try to avoid, except for the very successful ones.

Later in his career, when James became a real estate trainer, he taught those three concepts, the concepts of easy work, hard work and tough work. Most agents agreed with him and made a commitment at his seminars to do the tough work of real estate sales—the direct prospecting, such as knocking on doors and cold calling—but most of them didn't follow through. The ones who did were very successful. I believe the same holds true for executives and managers trying to implement a change program. They are willing and able to do the easy work and hard work, but many shy away from doing the tough work of change—the work that involves messy and emotional people issues.

Implementation is Tougher than Planning

The literature on change management contains a lot of advice about formulating a change idea and planning it at a high level but much less on how to implement the idea once it has been created. For example, although strategy implementation is viewed as an integral part of the strategic management process, little has been written or researched on it. Likewise, in the public sector there is a great deal of advice on how to formulate public policy, and many academic courses teach this. But try to find a course or a book on getting that policy implemented successfully, and you will find very little. Why should this be so? I believe that implementing a change is a lot tougher than planning it because you actually have to deal with people instead of just things and concepts. Concepts do not resist or argue back. But this is not accepted wisdom. Senior leaders often believe that a great change idea should be easy to implement, that anyone can do it. So it is less glamorous and attracts fewer accolades.

Top management often backs the implementation effort in words but not in actions. When that happens, implementation problems occur that have not been anticipated or expected. For example, in one study the following implementation problems occurred in over half of the firms studied during their implementation efforts¹:

1. Implementation took more time than originally allocated (occurred in 76% of the firms).
2. Major problems surfaced during implementation that had not been identified beforehand (74% of the firms).
3. Coordination of implementation activities (e.g. by task forces, committees, superiors) was not effective enough (66% of the firms).
4. Competing activities and crises distracted attention from implementing decisions (64% of the firms).
5. Capabilities of employees involved with the implementation were not sufficient (63% of the firms).

¹ Alexander, L.D. (1985). Successfully implementing strategic decisions. *Long Range Planning*, 18, 91-97.

6. Training and instruction given to lower level employees were not adequate (62% of the firms).
7. Uncontrollable factors in the external environment (e.g. competitive, economic, governmental) had an adverse impact on implementation (60% of the firms).

Change ideas, even brilliant ones, will not implement themselves. When a change has been developed in a vacuum by a few people, it should not come as a surprise that affected employees resist it during implementation. Furthermore, senior leaders should not be surprised if the change plan has major flaws in it because key employees and affected groups did not participate in its formulation. In fact, just the opposite may be true. You should be surprised if a change plan developed without key employee involvement is implemented successfully.

The Tough Work of Change Implementation

If the planners and implementers of change work together, implementation will be smoother and faster than if they do not, but it will not proceed without challenges. The easy and hard work will be accomplished better with this sort of collaboration, but tough work will remain tough. Let's look at the three types of work during the implementation of a change.

The easy work of change is largely the busy, but nonetheless important, work, such as scheduling meetings; writing and circulating memos and other materials; hiring consultants; gathering information; doing surveys; scheduling training; obtaining feedback; creating a change newsletter, hotline or website; forming change-focused teams; and so forth. Most managers have no trouble seeing the necessity of this work and also have little trouble performing it.

The hard work of change takes more effort, thought and detailed planning. Managers are usually good at performing this work, too, although they may forget some of the essential activities if they do not plan meticulously. For example, hard work includes such activities as identifying the change drivers, creating a business case for the change, deciding who should lead a change initiative, who should be on the steering committee and implementation teams, putting change activities into a project management framework, conducting periodic reviews, and doing a stakeholder analysis. It also includes designing a communications plan, planning and managing meetings or retreats, preparing briefing packages, and making modifications to organizational systems to support the change, such as to evaluation, reward and compensation systems. All of these and more are essential to sound change management.

But the tough work is often avoided. What I mean by "tough work" is dealing with people and their emotional reactions during change. Managers may avoid this work subconsciously or they may realize it is important but still neglect it. Many managers avoid dealing with emotional reactions, both their own and those of employees, because they are too stressful to handle. It takes courage and guts to confront resisters and deal with their concerns, and to expose oneself in person to criticism, hot debate and rejection. It is also tough work to manage disagreements on the change teams and among managers at all levels. It is even tougher to deal with sabotage and backstabbing, and to work with those who pretend to agree in formal meetings but who are naysayers afterwards. It's also tough dealing with unions and union leaders who may have good reasons to resist change. Even more, it is tough to have to downsize people or fire persistent resisters and those who are impeding change. And to act as a visible role model for the change takes a level of self-analysis and self-knowledge some do not have. Finally, to persist in the face of defeat is tough, and even though they may be temporary, setbacks don't seem temporary in real time. Perseverance may be the toughest work of all.

Perhaps you are now thinking that this is all self-evident and that you would have no difficulty doing the tough work of change. But most managers would have trouble dealing with a transformation as difficult as the one highlighted in the following case.

Doing the Tough Work at Canadian National Railway: Hunter Harrison²

When Hunter Harrison joined the now-privatized Canadian National Railway (CNR) in 1998 as chief operating officer, the company was generally acknowledged as one of the worst railroad companies in North America. Fast forward to 2008 and CNR was then widely recognized as the most efficient railway company in North America. How did he accomplish this cultural transformation that was nothing short of miraculous? Largely by doing the tough work.

A good change leader has to set an example to convert people, and Harrison was not afraid to put himself on the line to do this. One vivid incident occurred when he travelled to a CNR site badly affected by a flood to watch the reopening of the track. As they got ready to run the first train across a small lake that had formed on the track, an official reported that the engineer didn't want to go because he thought it was unsafe. Harrison said, "That's understandable, it's fine. He doesn't have to go." Then the conductor said he wouldn't go if the engineer didn't. Who was going to take the train across? "I said, 'John and I will take it (John was the operating vice president),' " says Harrison. "We're capable of doing that. It's just two miles across.' I was a little concerned about it. It wasn't just a slam dunk." But as the two senior executives started off, the engineer changed his mind. "He said, 'If you're going, I'm going,' and so all four of us went." Of course, this anecdote, complete with photographs, spread like wildfire around the company. Setting an example like this one is worth a thousand admonitions.

Another incident occurred when Harrison noticed that an employee was slowing down a switching operation. There were several officers and supervisors in the tower above the yard observing on a computer terminal, ignoring the issue. "They'd much rather deal with the tube than deal with people," says Harrison. "They don't want to see those behavioural issues that have to become confrontational. So I stood watching what they were going to do. They saw me watching. They knew I was becoming upset, and they were getting nervous. Finally, one of them got on the radio and started calling the person and saying, 'Pick it up a little bit or—.' Out of frustration I finally said, 'Wait a minute. You all stay here.' And I went down the steps and walked out. It was a hot summer day in Memphis and ninety-five degrees. He was a heavyset switchman/brakeman, and I said, 'What is your problem?' He said, 'I don't have any problem.' I said, 'Sure you do. Do you understand how your performance is slowing down this whole operation and impacting our customers? . . . We have to go. You have to pick it up. You are going to have to do better. If you don't do better in the afternoon than you did in the morning, you're not going to be with us anymore.' And he said, 'You know, I've been here fifteen years and nobody has ever told me that.' And I said, 'Well, sorry, but you can't say that anymore.' He picked it up, and that story was all over the railroad overnight."

Harrison did the tough work of confronting the employee when his supervisors avoided it. And these stories are just two among many showing how doing the tough work can change people's behaviour and transform a substandard organizational culture.

² Information for this short case study comes from a personal interview with E. Hunter Harrison.

About the Author



Carol Beatty is former Director of the Industrial Relations Centre at Queen's University at Kingston, Ontario, and an Associate Professor with Queen's School of Business, where she has taught in undergraduate, graduate and executive education programs.

An acknowledged expert on change management, strategy development, high performance teams and facilitation, Dr. Beatty focuses her consulting on human and organizational issues in modern organizations. She has studied the implementation of change for over 25 years, including technological change, strategic change, mergers and acquisitions, structural change, and employee buyouts.

An active researcher, she is currently completing a multi-faceted study on the key success factors of change management, comprised of a large-scale survey and several detailed case studies. She is also well-known for her major study of high-performance teams in which she isolated the three skill sets teams need to develop to be effective. Dr. Beatty's publications have appeared in such journals as the *Sloan Management Review*, *Human Relations*, the *California Management Review* and the *Business Quarterly*. She completed her MBA and PhD at the Ivey School of Business at the University of Western Ontario.

Carol is a sought-after consultant and speaker who has helped many private and public sector organizations become more effective. She is a trained facilitator in Future Search (Weisbord and Janoff) and Whole System Change (Dannemiller Tyson).

Recent publications include *Building Smart Teams: A Roadmap to High Performance Teams* (2004 with B. Barker), and *Employee Ownership: The New Source of Competitive Advantage* (2001 with H. Schachter). In addition, Dr. Beatty has authored several complex multimedia business simulations used in high-level human resources education: Panorama at the Crossroads, Change-O-Meter, and Harmon Health.

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