**How To Get Change Management on the Project Management Agenda**

Most change in organizations today occurs because of large scale project implementation. Very often this involves new technology platforms but sometimes the change is purely a business project change initiative. Unfortunately change management still has a long way to go to establish its fundamental importance to the successful implementation and benefit realisation of those changes. Simply put, most project managers think of change management as something that happens later in the project management life cycle. So let’s talk about why this happens and what as change managers we can do to put it on the agenda.

The first and most important distinction to be made is that as a change manager our role is to enable change to happen, we don’t drive the change. This is usually a huge paradigm shift in thinking for project managers and business leaders as most think that we make change happen, when what we do is advise on the most appropriate tools and techniques to employ at any given time in the change cycle to engage employees in the process of change. It is up to the leaders in the organization to drive change using our recommended strategies to achieve the desired outcomes of a particular project.

The second issue is that most project managers and business leaders think of change management as the “soft stuff” doing the communication, training and human resources requirements of the change. What they fail to understand is that the “soft stuff” is really the fundamental driver of change, a change project, whether focussed on technology or business change is of little value if employees are not engaged in the change itself and the reason for it and therefore the benefits of that change.

So here is a way you can influence the thinking of project managers and business leaders when a new project is on the horizon. Firstly think in terms of how they think, generally they are thinking phases of managing the project lifecycle, so for example the following phases; initiate; plan; build; implement; and close. So firstly think about change management in each of those phases across the “soft side” of business issues such as communication, stakeholder engagement, training, human resources issues and measurement. Then decide what activities, actions and strategies you could recommend to be included in each of these phases and identify the precise benefit to the project manager and business leader for your specific change management advice to be included in each of these phases for the project success.

Even with the focus on the project, the essential ingredient for any successful change program is management and leadership commitment to the proposed strategy. The greatest challenge therefore for change managers is to ensure that leaders do not waiver from the challenges ahead. Change is hard, whether you are at the frontline, or at the executive leadership level. But the most difficult role of all to cope with change is the CEO, because pressures come from leadership team members warning against the changes, there will be unrest amongst staff and questions regarding the strategy. And it is always safer to stay with what is known even if it is not the best outcome for the organization rather than to take a risk to try to innovate and do something new that is untested.

**So here’s what can you do to ensure that the focus stays on strategy.**
1. Establish a project management team comprised of key leaders that focus on enterprise wide change and dependencies and is chaired by the CEO or department head. This ensures that the silo mentality is broken down as managers are required to adapt to a new process, that is, thinking of their specific project and the impact across the organization, which in turns changes behaviour.
2. From a change communication perspective it is important to ensure that communication is timely and aligned with progress at each of these change meetings. More importantly it is essential to communicate how each project and strategy implementation is aligned with the enterprise wide vision and direction of the organization. This way employees and managers will understand how individual projects are linked and how the organizational strategy is dependent on them all coming together.
3. All members of the leadership team need to be aligned. They must have consistent messaging regarding the direction they are communicating and that it is linked to the organizational vision and strategy. The need to communicate this face to face and influence support, provide specific details of the positive outcomes of the strategy to those who are accountable for driving aspects of the strategy.
4. Identifying and communicating the performance requirements linked to the strategy and confirming this at regular intervals throughout the year keeps everyone focused on the strategy and tasks.
5. Ensure that all managers make the strategy reviews and updates a key part of their regular team meetings.
6. Implementation is the most difficult aspect to manage successfully of any project because this is when it becomes real – most resistance will be at this phase of the project, so it is important to have engagement strategies in place before this phase.
7. Identify those members of the leadership team most likely to be committed to achieving the outcomes and design a specific role for them to influence their peers and their management teams.
8. Where project management falls down is at the middle management level unless they have been engaged from the beginning and this means actually involved in the project and being able to influence the direction. This is where significant undermining occurs of project implementation and that is largely based in fear. Find out what the fear is and then address it and ensure that middle management are engaged from the beginning so they feel less threatened by the unknown.

Senior management provide direction for the strategy, ensure that appropriate resources both people and financial are available, are focussed and directly involved and aware of all the issues and risks of the project and most importantly provide updates and direction on an ongoing basis. The role of the change manager is to support this by ensuring that all the other issues that could derail the project are dealt with so that the senior leadership do not back track on the strategy.

Finally to maintain commitment to change all projects need to be integrated into the longer term strategy and vision of the organisation and all employees from frontline to senior leadership to understand how the project and their role contributes to the overall vision. Change is only successful when it is seamlessly integrated into the way the organisation operates, not as an appendage to the organisation. And once leaders experience the benefits of getting change management involved at the beginning of a project versus at the implementation phase, next time the challenge of getting change management on the project management agenda won’t be an issue.

**About the author:**

Marcia Xenitelis is a recognized authority on the subject of change communication and helping organizations get traction with strategy. She has consulted widely to business, spoken at conferences around the world and has developed products focused on change management. For access to case studies and more information on the types of strategies you can implement to engage employees visit [www.marciaxenitelis.com](http://www.marciaxenitelis.com) w.changemanagementtips.comore izational change they need to be involved in the process be truly engaged. This is where portanfor a wealth of free informative articles and resources.