To succeed with change, simplify and focus on behavior

By: Kim Huggins and Debbie Kramer

Carrie, a regional sales director at a large pharmaceutical company, feels overwhelmed by change — and understandably so.

In recent months, she has had to pull her team members out of the field to train them on the IT department's new contract management system. She has had to attend training for a new coaching framework the sales training department has introduced. And then there are the new compliance and regulatory changes she has had to communicate and implement, and a new product launch for which she has had to prepare — all in addition to her usual duties.

With this avalanche of change coming at her, how would Carrie possibly make her numbers?

Change from all sides

Carrie's situation is hardly unique. Corporate change has become far more complex and challenging in recent years. In fact, the very *nature* of change has changed.

Whereas once transformation essentially was a discrete event within an organization championed by a single project team, now managers and teams are pummeled from all sides by a constant stream of sometimes conflicting initiatives. Everyone in the organization is engaged with change and tasked with driving it. All too often, specific initiatives get lost in the frenzy.

As if such chaos wasn't bad enough, change methods themselves have also become more complex. Many consulting firms now present themselves as change experts, and the resulting proliferation of methodologies, tools, templates and frameworks can leave leaders scratching their heads.

How can they ensure that people at all levels are actually doing things differently, so as to obtain the desired results? How can they keep people on track with change long after the project has ended, especially when people are contending with so many competing priorities? Above all, how can they simplify change, making it more manageable?

Start with behavior

In our work with large corporate clients, we've discovered a striking pattern: Organizations that take a behavioral approach succeed more often in driving change. Rather than running themselves ragged trying — and usually failing — to change, these companies focus on just three core elements to ensure that change happens.

First, they work on **shifting behavior**. Contrary to what some experts claim, changes in mindset — how people think and feel — doesn't consistently translate into lasting behavioral shifts. It works the other way around: If you motivate people to perform the right behaviors and they begin seeing positive results, their perspectives will shift in due course. People have to *want* to change. Otherwise, they won't do it.

Second, companies that take a behavioral approach define and communicate a case for change that **enlists leaders** to get behind behavior change. Because behavior change is so scary for people, strong leadership is key.

Companies must help leaders understand and align with the change, define the few, critical behaviors that people must perform if the change is to succeed and remove key obstacles to change. Companies must also teach leaders the science behind getting behavior change and coach them on how to apply it.

Third, companies that adopt a behavioral approach work on **adjusting consequences** to support desired behaviors. Leaders must put motivational reinforcers in place (such as feedback, recognition and rewards) to ensure that people are consistently adopting and demonstrating new behaviors. Leaders don't need fancy tools or systems to reinforce behavior. Rather, they can rely on tools that already exist, like one-on-ones, email, text messaging, Skype, survey monkey and instant messaging.

If your organization is struggling with change, begin with behavior. Ask yourself: What must people do differently, and how will you know if they've altered their habits? What support will people need in order to adopt different behaviors? Are we confusing people with conflicting priorities?

Then move on to preparing your leaders, clearly articulating priorities and defining what they need to do to support behavior change. Equip them with a compelling case for change, and hold them accountable for seeing change through.

Finally, create a plan for precisely how leaders will reinforce behavior change. What will they do to recognize people for behaving in desired ways? How will they celebrate organizational progress?

Change may occur constantly in your organization, but it doesn't have to be chaotic or overwhelming. With a behavioral approach in hand, you can simplify conflicting priorities, align the organization and chart a clearer path to lasting, meaningful change.

Kim Huggins, partner at CLG, is a nationally recognized consultant, speaker and author in the area of understanding the generations. Her book, "GENerate Performance! Unleashing the Power of a Multigenerational Workforce," has been cited as an invaluable leadership tool for any business wanting to attract and retain talent. As well as owning and running a successful consulting business, Kim's background includes senior human resource positions and consulting assignments within various industries, including health care, pharmaceutical, biotechnology, financial and energy. In addition to generational workforce dynamics, Kim is well regarded for her expertise in the areas of change execution, leadership development/coaching, organizational development, employee engagement and cultures of innovation.

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