How Organizational Change Happens

(And Why It Usually Doesn't!)

FLIP BROWN, Business Culture Consultants

In the world of work, few words are as loaded as "change." Change management, leading change, sustaining change . . . it's all important, it's just not that simple! This word also lends itself to some lovely cynical humor, e.g. "Change is good but dollars are better" and one of my favorites, from a poster on Despair.com "When the winds of change blow hard enough, the most trivial of things can turn into deadly projectiles."

What are some of the ways in which businesses attempt to create authentic, substantive, and lasting change?

- **Directives** – "It shall be so"
- **Incentives** – "You'll hit your bonus if you make this change"
- **Strategic Plans** – "When everybody sees the logic, they'll get behind it"
- **Workshops** – "Some additional training should work"
- **Retreats** – "Being in a nice place with good food and flip charts will (somehow) transform us!"
- **Book-of-the-Month Club** – "Here, everybody read this and we'll on be on the same page"

However, according to various studies over the last twenty-five years, between forty-five and seventy percent of all change initiatives fail.

The number one reason why change initiatives fail? If the change requires a shift in individual and group behaviors, and this is not seen, accepted, and skillfully addressed consistently over time, the old patterns will still dominate. This is particularly true if the leaders' behaviors are not in alignment with the espoused values, goals, or expectations.

So let's break down the components of true change from my experience in working with over one hundred different business cultures:

- **Doing a gap analysis:** An ability to describe the current situation and the desired future state. Can the rough parameters of where you're at and what the next plateau looks like so that you can begin to co-create a path forward and bring everyone along?

- **Identifying pain points**: Frustration, lack of results, relational disconnects. These elements can create a sense of urgency yet make it more challenging to move forward together.

- **Clarifying shared expectations and assumptions:** The process of defining common ground. It's amazing how often we find that others do not hold the same meaning on key concepts.

- **Practicing effective decision-making and implementation methods:** Investing the time into understanding the specific ways in which leaders and teams make decisions (or don't) and what it takes to get consistent traction once a decision has been made. We've all left a meeting believing a decision was made and action would be taken, only to find out at the next one that the person responsible was Nobody.

- **Obtaining and tracking commitments:** Being definitive as opposed to aspirational. Too often our multiple "yes-es" stack on top of each other, and we lose perspective in terms of what we've promised, to whom, and by when.

- **Creating means of "no fault/no blame" evaluation:** The ability to figure out what's working and what isn't without people taking it personally or pointing fingers is a necessary component. (What do you call a group of people sitting around and deciding whose fault it is? "Blamestorming!")

- **Honoring the anxiety of going into the unknown:** There's always some "unfolding" to the change process, and different people will respond in different ways.

- **Supporting helpful behaviors and addressing ones that constrain the process:** Will it be cooperation and collaboration, or collusion and collision? Without the ability to discuss behavioral patterns the culture is at the mercy of personality, internal politics, and/or passivity.

Questions to ask:

- What are the elements of tactical, strategic, cultural, or behavioral change that are desired or required?

- Have you addressed the myth that information alone will create change? (If this were the case there wouldn't be a single tobacco smoker left!)

- If the leadership team has drafted a change strategy over a series of discussions, is there a realization that this team has had the opportunity to process the potential cognitive and emotional impacts, and that when you present this information to the rest of the company others will be "behind the curve" and need some time to comprehend and digest it?

- Are you able to have the conversations about the clarity and power of your values; your agreements on the behaviors that support or restrain those values; and how you will balance personal, mutual, and hierarchical accountability so that you reach your greatest potential?

- Can you view the inevitable disagreements and conflicts as opportunities for a richer outcome rather than obstacles?

- How skilled are your managers and supervisors in active listening, emotional intelligence, creative conflict, and group dynamics? (Hint: If they all superb, I'd be out of a job!)

- What is your time frame for how long it will take to develop, implement, and integrate the desired change? (Significant cultural changes truly take six to twenty-four months, with very few exceptions.)

- And finally, what is the amount of management courage, appropriate professional vulnerability, and demonstrated empathy in the culture? How open, connected, and compassionate can you be with each other?

When we think of significant change in our personal lives – like implementing a regular exercise program, making consistently healthy food choices, or shifting careers – we realize that we can't just give ourselves a PowerPoint presentation or go off on a one-day retreat and expect miracles.

Amazing business culture changes can and do happen with the right awareness, the right tools, and the full embrace of the process. I wish you great success and real fulfillment as you take the journey.

Business Culture Consultants helps businesses and organizations become more connected, more collaborative, and ultimately more successful. Engaged clients have strengthened their business relationships, deepened their awareness, and held true to their values.

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