

Change Management - How to Push Water Uphill

“It’s like pushing water uphill.” How many times have you heard yourself or one of your colleagues say that? Usually it refers to the introduction of a new process or system and the difficulty of getting people to actually adopt it. So you push hard and it looks as if you might be getting somewhere then suddenly it all drops back to where it started. Just like trying to push water uphill!

The problems with trying to push water uphill are numerous. Gravity, for a start, but that affects anything you might try to push up a hill. The biggest problem with water is its ability to change its shape and get out of so many of the things you might try to push it in.

Likewise your change project. It will be harder to succeed if your project has a flexible shape and isn’t contained in some way. It will be impossible to succeed if you ignore ‘gravity’, that is the forces that are pulling against all progress. To succeed there is a simple formula that can be applied to any task or project, large or small.

1. Label it
2. Give it shape
3. Make it yours
4. Contain it
5. Apply anti-gravity
6. Check out the consequences

1. Label it

Firstly, write down the end result of your change project. Write it in terms of getting what you want, rather than not getting what you don’t want. For example, write ‘At least 95% satisfied customers’ rather than ‘Complaints less than 5%’; ‘Computerised billing operational by year end’ rather than ‘No more manual billing after year end’. The situation described may logically be the same, but the language is important. The language is important because it triggers images and thoughts in our minds. However, we can only make images of what is – it’s almost impossible to make a picture in your mind’s eye of the absence of something. Try it – make an image in your mind of ‘no more complaints’. Either you get nothing - and ‘no customers at all’ is probably not what you

want – or you get an image of happy customers. So it’s easier to start with ‘more happy customers’ and probably more accurate in terms of the images that get associated with the words. Your positive statement of the outcome should be brief and easy to remember.

2. Give it shape

The next step is to write a description of what your change project really means in terms of evidence to others in the organisation. What will they be able to see that’s different? What will they hear that’s different? Is there anything they will feel that’s different? For example, ‘orders shipped every day’ rather than ‘more shipping’; ‘more space in the office’ rather than ‘fewer filing cabinets in the office’. Focus on the benefits to employees, customers or suppliers in describing the results of the change. If you can’t think of any, why are you making the changes??

3. Make it yours

It’s your project. You’re going to make it happen. Other people will be involved, but you are the one who will make sure it succeeds. If there is any area where you can’t make it happen unless someone else is involved, you have to be confident that you can have enough influence to ensure their contribution. Identify the areas of the project that are not directly under your control and where your task is to influence others to do their part. Realise that your influence is crucial to the success of the task and allocate time to it. Where you need other people to do something, you still have responsibility for making sure that they do it. That is true even if the person who has to act is the CEO.

4. Contain it

Put some boundaries around your project. In some cultures this involves producing ‘terms of reference’ for the project. If you haven’t been given or been asked to produce such terms of reference then it’s still a good idea to be clear about what’s in and what’s outside the scope of your project. Have clear time frames, accurate budgets and be realistic about what can be achieved with them!

Okay, so far so good. You're probably thinking that most of this is just 'common sense' – although common sense isn't necessarily common practice. Now we get to the bits that, in my experience, make the biggest difference:

5. Apply anti-gravity

Gravity is what drags the water back down the hill. Anti-gravity is what keeps it going. In real terms this means identifying the factors that will get in the way of your project and countering them. The reason why most organisational change is so painful is that too often people are aware of what they have to give up for the change to succeed. What they have to give up can include the security of working with a familiar system; the enjoyment of doing a seemingly insignificant task that is about to be streamlined or removed from the process; it could be telephone contact with customers or colleagues; or it might be simply having a good excuse for problems and failures. To identify the 'gravity' ask yourself the following questions:

- What will we have to give up in order for the change to succeed?
- What have we got invested in the status quo?
- What's good about what we're currently doing, that must be included in the new practice?
- What do people enjoy about the current practice?

The purpose of answering these questions is to identify the factors that will act as gravity on your project, holding it back and bringing you back to 'square one'. Once you know the things that are valued in the present you can incorporate them into the change, or compensate for them, in order to make your change project succeed. For example, in making the transition to a Help Desk service by the IT Department you may find that the users resent the loss of direct contact with IT technicians. They want to talk to their friends and get their IT support as a personal favour. By making sure that Help Desk staff get time to build relationships in all departments before the new system goes live, you can maintain that feeling for users that all they have to do is 'phone a friend'.

6. Check out the consequences

Finally, to make sure your project is really a success, consider the consequences of making the planned changes. Look at all aspects of the operation and check out the wider implications of your project. What will be the effect on staff? On customers? On suppliers? What will be the effect on other activities?

On budgets? On scheduling and planning? By fully considering the impact in all areas you can ensure that there are no conflicts of interest, no nasty surprises and no excuses for delay.

Change can be uncomfortable for many people – that's why it has to be managed. If it is managed intelligently and compassionately then change can be rewarding. After all, the reason we change our organisations is to improve them, isn't it?

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