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Five easy ways to wreck change

"If you're going to shoot yourself in the foot, cross your legs so you can get both of them at the same time."

- Shadybrook Immutable Truths

I'VE HAD THE PLEASURE lately of working with two large, continuing change projects that appear substantive and far-reaching. You might have noticed the weasel word "appear". With human beings and global economics as they are today, it's impossible to tell how things will end. I've been around the auto, steel, airline, and paper industries, among others, since the 1970s, so I'm loath to predict successful change. Nevertheless, these two change initiatives, both involving the substantial support of unions, are charged with possibilities. I'm sure I'm not the only one involved holding his breath.

So, I've been thinking about the successes and failures that I've known or contributed to, and the failures tend to haunt me. We've watched (and helped) too many organizations invest hope in the prospect of worthwhile change, only to see their efforts wasted on puny results. I've unearthed from the ruins five easy ways to wreck change where you work. Or, you could try the related suggestions—learned the hard way—to avoid them.

Skip the "vision thing". Develop no clear picture of a desirable future; that way, no one will want to go there. If change leaders can't create a compelling picture of success, then those they hope to lead will stay put. The foundation for real change is an irresistible picture of an alternative to the mess you're in. Those involved, starting with leaders, must agree early on what successful change looks like. It's easy to mistake the edge of the rut for the horizon, so force yourself to look beyond next week or next year. Instead, ask what it might look like in ten years if the best hopes succeed.

Launch something spiffy. Several years ago at a foundry, management unilaterally started a "World Class Teamwork" program. They sought help because it hadn't caught on. I saw the first indicator of a problem while talking with employees, seven out of 12 of which wore T-shirts that read: "World Class My ---!" When starting a change initiative, launch it from the top and give it a name, preferably with a snappy acronym. It will quickly become a "program". As soon as you have a program called, say, "Leading Edge High Performance Work Culture Change Process," people can say "Oh, here's this

month's new program," file it away next to last month's, and get on with work.

Instead, take your cue from ample evidence of successes: change happens best from the middle out. Engage people in identifying critical business problems, and build change around getting the job done. Mobilize people around exasperating problems that tie them in knots. And don't call it anything, except perhaps, "working-together-to-make-things-great-for-our-customers-and-ourselves."

Short-change support. Make change in the work place an "extra" activity, done on the cheap. Budget neither adequate time nor money for it, and change will grind to a halt. A common complaint is that those involved are expected to change tires on the car while it's careening down the highway. Worthwhile change is undeniably demanding, but it needn't be fatal. Support it with: time for leaders (at all levels) to think; upfront planning; time, training and money for ad hoc teams chartered to solve problems; dedicated resources to provide training and support for teams; disciplined attention by managers and union officials guiding the effort; and opportunities to learn from others beyond your building.

Keep the players apart. Make it hard for those involved in change to communicate, and you'll keep anything worthwhile from happening. Years ago, Herb Shepard wrote, "Innovation requires a good idea, initiative, and a few friends." Supporting change is draining and often lonely. Those who embark on that journey—no matter where they stand in the hierarchy—need the support of "a few friends". Find ways to develop support networks for those who champion change. A periodic lunch (or pitcher of beer) is a start. We're all muddling through change, and it helps to compare muddles often.

Ignore behavior. Use earnest phrases like "walking the talk" and let it go at that. Ignore the need to pin down behavior and you'll get what you always got. Changes in structure and responsibilities require new behavior, as do collaboration and teamwork. Without agreeing on specific supporting behaviors and how to monitor them, substantive change will evaporate. It's hard work to define what we will and won't do differently. It's harder still to hold ourselves and each other accountable for that behavior. G.K. Chesterton's words fit here: "...the ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried." P&P