

CONSIDERING THE STALLED CHANGE INITIATIVE

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The change management team has completed all its deliverables but the project has now been delayed several more months. You're seeing a shift to "let's just get it done" and do damage control. You've met with your executive sponsor to determine how much damage you are willing to accept. Your line project managers (PM) don't have a lot of faith in change management because they recognize (at last) that they've put the wrong people in those roles. So what do you do to keep the momentum going and reengage both the project and change managers (CM) as partners?

Unfortunately, the situation described is all too common and can take the heart out of, as well as kill, any change initiative. One of the nettlesome contributing factors in the environment described is that there are often numerous points of 'no' vocally suggesting that the project either slow down, be delayed or canceled with no one individual capable, or willing, to make the contrary decision to move forward. As a result, and before considering any activities, actions or interventions, it would be instructive to ask a few questions to more clearly understand the relationship between change management leadership and the three controlling constituencies involved, i.e., senior management (executive sponsor), line project managers and change managers and to determine if a strategy for initiative resistance was in place.

- What are the lines of authority? Specifically:
 - Does the executive sponsor have project decision-making authority?
 - To whom do the CMs report?
- How are initiative decisions currently being made and by whom?
- What is the role and authority of the change management leader?
- Who can make decisions related to the change process and intervention utilization?
- Are the change leader and CMs only collateral support with no responsibility for decision-making or are they equal members of an integrated decision matrix?
- Was a change resistance strategy, matrix and action plan created prior to launching the change initiative? If so, was this delay foreseen? If not, why not?
- What, specifically, are the reasons given for the delay and by whom?

As a practical matter politics are often the speed bumps in the change initiative road so the executive sponsor is critical in the decisions to either progress the initiative or allow it to stall; if either the executive sponsor or senior management are indifferent, there is little hope for a successful implementation. In order for the change management leader, in concert with the executive sponsor, to make decisions that inform the choice of activities to advance the initiative, asking the following questions is helpful.

- Is the delay legitimate or a political tactic designed to stall or kill the project or cause it to lose credibility?
 - If this is the case, what (or who) is needed to get the project back on track?
- What is the cost/impact of the delay in terms of infrastructure, productivity, credibility (both for the project and those individually involved) and workforce morale?
 - How much of the work to date will be jeopardized or lost due to the delay?
 - What is the cost of any rework needed as a result of the delay?
- Where does the CEO stand on the project and the fact that it is stalled?

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- The decision to make the change revolutionary (“let’s get it done and do damage control”) vs. evolutionary (accept the delay and wait it out) is driven by two factors, the organizational culture (change averse/dysfunctional or not) and/or the CEO (change averse/dysfunctional or not) who can, by fiat, override a resistant culture.
 - What is the tolerance of the organization for a “just get it done” change process?
 - What are the benefits, if any, of such a change?
 - What is the downside, if any, of such a change?
 - Will the project gain or lose credibility/support with such a process?
 - Is this method more or less apt to be successful?
- How much responsibility is currently accepted for the project’s delay by senior management, the executive sponsor, project managers (especially for their choice of inappropriate change managers) and change managers?
- Who is responsible for the project’s success or failure?
- What were the expectations of the PMs and CMs at the outset?
 - How clear were those expectations?
 - Were clear metrics in place? If so, were the metrics monitored and reported?
 - Do the expectations for the PM and CM roles need to be changed? If so, how?
- Are the PM and CM shortcomings related to skill sets, attitudes, behaviors or the result of barriers created by others or a combination thereof?

With these answers in hand (or not), the following tactical suggestions are next step considerations to keep the project alive and add value to the organization. If change management leadership does not have the authority to undertake such activities, the executive sponsor needs to be enlisted to hold the initiative naysayers at bay and provide activity/invention approvals.

- Calculate the impact of the delay in terms of dollars, people, credibility and likelihood that the delay will be fatal to the project. Present the data to decision-maker(s) initially without recommendations to encourage discussion of the data but have recommendations in hand. After discussion offer recommendations for what is needed to get the project moving forward.
- If unable to move the larger project forward consider obtaining approval to disassemble the initiative into its constituent smaller parts for voluntary individual departmental/team/individual implementation with or without change management support.
- If certain the project will not move forward (determined by a clear, unambiguous, decision made by the appropriate authority), facilitate meetings with all impacted parties to explain the delay, revised timeline (if any), the interim plan (if any) and options available to the participants, e.g., individuals may voluntarily make changes aligned with the initiative with or without change management team support. If possible, include the executive sponsor.
- To reengage the PMs and CMs, schedule a series of one-on-one discussions to:
 - Obtain their individual perceptions on the change initiative in general and, specifically, the delay.
 - Garner input on the impact of the delay on each personally as well as on their areas of responsibility.
 - Solicit their recommendations for reanimating the project.
 - Assess their need/desire for change management support.

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- While protecting the confidentiality of the participants, use the aggregate data to proactively address the issues presented and design appropriate coaching and interventions. Again, protecting confidentiality, use the aggregate data to inform senior management updates.
- In the change management leader's experience, and/or in collaboration with the executive sponsor, rank order the PMs and CMs from worst to best fit for the project. Starting with the worst fit, and with senior management support, immediately reassign one PM and/or CM clearly articulating the reason(s) for the reassignment. Going forward clarify the expected desired behaviors and project support needed from the remaining or new PMs/CMs while providing appropriate training/coaching/mentoring.
 - With Boeing's C-17 program, well known for their change management successes (2 Baldrige awards after serious threats of program cancellation) their motto was:
"Change Management or change management" and they did.
 - My posts "*The Role of the Internal Change Team*" and "*Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Being a Change Agent You Can Learn On the Back of a Horse*" provide insight into both team member selection and role.
- If not previously completed, the following activities provide value even if the change initiative is delayed or canceled.
 - Implement systems/process mapping as indicated by the project including cycle times as needed.
 - Design and implement staff training based on new, project-specific, skill sets.
 - Complete a change resistance matrix and implementation plan
 - Collaboratively redesign/rewrite job descriptions, performance standards and appraisal/feedback systems/processes to reflect new standards, metrics and behaviors that align with the proposed change.

There are valid reasons that can sidetrack, delay or even cancel a change initiative, e.g. budget, strategy change, et al. However for every valid rationale there are multiple pretexts to delay or cancel an initiative that can be attributed to a lack of planning, politics, change resistance, dysfunctional culture and/or executive indifference. As stated earlier, a delayed initiative is both disheartening and distracting for all involved but particularly so for the change management leadership and change team. While the change team leadership may not have the authority to press on with full implementation they can, with judicious decision-making and a modicum of senior management support, insure that the change initiative remains alive and sufficiently robust to provide incremental value until such time that the full initiative is revived and back online; with answers to the questions above that might be more sooner than later.