



DEGREE OF DIFFICULTY SERIES

1. Just How Difficult Is Your Change Initiative?

Credibility gaps often exist between us as change practitioners and our sponsors. Many factors contribute to these gaps, and I'll explore several in a future post. Here, I'd like to focus on a common one: Many sponsors see us as indiscriminate when suggesting they allocate significant amounts of time and attention to implementing change initiatives. They believe we think ALL initiatives are critical and in need of our skills.

Let's not argue about whether this indictment is justified, or whether you personally would ever create such an impression. My point is, too many sponsors hold this view about too many of us change practitioners and as a result, they see us as tactical players (have hammer, looking for nail) rather than as trusted advisors capable of determining when implementation assistance is genuinely called for.

I have some thoughts and ideas on the subject I'll express here in the hope that they prompt you to share some of your considerations and perspectives as well.

We enhance our credibility with sponsors when we are cautious about recommending expenditures of time, effort, money, etc. on implementation assistance for new initiatives. But how can we know where to draw the line?

Determining When Change Initiatives Require Special Attention

An all-too-common frustration heard from practitioners: "This change initiative is in crisis, but I can't get anyone to listen to me."

It helps to get the sponsor's attention if we can define exactly what we mean by a project being "in crisis." What I try to do is keep it simple—to me, initiatives that are really important and are in danger of not being successfully executed are *in crisis*. As such, they require significantly more consideration and resources than projects of less consequence, or those that will succeed without much difficulty.

Typically, the more an initiative's makeup reflects being "in crisis," the greater the likelihood of failure, the lower the quality of results, and the longer it will take to reach intended outcomes. To

compensate for these risks, sponsors who succeed with change typically allot more attention/resources (mindshare, knowledge, skill, money, people, etc.) to these endeavors.

The most reliable way of determining whether a change initiative is in crisis is to measure its “Degree of Difficulty.” To explain, let’s start by considering three implementation realities:

- Transformational change is more difficult to execute than incremental shifts.
- Actually achieving the intended purpose is more difficult than installing new skills, technology, processes, or procedures.
- Business imperatives are more difficult to fulfill than “good ideas.”

These realities lead to three corresponding questions:

- How much change does the initiative represent?
- What results do you have to deliver to keep your promises?
- How crucial is the success of this initiative relative to all the other major initiatives in place or planned?

We’ll explore these three questions in depth in the next post.

Key Terms:

Sponsor: Individual or group having the power to sanction a change

Agent: Individual or group facilitating and/or execution of implementation plans

Target: Individual or group who must actually change

Advocate: Individual or group who wants change, but does not have sufficient power to sanction it



2. Exploring a Project’s “Degree of Difficulty”

Three key factors—How much change? What’s the desired result? How crucial is it to succeed?—help determine a change initiative’s Degree of Difficulty. Let’s look at these in detail.

Determining How Much Change Is Expected

Projects of a *continuous improvement* nature (dealing with incremental change) have an important place within organizations. Without Six Sigma and other such methodologies to keep a constant vigilance on quality enhancement opportunities, organizations would never harvest the full potential from their processes and procedures.

Transformational change, on the other hand, dramatically alters the course of current actions. These projects aren’t designed to refine what is already in place. (Note: The introduction of continuous improvement techniques to an organization may be a transformational change in itself, but once the new mechanics and thought processes are fully embedded, its use is to foster continuous, not transformational, change.)

Incremental change characteristics:

- A focus on methods, systems, and behaviors

- A clear and single direction
- Improving the familiar
- Relatively stable execution
- Few changes and/or affecting a small span of the people
- Minor disruption to people's expectations
- The path forward is linear (logical extension of and improvement upon what is still generally working)
- Minimized mistakes
- A minimal impact on political terrain
- People are not expected to examine who they are, what they value, or undertake any personal development beyond the tactical request of the incremental change
- A small number of people are unwilling and/or unable to do what is asked of them

In contrast, here is a list of *transformational* change characteristics:

- A focus that also includes behaviors but extends to beliefs and underlying assumptions as well
- No single right answer...part of the challenge is to determine from the many possibilities which one (or which combination) is the best fit for the task at hand
- Exploring and pursuing unusual and creative alternatives
- Executing the change even though it causes ongoing disequilibrium for everyone involved
- Many changes and/or affecting all or most of the people
- Major disruption to people's expectations (perceived either positively or negatively)
- The path forward has many interdependent components (requires a high tolerance for ambiguity and paradox)
- People rely on learning from mistakes
- People can only succeed by examining who they are, what they value, and how they can develop knowledge and skill they didn't previously possess
- Significant impact on the political terrain (new players, power shifts, etc.)
- A sizeable number of people are unwilling and/or unable to complete the journey

Transformational projects are inherently more difficult to orchestrate than those with incremental improvement objectives.

How to Determine an Initiative's Desired Results

Unless a project ends in an outright meltdown, there are two basic outcomes from a change:

- **Installation**—putting something new in place
- **Realization**—achieving the true purpose of the endeavor

Organizations generally do a relatively good job of figuring out how to solve their problems or exploit their opportunities. Unfortunately, the majority don't implement these solutions very well. They plan the proper courses of action for the circumstances, but actually fulfilling their ambitions is often beyond their reach.

The problem is, these organizations unwittingly apply their resources toward installing new solutions rather than *realizing* the anticipated benefits.

Installation occurs when an important change (merger, reorganization, updated processes, etc.) is introduced to the organization. The sequence of events may include announcing the endeavor, restructuring and reassigning responsibilities, providing new equipment or software, training, or a host of other related activities.

Realization is achieved when the organization goes beyond just deploying the change and reaps the full business benefits that were anticipated when the resources were allocated to pursue the initiative (for example, a 10% increase in productivity, or a 15% decrease in customer complaints).

The problem is seldom that the change just doesn't happen; the more common situation is that it is only partially implemented or never really used as intended. This can happen for a number of reasons—failure to understand the true intent and scope of the effort, mixed signals from management about its importance, resistance from those being affected, competition for time and attention from too many other changes, and so on. Regardless of why, though, organizations that do no more than install major change almost never create the support and acceptance needed to produce the hoped for results.

Realization of the full intent of critical change is the only way to truly accomplish dramatic leaps in ROI.

Determining How Crucial an Initiative Really Is

Good ideas can be very seductive.

Organizations seldom pursue major business solution initiatives that are not in some way intellectually sound and supported by a strong business case. Sponsors who get infatuated with too many good ideas, however, start off "all psyched up" but then don't do what's necessary to ensure the project's success. These good ideas look reasonable on the surface, but each one requires a certain amount of attention and resources to accomplish. At some point, assets are exhausted and those good ideas fall by the wayside.

The commitment to business imperative initiatives is very different. There may be a "sound reason" for following through on a good idea, but a *business imperative* means the price for not resolving the problem or not taking advantage of the opportunities at hand is prohibitively high. This is when you'll hear executives say, "This project *will not fail* on my watch" and mean it.

The resolve needed to face whatever challenges are involved and pay whatever price is incurred in a business imperative change is much greater than that needed for "good ideas." This amount of dedication, however, also brings greater degrees of difficulty. Sponsor commitment at this level is always more intricate, complex, and demanding.

Steadfast resolution can sustain people during the inherent hardships that will be encountered. But it is also important to understand that this kind of commitment increases the demand on energy and resources. If they are to reach the promised results, leaders responsible for important change initiatives in crisis should respond with a heightened sense of involvement and a strong resolve to apply extraordinary effort and resources. Let's face it, it is easier to be half-hearted about something than to put your full self into it.

Let's loop back to the issue of our credibility with sponsors. As practitioners, we must be seen as in service to, and closely aligned with, sponsors. If not, our ability to influence a project's outcome is severely hampered, if not eliminated altogether. This means we must be judicious when recommending that sponsors employ serious implementation facilitation.

At Conner Partners, we take a neutral position about whether special implementation efforts are applied to a particular project until after the sponsor and other key players conduct a Degree of

Difficulty assessment and discuss the results.



3. Assessing Your Project's Degree of Difficulty

One of the ways agents can bolster their credibility with sponsors is by not coming across as eager to apply implementation assistance to every initiative that surfaces. This can be accomplished by encouraging sponsors to engage in a Degree of Difficulty assessment and discussion that we as agents help facilitate.

A change is difficult when it falls somewhere between easy and impossible. The “difficulty criteria” is clear (How much change is involved, the desired result, and how crucial it is to succeed). However, determining if a particular project is “in crisis” is not a cut-and-dried calculation.

At the low end of the Degree of Difficulty scale are change efforts that are incremental in nature, have installation as an acceptable outcome, and are viewed as good ideas. At the high end are initiatives that are transformational in their intent, realization based, and considered business imperatives.

Most change projects fall somewhere between the two extremes. Some might be of the highest importance (business imperative) and nothing less than full realization will suffice, yet the shifts themselves fall within the limits of continuous improvement, not paradigm leaps. Other efforts might be highly transformational but not necessarily constitute an absolute necessity to accomplish.

Organizations display different levels of tolerance for facing difficulty. For example, if each of the criteria were to be measured on a 20-point scale, one organization might feel comfortable with no extra implementation attention given to a project that scores 18 on the transformational factor, while another would invest special resources to any initiative scoring 12 or above.

These three factors cannot be addressed independently. They require examination from a holistic, integrated perspective. For some organizations, anything that comes closer to realization focused and business imperative alerts leaders to be particularly careful with implementation. Another organization, however, may take the position that both must score high before any extra effort is put into implementation.

Assessment tools are definitely helpful in objectifying the analysis, but ultimately, this is not a subject that lends itself to diagnostic interpretations alone. In addition, it's valuable to collect various impressions from key people who understand a project's implications, and then use this information as the basis for a healthy discussion before the decision maker determines the path forward.



4. The Change Practitioner's Role in Encouraging the RightKind of Due Diligence

I hope this blog provides all its readers with a vehicle for sharing not only ideas but tools and techniques as well. At Conner Partners, we use an assessment tool to help us evaluate the overall challenge an organization is likely to encounter when implementing a particular initiative. It focuses on the three dimensions I have been writing about:

- Incremental vs. transformational change (To what extent will the change significantly disrupt the expectations of those involved?)
- Installation vs. realization focused (To what extent are implementation activities focused toward installation [putting the key building blocks of the solution in place] vs. realization [ensuring that the intended business outcomes are achieved]?)
- Good idea vs. business imperative (How high is the cost to the organization and its leaders if the initiative fails to achieve its objectives?)

You can download the free assessment and instructions for interpreting your answers by [clicking here](#).



5. Getting Help for a Project in Crisis

The more an initiative's makeup reflects being "in crisis," the greater the likelihood of failure, the lower the quality of results and the longer it takes to reach intended outcomes. To compensate for these risks, sponsors who succeed with change typically ensure that more attention/resources (mindshare, knowledge, skill, money, people, courage, and discipline) are allotted to these endeavors.

Fortunately, there is a clear pattern for leaders who consistently achieve their change goals. They insist on Degree-of-Difficulty-type ratings (obviously, it is not necessary to use the Conner Partners tool to accomplish this) and the appropriate discussions for all initiatives requiring their approval. With this information, they can either: 1) allocate the proper attention/resources needed to succeed, 2) make a decision to reduce the overall rating to a range requiring less attention/resources (by lowering the burden of one or more of the three criteria), or 3) decide not to move the initiative forward.

Leaders who tend to fail at their initiatives also display a distinct pattern. They either: 1) do not include Degree of Difficulty ratings and discussions as part of their due diligence for approving projects, 2) sanction initiatives naively thinking that there is an unlimited amount of mindshare/resources that can be applied to change, or 3) sanction initiatives despite knowing that projects require more attention/resources than will be allocated.

It is clearly possible to increase the likelihood change projects reach full realization. It starts with making informed decisions about whether an endeavor is in crisis—hopefully early enough to allocate the attention and resources needed to prevent or minimize as many risks to intended results as possible. Our role as internal and external practitioners is to encourage this kind of due diligence before suggesting to sponsors that our implementation expertise be deployed. I believe taking this position will increase our credibility and trust with sponsors.

INVITATION TO DIALOGUE: I have offered some of my perspectives on this issue and an assessment tool we use at Conner Partners to help address the problem. What are your thoughts on how our credibility as change practitioners is affected when we appear to be too willing to apply our implementation assistance skills? What impact do you think this has on our relationships with sponsors? What approaches or tools do you use?