WHEN CHANGE LEADERS ARE THE PROBLEM

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One of our clients posed a question that may be familiar to others who have embarked on a change initiative.

You're leading a team of change leaders for a large employee resource planning (ERP) implementation. These individuals don't report to you, they report to the business units participating in the change. Most of them are communications people who have been "repurposed" for the project and do not know how to prepare people for change. They consistently fail to contribute, but are well positioned, and poised, to ambush concepts and ideas they didn't create. They'll plan with you for months and then the day before something is due they announce their resistance, leaving you to report to your executive team another failed deadline. Replacing them with true change agents is not an option...what do you do?

It's not uncommon to see say-one-thing-do-another behavior in an organization, nor is the active resistance to change. Unfortunately, in this case both have come together to present a particularly thorny challenge. As the circumstances suggest, the launch is well underway when the Change Leader's (CL's) dysfunctional behavior manifests itself. And with that behavior, it is apparent that the CL's alliances and goals are aligned with others elsewhere in the organization. With the behavior described, they are not just resisting the change but attempting to stop it cold; the question is why and what can be done to rectify the situation.

We are not privy to events that led to the adoption and launch of the initiative but, based on the description given, we can assume that no change readiness assessment was administered; if it had been much of the described resistance, and its underlying causes, could have been identified and addressed in advance of launch. Because no assessment was used, let this be a cautionary tale of what can happen when significant change is attempted without using a linked change management framework and methodologies.

Failure by the Change Manager (CM) to address the issue can be the mark of an inexperienced or uncertain manager or, if they are experienced, they are a person who may be being set-up to fail by the organization's culture/leadership. As a result, the CM must take swift and decisive action to insure the success of the initiative as well as to protect their ability to manage and, by extension, their professional reputation.

With this in mind, there are six possible reasons, or combinations thereof, for the CL's extreme passive-aggressive behavior:

1. Lack of communication. The CM seems not to be in frequent/close contact with executive team or CLs suggested by being blindsided by the CLs "ambushing" after "months" of planning with the subsequent need for the CM to report lack of progress.

2. Lack of metrics. The fact that the CM was "blindsided" and no work had been accomplished to progress the initiative suggests that no progressive deliverables had been established.

3. A profound misunderstanding (intentional or otherwise) by the CLs of their role and the behavior required by that role, both of which may be the result of a lack of communication and training.

4. An orchestrated attempt by some (and/or a highly placed one) in the organization to cause the initiative to fail. We would go so far as to say that as widespread as the CL's toxic behavior is, it is also likely embedded in the organization's culture. Such behavior cannot exist without the tacit sanction of a member(s) of senior management or, in the extreme, their active promotion/orchestration of that behavior.

5. Lack of appropriate structure, lines of authority and reporting accountability. It is likely the CL's 'day job' responsibilities remain unchanged and their CL duties are added work that will impact that 'day job'. Further, it is likely they have been drafted into the CL role

with no/little briefing, no training, few questions answered and no ability to refuse the role. If this is the case, unless this condition is addressed, their 'day job' managers (and/or their senior manager(s)) will continue to wield authority over, and influence on, the CLs priorities and behavior.

6. A misunderstanding by the CM of their role and/or their lack of the skill sets/experience needed to effectively manage the CL group. It is possible that the CL's behavior is a direct result of an off-putting CM management style, lack of change management knowledge and/or their inability to obtain, or maintain, the requisite management support and approvals in advance of launch as reflected in the CM's apparent lack of authority to deal with the problem.

For the initiative, and the CM, to succeed under these circumstances it is paramount that the CM enlist the highly visible support of the initiative's executive sponsor(s) to establish/reinforce the scope of their authority. Further, assessments must be made to determine root causes followed by interventions that are designed/implemented to address the resistance and politics if they are in play. Indeed, it will be virtually impossible to change the CL's dysfunctional behaviors until any senior management misalignment has been addressed to remove the cover being provided for that behavior. To that end, the steps outlined below have the goals of identifying the source(s) of resistance, aligning the management group and implementing a plan that will realign the CL behaviors.

Step 1: The CM should, as quickly as possible, hold 1:1 meetings with each CL in an effort to ascertain the root cause of their behavior. Confidentiality is critical to insure candor. There are three likely catalysts for their behavior. The CLs…

1. Don't like their dual role and are acting unilaterally. The organizational culture is low/no trust with such behavior tolerated throughout the organization.

2. Or those they are close to, are being perceptively or actually negatively impacted by the change initiative and they are in the resistance phase of the change cycle.

3. Are acting out of loyalty to, and/or at the direction/influence of, their 'day job' manager's agenda (or a senior manager).

Step 2: With the CL interview feedback in hand, the CM should immediately meet with the executive sponsor(s) to discuss the issues and request their input and perspective regarding any management resistance. As the executive sponsors' approval of the next steps is critical, the CM should be prepared to provide a high level briefing of the planned next steps to address the issue(s) and a risk assessment of failing to effectively do so.

Step 3: If necessary, the executive sponsor(s) meets with the CEO/MD to address any senior management resistance. The result of this action is incorporated into the CM's plan.

Step 4: Based on CL feedback and executive sponsor(s) decisions, the CM drafts a change resistance strategy and implementation plan for executive sponsor(s) review and approval for implementation. Three critical elements need to be included:

1. While the conditions described indicate that CL replacement is not an option, that option should be included with the appropriate rationale based on the impact of the CLs' demonstrated negative behaviors on others and the initiative.

2. During their time in the role the CLs' discipline and performance appraisal must be the responsibility of the CM, not their 'day-job' manager. All project related CM appraisals/ feedback are first reviewed with the individual CL and then published in a weekly report to the executive sponsor(s) as part of scheduled initiative updates.

3. A plan risk assessment with options, especially on how the CM intends to manage the CLs if their replacement is not an option.

Step 5: The CM, in collaboration with the executive sponsor(s) and aligned with the approved resistance strategy, establishes/confirms clear lines of the CM's authority, the scope of their decision making authority, and clarity regarding reporting relationships.

Step 6: The executive sponsor(s), with the CM in attendance, meets with the CL's day-job managers to inform them of the CM's authority and decision making parameters as well as changes in the reporting relationships. Included is, if deemed necessary, an overview of recent events and the consequences for not supporting the initiative going forward.

Step 7: The CM meets with the CLs to unambiguously define their role, responsibilities, reporting relationships, deliverables, implementation deadlines and behavioral expectations moving forward. Each CL will acknowledge these items by signing a personalized change initiative performance contract.

Time permitting (and it does not in this case), the CM could undertake a change team chartering intervention. This intervention would facilitate the CL team's co-creation of a their mission and vision specific to the change initiative brief as well as asking them to identify, and agree upon, the ethical principles, and associated behaviors, for which they will be held accountable. As time does not permit these are determined by the CM.

Step 8: To insure effective communication a schedule of update meetings and reports is promulgated. Short daily status meetings with each CL with deliverable and deadline reviews are held. A weekly written report to the executive sponsor(s) summarizing the week's activities and progress against established KPIs/deadlines and potential challenges at hand or that may be encountered in the coming weeks.

In summary, CL and resistance issues should not have blindsided the CM. Unless the CM is a new hire or outside contractor, the behavior should have been no surprise as it is likely reflective of the organization's culture. Further, if the CM had performed a change readiness assessment it would have identified any sources of resistance and misalignment and, because there was a lack of an effective communication and reporting structure, there was no 'heads up' that something was awry. And, finally, the lack of authority (real or perceived) in the CM role, along with the inappropriate reporting relationships, are significant structural shortcomings and should have been clarified/resolved by the CM prior to undertaking the leadership role.

As has been said by many change is, under the best of circumstances, difficult and fraught with challenges both large and small. It is made exponentially more difficult when managers, through ignorance or malicious intent, give cover to initiative related dysfunctional behavior that is attempting to sabotage the initiative. Once such behavior is identified the CM must take immediate and compelling action to address the issue, half measures will only serve to make matters worse. It is for this reason that Tectonics insures that our clients understand the pitfalls and risks of implementing change as well as the value of using a valid change model and methodologies. If such a model and methods had been utilized in this case the organization, and CM, would have been spared considerable angst while experiencing fewer challenges, faster adoption and greater initiative success.