

Five Critical Principles to Guide Organizational Change

By Wendy Heckelman

In order to respond to the fast pace of social, political, economic, and technological forces, organizations must be nimble at effectively responding to challenges and taking advantage of opportunities. Most organizations and their leaders struggle with developing and implementing all types of large-scale change (*Figure 1*). The vast majority of change initiatives are unsuccessful, with up to 93% of them unable to meet the goals of their change efforts (Decker, 2012). This can be costly to the organization in several ways, including, but not limited to lost competitive advantage, missed opportunity revenue, wasted dollars on the change effort, loss of employee engagement, productivity, and possible attrition.

Why do so many organizations flounder when there is a wealth of literature, theory, and best practices available on how to plan and execute large-scale change? This article will review the most recognized and commonly referenced change models from William Bridges (2003), Edgar Schein (2004), and John Kotter (2002). *Table 1* outlines the most commonly identified reasons why organizations do not meet their change goals. What emerges from this review are two major gaps in the guidance on large-scale change. First, leaders at all levels of the organization need more direction on how to successfully execute change. Second, mid-level or team managers need help managing their team members through transitions. Five principles



Figure 1. Types of Large Scale Change.

This figure illustrates the 4 change processes that need to be addressed to assure change management success (Bridges, 2003)

Table 1. *Analysis and Contributions on Change Management.*

This table summarizes the top-level change management steps from three thought leaders (Bridges, 2003; Schein, 2004; & Kotter, 2002).

	William Bridges	Edgar Schein	John Kotter
Level of analysis	Individual	Individual	Organizational
Steps or stages	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Ending, losing, and letting go</i>—individuals experience the “loss” of the old way of doing things. 2. <i>Neutral zone.</i> 3. <i>New beginning</i>—individuals have accepted and are working to implement the change. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Unfreezing/ disconfirmation</i>—individuals require sufficient anxiety or disequilibrium to push them towards a change. 2. <i>Cognitive restructuring</i>—individuals restructure or change their thinking. 3. <i>Refreezing</i>—individuals feel “safe” enough to problem solve and learn new methods, for example, based on a compelling positive vision. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Establish a Sense of Urgency</i>—organizations need to convince at least 75% of their managers that the status quo was more dangerous than the unknown. 2. <i>Create the Guiding Coalition</i>—this group has sufficient power to shepherd changes and becomes part of a volunteer network, including all levels of the traditional hierarchy who drive change. 3. <i>Develop a Change Vision</i>—a simple and compelling vision is needed to inspire individuals. 4. <i>Communicate the Vision for Buy-In</i>—includes leaders that act consistently with the vision to demonstrate commitment. 5. <i>Empower Broad-Based Action</i>—removes obstacles to change. 6. <i>Generate Short-Term Wins</i>—shares evidence of successes to motivate. 7. <i>Never Let Up</i>—maintains momentum and urgency. 8. <i>Incorporate Change into the Culture</i>—embeds changes into culture and practice.
Unique Contributions/ Contrasts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals go through a change process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals need to be driven to change. • A compelling vision is needed to drive change. 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides guidance for dealing with continuous and simultaneous change. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater focus on organizational behavior and change execution. • Steps should be considered as “continuous” rather than “sequential” for ongoing change.

are offered for overcoming change difficulties and to boost an organization’s likelihood of realizing its change goals. These principles and practices are based on insights from over twenty-five years of client engagements.

What Guidance on Large-Scale Change Exists?

This review provides a strong understanding of the relevant guidance on organizational change.

Table 1 shows the three leading researcher’s level of analysis, change management steps or stages, and unique contributions to the prevailing research. Bridges and Schein focus on individual behavior, thus the focus to include specific actions to address employee transition and resistance.

Table 2. *Categorized Reported Reasons for Organizational Change Failure.*
 This table summarizes into five main categories why change efforts have failed.

Category	Reported Reason for Change Failure and Source
1. Not creating a simple, compelling organizational vision for change.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lacking a vision (Kotter, 1995). • Not overtly and directly tying the purpose of the change effort to the organization's business strategy (Ackerman-Anderson, 2002).
2. Not changing individual beliefs, i.e. not ensuring that individuals have bought into the reasons for the change effort or ignoring the organizational culture.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not establishing a great enough sense of urgency (Kotter, 1995). • The organization was not prepared, and the internal culture "pushed back" against the change (Palmer, 2012). • Initiated technological or organizational initiatives only and neglected the cultural mindset and behavioral requirements (Ackerman-Anderson, 2002). • Employee resistance (Meinert, 2012).
3. Poor planning and/or execution of the change effort.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Failure to systematically plan for and create short-term wins (Kotter, 1995). • Failure to anchor changes in the corporation's culture (Kotter, 1995). • Failure to make systemic changes (Chaudron, 2003). • Choosing a change methodology or approach that did not suit the business, or worse still, had piled methodology upon methodology, program upon program [sic] (Palmer, 2012). • Proceeding without a clear change strategy or using a change strategy that does not fit the type of change required (Ackerman, 2002). • Failure to make decisions up front (Chaudron, 2003). • Failure to measure results (Chaudron, 2003).
4. Inadequate leadership, including a lack of leader involvement, preparation, and capability.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Failure to create a powerful guiding coalition (Kotter, 1995). • Leaders not prepared for the change of management style required to manage the changing business, or one where change is the norm (Palmer, 2012). • Leaders unwilling to change or develop themselves to overtly model the organization changes they are asking of their employees (Ackerman-Anderson, 2002). • Deciding on a strategic direction for change and then leaders remain remote from the change (sometimes called "Distance Transformation") leaving the actual change process to less motivated or untrained employees (Palmer, 2012). • Insufficient sponsorship from senior leaders (Meinert, 2012).
5. Insufficient or confusing communication.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under-communicating the vision by a factor of ten (Kotter, 1995). • The organization is unclear about the reasons for the change, and the overall objectives for the change (Palmer, 2012). • Creating resistance by using only top-down communications to announce change; not channeling people's reactions to the announcement in constructive ways; and not engaging employees in shaping the future of the organization (Ackerman-Anderson, 2002).

NOTE: Items that were repetitive or less demonstrative of the categories were omitted for space considerations

Kotter emphasizes organizational behavior and the steps for effective change management execution. Both Bridges and Kotter provide useful guidance on dealing with ongoing change.

Examining Reported Causes of Organizational Change Failure

Despite the substantial literature and models available, all agree that organizations continue to struggle with large-scale change initiatives (Decker, 2012).

The first category centers on failing to establish a compelling vision. This is best stated by Kotter (1995), "without a clear vision to guide the complicated and difficult efforts of a large-scale change project, confusion can set in, individuals may become unmotivated and resistance can

gain a foothold.” As many change management practitioners have experienced, a compelling vision is often the motivator for change, even when there is much uncertainty on how best to execute the change effort. To illustrate, one of our clients, a global pharmaceutical company, recognized the confluence of factors altering healthcare delivery and decisions. As part of a major transformation effort, leaders created a compelling vision to double sales and profitability over a five-year period. This vision motivated leaders and employees to engage in various large-scale change initiatives that included re-organization, culture transformation, and process improvement. We will return to this case study again.

The second category relates to individual beliefs and the importance of achieving buy-in and acceptance of the change effort. If an individual does not see or share the organization’s vision and rationale for the changes, the individual can be a source of resistance. Resistance often reflects that individuals and teams are more comfortable with the current state than they are with the proposed changes.

The third category focuses on the importance of effective planning and execution of the change effort. This category contains the greatest number of items, demonstrating that many different types of planning and execution failures can occur. A common organizational mistake is taking the time to announce and explain the change effort and rationale, but doing little to provide direction to sustain the change effort and address its impact over time. Another common mistake is not measuring progress to enable course corrections.

The fourth category includes the many issues related to change leadership. Where leaders have inadequate guidance on their role in driving change, this trickles down to a lack of support from their managers. This is partially due to the fact that organizations are not giving full accountability to leadership at all levels to follow the plan accordingly.

The final category includes concerns about insufficient or confusing communication. Several best practices emerge in this category, including the creation of a

Table 3. Principles of Large-Scale Change Implementation.

This table summarizes the 5 key principals required for successful organizational change (Heckelman, et al., 2013).

Key Principles
1. Change takes place more effectively when worked at three levels: organizational, team, and individual.
2. Change is adopted by connecting individual beliefs to organizational results.
3. Change requires a planned and disciplined implementation cascade.
4. Change is accelerated by equipping leaders to lead through the transition.
5. Change implementation calls for frequent and ongoing communication and calibration.

comprehensive communications strategy, whereby the focus is to clearly convey the vision for change and develop an effective communications plan. Most individuals get their cues on how to act from their direct manager, therefore, the manager’s communication and reinforcement of the rationale for change is critical to success.

Putting it all Together: Diagnosing Outstanding Needs

Change is hard work (Meinert, 2012), but gaps emerge when the change models are examined against the Categorized Reported Reasons for Organizational Change Failure (Table 2).

Bridges’, Schein’s, and Kotter’s models provide guidance to avoid the first, second, third, and fifth change failure categories (Table 2). For the first category, they all mention the importance of creating a compelling vision to drive change. For the second category, Bridges’ and Schein’s models address individuals’ beliefs and how to guide others through change. For the third category, Kotter’s steps are meant to provide an execution roadmap for large-scale change. Finally, for the fifth category, Kotter also highlights the importance of communication and the perils of miscommunication.

None of these three leading experts emphasize the importance of properly preparing leaders or managers to guide individuals and teams through the transition, which is part of the fourth category. In Table 2, Kotter himself acknowledges this gap, calling for greater emphasis on

“change leadership,” noting that “almost nobody is very good at it.” Therefore, the first outstanding need that emerges from this review is specific guidance and preparation for leaders at all levels of the organization. The second outstanding need pertains to change planning and execution. Evidence shows that change planning and execution remains the most problematic area for organizations (Table 2). This clearly demonstrates that organizations should and would benefit greatly from additional guidance in this area.

Change Execution Principles to Address Outstanding Needs

Working with hundreds of large and small organizations across all four types of change (structural, cost cutting, process, and cultural), five principles are offered to ensure successful large-scale change implementation (Table 3). Tested and validated,¹ these principles address the change failure categories and position an organization for successful large-scale change execution (Table 2).

There are two phases to execution planning. First, leaders need to create an effective change strategy by making key decisions about what is changing, why it is changing, and who needs to be involved. Second, this strategy needs to be used to create the actual change approach or execution plan. This plan will define how the change will be cascaded and implemented throughout the organization. For example, each of these principles were applied in a disciplined approach when a large division

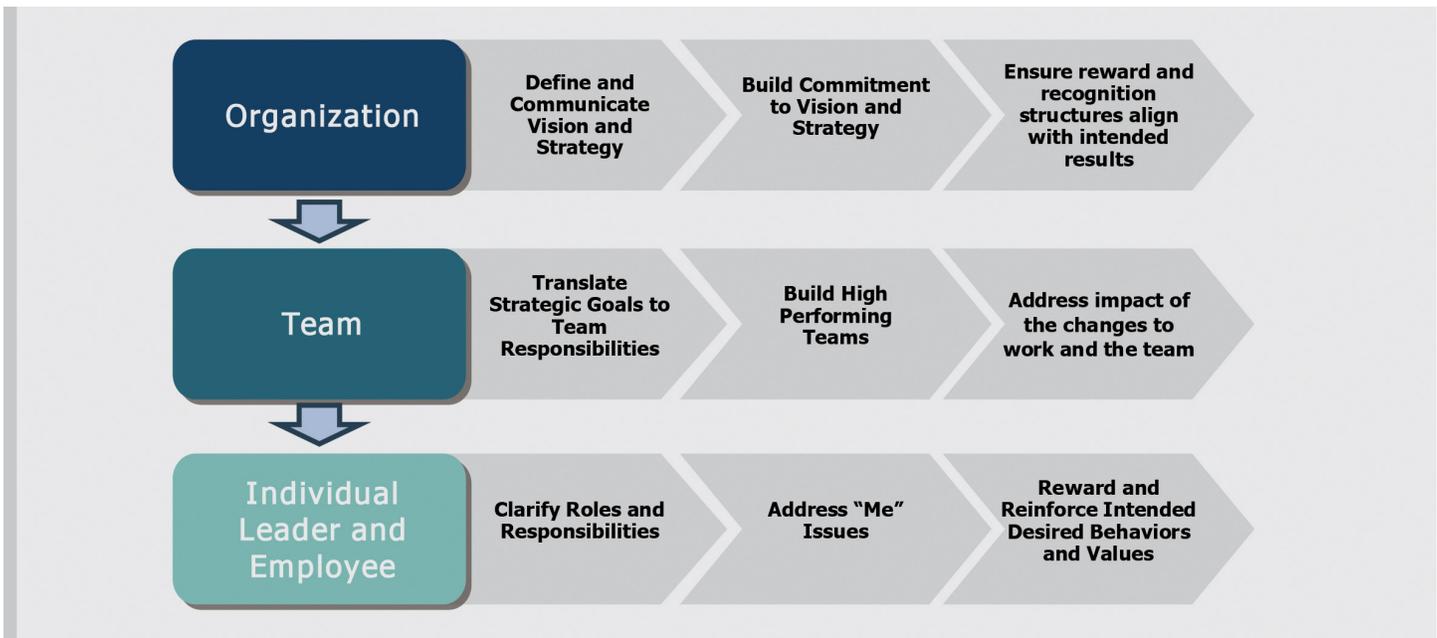


Figure 2. Principle one: Change takes place more effectively when worked at three levels: organizational, team, and individual

of the global pharmaceutical company embarked on a merger integration. This multi-billion dollar company, operating in over 30 countries, with multiple business units needed a consistent and well-planned framework to execute the merger integration to achieve desired financial and organizational goals.

1. Change takes place more effectively when worked at three levels: organizational, team, and individual.

Other theorists have noted that change needs to occur at more than one level of the organization. One of the best examples is Kanter, Stein, and Jick's (1992) categorization of change stakeholders into strategists (the leaders who create the vision), implementers (the middle managers who translate the vision), and recipients (who must adopt the changes). However, there is little attention paid to the fact that the "implementers" or middle managers may not have the same kind of leadership training as the strategists. Strategists are usually the top leaders of an organization. They may have direct reports, but middle managers (implementers) are more likely to be in charge of a team of workers and therefore require unique guidance on how to lead and inspire teams and individuals, through change. *Figure 2* defines the key objectives that need to be achieved at each level.

The organizational level is where senior or change leaders clearly define the

vision and strategy for the change effort and determine who should be involved. These leaders should spend time defining a clear rationale for why change is required (to inform the vision) and thinking through what the effects of the change will be (to inform the strategy). This includes determining the roles that different organizational groups or teams will play in the larger change effort.

For the global pharmaceutical company, senior leadership recognized that integration success rested first with how the senior leaders defined and communicated the vision and strategy. During a special international leadership summit, top leaders were brought together to "create one culture, align on business imperatives, and build trust amongst new leaders." These senior leaders left with a clear plan of action and an implementation cascade to drive organizational change and provide tools for teams to execute the change strategy.

The team level is where strategic goals are translated into an implementation plan. Middle managers must address how they will achieve the goals of the larger change effort with their team(s). First, they must agree to "buy-in" or fully accept the change vision themselves and then be able to inspire others. This requires accurately determining the change impact to their team and diagnosing team weaknesses and strengths. If they are given a new or

changed team, they will need to be able to "jump-start" or quickly build a high performing team to meet this change and the ongoing performance expectations. Organizations often underestimate the needs of middle managers in their change planning efforts and fail to devote sufficient time or resources to ensure they are prepared to transition their teams.

2. Change is adopted by connecting individual beliefs to organizational results.

The individual level is where the personal dynamics of the transition should be addressed. Basically, individuals experience the same emotional turmoil they feel when major change takes place in their private lives (e.g., death, divorce, or relocation) and they can react in complex, unpredictable, and sometimes contradictory ways. The individual level involves addressing the "me" issues. Success will require clarity about an individual's role, responsibilities, and behavioral expectations. Be specific and identify behaviors needed to start, stop, and continue doing, to be effective. Leaders at all levels need to address these issues with themselves and their team members. Leaders and managers also need to be prepared to effectively coach and reinforce behavioral expectations. Execution planning requires effort at all three of these levels, but it starts with strategic thinking at the organizational level.

To truly guide individuals through the transition *and* produce desired behavior change, the organization needs to establish a connection between individual beliefs and desired organizational results. During the merger integration of the global pharmaceutical company, the senior leadership team dedicated time to defining cultural beliefs for the newly integrated company. This session provided the venue for leaders to move from “talking about” cultural tenets related to accountability and customer focus to internalizing these beliefs and aligning on actions going forward.

With this client, the following interventions were incorporated to increase the likelihood of success and limit the potential for failure:

- » Helping individuals to see the relationship between their own beliefs, how they act, and the results of the organization, will support change efforts.
- » Identifying and addressing any potential misalignment between an individual’s beliefs about the organization’s vision, strategy, and values is critical to changing actions and ultimately, results. What is communicated about the vision and strategy may not be reinforced by what employees experience on a day-to-day basis. If this misalignment is not addressed, individuals will be less motivated to act in ways that will produce the desired results.
- » Instilling the importance of leaders and managers to create experiences that shape and reinforce desired beliefs. For example, if you want an individual to believe they are empowered to make decisions, they need to be given experiences that demonstrate their decisions will be acknowledged and respected—even when a misjudgment may occur.
- » Examine the factors or issues that help perpetuate undesirable beliefs. These may provide insight into what is limiting behavioral change and what action(s) can be taken to better align for intended results.

Creating alignment between an individual’s beliefs and the values and goals

of the change effort ensures that individuals have bought into the reasons for the change effort. Senior leaders need to create a detailed vision and strategy that managers can use to easily determine the behaviors and expected outcomes from their team. Managers must then have the training and autonomy to shape beliefs and produce results.

There are numerous ways that leadership needs to be prepared to lead change efforts. First, in order to sell others on the change effort and manage them through the transition, leaders and managers need to “buy-it” themselves and manage their own reactions to the change. This is why the implementation cascade is so important. Managers cannot address their teams’ reactions and resistance to the risks and uncertainties involved in transition without also addressing their own.

3. Change requires a planned and disciplined implementation cascade.

Creating large-scale organizational change requires a detailed planning and a disciplined launch execution plan to be effective. Planning needs to be done at the organizational level by a “Guiding Coalition (Kotter, 2012)” or cross-functional team of senior leaders (Kotter, 2007). After determining the change strategy, this group needs to oversee the creation of an organizational-level change implementation plan. At minimum, an organization-level implementation plan should contain:

- » A planned cascade that addresses (at each level of the organization) how buy-in and ownership will be obtained, what will need to change, and how individual transitions will be handled.
- » Guidance for ensuring there is uniform execution across the organization. Failure to provide a consistent approach for leaders to follow means that managers could be moving forward in inconsistent or even conflicting directions.
- » Specific guidance for how managers can implement change with their teams. Establish clear goals on what each team must accomplish and how they are expected to contribute to the

organization’s overall success. Each manager or team leader must translate the senior leaders’ implementation plan into a local execution plan for their teams. The more direction that senior leaders provide in their cascade, the better these local plans can be.

- » Efforts to align tools, i.e. incentives, performance metrics, and learning

programs with established and defined goals of the change effort.

- » A map conveying how information will be cascaded down through the organization and what needs to be communicated to whom and when. Creating an effective information cascade to the leadership ranks of the organization helps gain buy-in at each level and encourages leaders, managers, and individuals to take accountability (Connors & Smith, 1999) for implementing the change effort.
- » A plan for customizing the cascade to address subgroup differences. Most companies have subgroups with their own unique subcultures (Schein, 1992). Senior leaders should customize communications and tactics to help determine the message that will best resonate with them and the experiences that the team leaders can use to inspire change beliefs.

Circling back to our global pharmaceutical company, during the merger integration, all of the above recommendations were incorporated into the planned implementation cascade. Leadership recognized the importance of dedicating time and



Figure 3. The 5 C's of Transition Leadership (Heckelman, 2012). This figure summarizes our recommended method of change implementation.

resources to the development of change management tools and a consistent roll-out. The outcome of the consistent implementation cascade led to over 90 Team Jump Starts across the organization. During these sessions, each leader had the opportunity to convey with conviction the vision and need for change. As a team, they aligned on business priorities, internalized the cultural tenets, and began the process of forming an integrated team encompassing the new leaders, new members, new processes, and new priorities.

4. Change is accelerated by equipping leaders to lead through the transition.

Providing a common change execution framework and tools addresses one of the critical gaps (Figure 3).

There are numerous ways that leadership needs to be prepared to lead change efforts. First, in order to sell others on the change effort and manage them through the transition, leaders and managers need to “buy-it” themselves and manage their own reactions to the change. This is why the implementation cascade is so important. Managers cannot address their teams’ reactions and resistance to the risks and

uncertainties involved in transition without also addressing their own.

Leaders at all levels of the organization require skills to guide their direct reports (including managers and team leaders) through the transition. This can be defined as “transition” leadership which is about leading through change. Transition-leadership requires guiding everyone—at all levels—through the desired change. Direct reports might not be convinced that the proposed changes will produce desired results. They may question their own capability to be effective. They may question how the changes impact their compensation and ability to remain successful. Leaders need to coach each team and individual on these and other issues, while simultaneously managing and overcoming their own doubts about the proposed strategic direction.

The organization can help their leaders. Leaders need a clear roadmap, clarity on their role and expectations, and support and resources, to develop their skills. Many organizations either provide too little support, which leaves leaders floundering, or, they are overly prescriptive and leaders are not able to customize the implementation

approach to meet the needs of their team or themselves.

Organizations should give leaders and managers tools and resources to help them:

1. Assess their own reaction to the change and determine what they need to do to personally accept and champion the change effort (this may include specific training or knowledge).
2. Assess the impact of the change on their business responsibilities and potential risks.
3. Create or “jump start” a high performing team to meet the goals of the change and ongoing performance expectations.
4. Coach and develop individual team members through the transition—be able to manage different reactions to the changes.

During the merger integration of the global pharmaceutical company, the 5C's of Transition Leadership® model was applied to ready the leaders to guide their teams through the transition. The approach was cascaded to all levels of the organization resulting in quicker adoption of the change, mitigation of business risks including customer transitions, and aligning teams around business goals and priorities. All leaders were responsible to develop transition plans for their employees and teams.

5. Change implementation calls for frequent and ongoing communication and calibration.

Communications planning is a key component. Creating and communicating clear messages creates common understanding, proactively addresses misconceptions, and sustains efforts. This level of planning should never be considered an afterthought. Communications are the primary vehicle for conveying the core messages of the change effort.

The organization-level execution plan should contain a communications plan with the following details:

- » Responsibility and timing for crafting senior leader-level communications.

- » How and when different communications methods will be used and with whom.
- » How updates on progress will be measured and reported (and to whom).

Senior level communications should include **why** the change is happening, **what** exactly is happening, **who** is going to be affected, and finally, **how**. Communications should convey senior leaders' vision for the change. Leaders should take the time to craft speaking points that will resonate, inspire, and mitigate potential concerns. In local execution efforts, managers and team leaders need to sincerely embrace the change vision, reinforcing the senior level messages, and creating additional customized messages for their teams.

The leaders in the merger integration case, ensured a robust communication plan that included multiple touch points, various mediums, unique branding, and constant reinforcement of key messages during weekly updates. Updates were designed to make selection announcements, highlight successes, clarify direction, and reduce confusion about decisions being made. To avoid confusion, both formal and informal communication emphasized the importance of being honest, sharing what was known, and what still was undecided. Furthermore, the communication plan included ways to bolster employee engagement and input with critical feedback loops.

Ongoing measurement and calibration helps leaders identify and address roadblocks, take steps to correct any potential issues, and recalibrate plans before things get too far off the rails. Small successes should be identified and publicized to maintain momentum (Kotter, 2012). Best practices help others to see positive change results as realistically achievable. Celebrating success as it occurs is critical given the long-term nature of large-scale change.

Senior leaders should have determined the metrics for short- and long-term success, how they will be measured, how often, and how they should be reported. At the local or team level, managers and team leaders may need additional metrics

to help them track progress towards team-level goals.

Calibration best practices include:

- » Determining clear metrics to measure progress (and measure them often).
- » Communication of progress (do this regularly and creatively—with a focus on business results).
- » Process for addressing issues.
- » Recognition of/Reward for effective and appropriate contributions, decisions, and behavior.

and organizational results to better understand their role in making change efforts work.

3. Organizations must create a disciplined change execution plan and cascade to provide sufficient direction for leaders throughout the organization.
4. Organizations must fully equip leaders at all levels to drive change.
5. Effective communication and calibration is critical for change execution success.

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This fifth principle provides guidance and can be used to address the fifth (inadequate communication) and the third (poor execution planning) category of reasons for change failure. It emphasizes the importance of clear and frequent communication and ongoing measurement in large-scale change efforts. It also explains their role in overall execution planning as critical for keeping large-scale change efforts on track.

Summary

This article offers five principles to guide change efforts that supplement existing literature and address outstanding gaps in guidance on large-scale change. These gaps include inadequate preparation of leaders (at all levels of the organization) when guiding their team(s) through the change transition, thereby not creating effective change execution plans. The principles state:

1. Change needs to occur at all levels of the company: organization, team, and individual.
2. Individuals need to see the connection between their individual beliefs

The case illustrated throughout this article highlights the practical application of the above principles. When these principles are incorporated into a change execution plan, the likelihood for achieving desired results increases.

Endnote

1. These principles have been tested and validated by first building the model on well-established research theories. A review of the literature resulted in the framework developed to identify why organizations fail when implementing large scale change. That is the principles were developed by first focusing on what the literature identifies as the needed steps to successfully implement change management. Then, again using the established literature, we summarized the reasons why change efforts fail. After matching the steps needed to implement change with the reasons why change implementation fails, we were able to identify the principles needed to succeed in change implementation. So, the principles

were developed based on well-established principles and literature findings of change management.

The principles have been tested by using them in implementing change across organizations over the past several years. Each principle was discussed and endorsed by different levels of supervising teams across the organizations we worked with. That is organizations helped us validate the relationship between the problem (implementing change) and the solution (implementing change using the principles proposed).

Finally, a survey was developed to assess change agility readiness and individual change agility capacity. The survey was administered to clients (N approximately 300) using the 5Cs framework as a baseline and post measure. Results confirmed that the principles and framework were valid and prepared organizations and individuals to implement large scale change.

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