



Book Real Time Strategic Change

How to Involve an Entire Organization in Fast and Far-Reaching Change

Robert W. Jacobs
Berrett-Koehler, 1997

Recommendation

Consultant Robert W. Jacobs walks you through his "Real Time Strategic Change" program, which, he explains, has been successfully implemented in numerous companies and organizations. He discusses how and why it works, and points out why other commonly used change strategies don't. Although the book achieves its mission nicely, it gets bogged down by continuous, detailed examples of each step in the process, which provide little in the way of illumination. His excellent guidelines for change still manage to shine through. *BooksInShort* recommends this book to all those who are or will be involved with implementing individual, group or organization-wide change.

Take-Aways

- Most organizational change efforts fail.
- Change efforts fail because those who are most affected by them aren't included in planning or implementing them.
- Telling people about change in memos is not the same as involving them.
- The four common change approaches don't work.
- "Top-down" strategies usually fail.
- "Bottom-up" strategies usually fail.
- "Representative Cross-Section" strategies usually fail.
- "Pilot" strategies usually fail.
- The "Real Time" strategic change approach succeeds because everyone in the organization is involved in simultaneous planning and implementing of change.
- When individuals are part of the process, they feel a sense of community.

Summary

Inclusion Equals Effective Change

Most organizational change efforts fall short because those who are most interested in and affected by the changes are not included in either planning or implementing them. It's not enough to gather people together for a big meeting to hear someone else tell them how they are going to be doing business differently in the future. Instead, the hundreds or often thousands of people who work at an organization facing change must be completely involved in the change effort. Change happens faster when everyone involved has been instrumental in creating the overall change strategy, can actively participate in it, and feels aligned with it.

“Too many organizational change efforts result in frustrated leaders, disillusioned workers and few, if any positive, lasting, changes.”

The "Real Time Strategic Change" plan will work in small and large organizations. Four kinds of people should be involved in organizational change:

1. Organizational leaders and members who want to speed up the pace and effectiveness with which changes are implemented
2. External and internal consultants responsible for supporting change initiatives
3. Experts in organizational strategy, culture, total quality management, work design and re-engineering
4. Participants in social, political, economic or community change or development issues.

Why Common Change Strategies Don't Work

The four most common strategic change approaches rarely work, for very specific reasons. Those strategies, and their key flaws are:

1. Top-down strategies - In a top-down strategy, an organization's leadership team decides which changes need to be made. Leaders explain the changes in brief, large group meetings. Less participation-minded organizations don't have meetings, but instead notify employees about changes through reports and memos. The changes are rarely clear to everyone. The commitment and collaboration required for effective implementation are not made clear. Those who will be implementing and living with the changes are not consulted or involved in the process of deciding which changes need to be made. People don't feel personal ownership for making changes successful.
2. Bottom-up strategies - Individual teams of workers are accountable for making changes in the way they do business. Teams end up working independently of each other, creating innovative solutions to their own problems. This approach is satisfying only in the short-run, since individual teams can make major improvements and achieve good results, but one team's gains often occur at the expense of another and the entire organization's long-term problems persist. Progress is stymied by a lack of overall strategic direction and a lack of system-wide coordination among these internally focused teams. Commitment is much higher than with the top-down strategy, but without an overall context and collaboration, success is limited to problems that exist exclusively within separate functions, areas or levels.
3. Representative cross-section strategies - Organizations recruit representative cross-sections of the actual people affected by proposed changes to help decide which changes are necessary and how they can be implemented. These task forces, committees or groups are committed, but no one else is involved, so there is no overall commitment from workers across the organization.
4. Pilot Strategies - Organizations identify a specific part of the firm as the flagship (pilot project) for change. These change efforts benefit from having a well-defined task, the support of organizational leaders and the allocation of resources. Participants in the pilot project are involved closely in planning and implementing change. The results of their efforts are "showcased" throughout the entire firm. It is nearly impossible, however, to transfer these changes to the other parts of the organization because of resentment on the part of those who were not consulted but who now have to live with the changes made. Also, often the changes do not suit the non-pilot areas of the organization.

Real-Time Strategic Change

Real time refers to the simultaneous planning and implementation of individual, group and organization-wide changes. Current reality is the main driver throughout the process, and real current issues are the basis of consideration. Problems aren't "cut down to size," a popular, but ineffective remedy to complexity that inevitably results in unworkable, piecemeal solutions to systemic problems. In real-time strategic change, everyone who needs to make changes happen is involved in planning and implementation, not just a small

representative group. As a result:

1. Change efforts are more informed and more effective.
2. Those making the changes believe such changes are needed.
3. The process leads to a complete organizational mindset for change.
4. Change isn't perceived as an extra project, but an integral component of "real work."
5. Change happens more quickly.
6. Substantial change occurs across the entire organization.

Change Principles

No two events or change efforts are ever the same, so each organization's experience will be different, and within an organization, this year's experience will differ from next year's.

“Life cycles of products, technology, services and processes continue to get shorter. Despite people's best efforts, it is clear that many organizations are falling behind the power curve of change that exists worldwide.”

All change must involve empowerment if it is to be effective. Change only happens when people "make change happen." A big part of that is the consistent flow of information between leaders and other employees. All participation must happen through interactive processes, not one-way processes. In the planning and implementing stages, listening is critical because integrating diverse perspectives helps people discover common ground.

“Rather than having to choose between either substantial changes made in limited parts of an organization or modest changes made across an entire organization, the real time strategic change approach makes it possible for substantial changes to be made across an entire organization.”

Obviously, change is not static, and neither are planning and implementation. Therefore, all processes need to be flexible and responsive to the emerging needs of the entire group. All change activities add to the common database of information that the entire group is creating together. That information must be freely shared as it is collected.

“Everyone who has taken part in any change effort recognizes the importance of securing buy-in from key players who can make or break the initiative.”

Throughout the entire process, participants must be treated as they really are - people with complex sets of needs, wants and issues. Change triggers emotional issues, turf battles and competing needs. This must be acknowledged. Psychologist and organization consultant William Bridges has written extensively on the transition process that people undergo after changes are made in their lives and their companies.

“A real time strategic change effort follows an organization's natural dynamics.”

The process has three predictable stages.

1. The ending phase - In this phase, people need to let go of their old ways.
2. The neutral zone - People feel disoriented, as if things are falling apart.
3. A new beginning - This phase is characterized by a vision for the future and people's energy and motivation to realize it.

“The time we spend in these organizations should be reason enough to explore more deeply ways we could transform them into communities. But benefits from this transformation would extend into our relationships with our families, friends and others as well.”

For a real-time strategic change effort to succeed, a system-wide paradigm shift needs to occur. In such a shift, everyone experiences "a new reality in real time." In this reality, they will feel in charge of their own destinies because they are the ones planning and implementing the changes they are going to experience. Ultimately, change happens system-wide because "everyone decides it's time."

“Simply put, by getting the right people together, having them working on the right issues, by providing them with the information they need to make wise choices for their organization, and by creating an open interactive process for them to work within, good decisions will be made.”

Once everyone sees a new world of possibilities, they can never not see it again. While the reality of the organization’s issues and challenges remains, peoples’ perceptions of that reality change, leading to new behaviors, decisions and attitudes. These paradigm shifts are unmistakable. You will be able to tell when they occur.

“The saying, ‘The devil is in the details’ certainly applies to the real time strategic change technology.”

One very valuable component resides at the core of a real-time strategic change effort: creating community. When people work on something together, a sense of community is automatically created. Any previous isolation people might have felt is chipped away by this experience. This can only be a good thing for the organization.

“The crux of the issue is whether people are committed to being different tomorrow than they are today.”

Often members of organizations don’t get enough information about organization-wide strategies and change initiatives. People are asked to be "good soldiers" and to carry out directives without being told why. Therefore, they can’t make sense of the change effort or determine how they can contribute to the organization’s overall success. When everyone is informed of the "big picture," people can be comfortable with change only if they fully understand the reasons behind it. If they participate in planning and implementing change, they can actually commit to it.

Choosing the Future

If you’re going to implement change, it should be for the best. So, choose the future you prefer, and take the steps needed to achieve it. To change faster and more effectively, organizations need a powerful means to that end and a vision their members can believe. For some organizations, change means the difference between survival and continued viability. For others, it means extending past successes into the future.

“The greatest challenge for leaders in a real time strategic change process is to strike the appropriate balance between sharing their perspectives with others and having others share their perspectives with them.”

Thomas Jefferson believed the only safe repository of power resided in the people themselves. That concept is also true for organizations. Real-time strategic change is a democratic process that involves the people themselves. In such an environment, participation is real, not just a catch phrase or a fad, and people take an active role in shaping their organization’s future, as well as their own.

True Partnership

When people’s hearts, minds and imaginations are set free, they can create organizations that they want to own. This approach is a true partnership. When an entire organization can come together for a common cause, the organization’s collective knowledge, skills and creativity are brought to bear on creating its future.

The fundamental principle underlying the real-time strategic change process is: "If it is to be, it is up to you and me." Organizations don’t transform themselves; only individuals joined together can do that. When individuals buy in to the change process and feel that they own it, they will be committed to it and its long-term outcome.

Roland Loup, of Dannemiller Tyson Associates, believes that this process addresses three basic individual human needs:

- To have their voices heard.
- To clearly be part of something larger than themselves.
- To be part of something successful.

The realization of these individual needs fuels each person’s commitment to the real-time strategic change process.

About the Author

Robert W. Jacobs is a partner in 5 Oceans, Inc., a consulting firm specializing in organization-wide transformation. His publications include articles and case studies on strategic change and its application. He lives in Chelsea, Michigan.

