Change Thinking

by - *Daryl Conner*

Despite all the business change knowledge uncovered during the last 50 years, many seasoned change management professionals still aren't adequately prepared to serve those trying to navigate their way through today's turbulence. Change Thinking is an effort to have an exchange with, and be part of, a community of practitioners committed to raising the level of their game and that of the field of change execution.

The Importance of Commitment in Change

"There's a difference between interest and commitment. When you're interested in doing something, you do it only when circumstances permit. When you're committed to something, you accept no excuses, only results." ~Author Unknown

There are so many aspects to being a professional change practitioner that it's easy to lose sight of the fundamentals that comprise our role. It's OK to add all the bells and whistles we want, but at the same time, we must deliver on the basics. One way to think about the bottom line of our function is that, as change facilitators, *we exist to foster commitment-building among those who are crucial to the success of key initiatives—sponsors, agents, and targets*.

In the last series of postings, we explored how momentum and critical mass of energy directed toward realization helps to create the sought-after commitment all change projects need. In this series, we'll dive deeper into the dynamics under commitment and look at what's involved in furthering its development.

The Practitioner's Role

The true test of success for major change initiatives is full realization of the business outcomes intended by the organization's leaders. Realization, in turn, requires that new solutions (systems, processes, technology, etc.) be put in place, supported by new mindsets and behaviors. These new mindsets and behaviors enable the *targets*—the people who will apply the solutions to achieve results, and who need to function effectively in the changed environment—to do their part in achieving realization.

To support the shifts that the targets must make, two other groups—sponsors and agents—must also perform effectively. The demands on sponsors and agents represent major alterations in thinking and behavior:

- *Sponsors* must consistently display support for the change through influential communication and meaningful consequences.
- *Agents* must support the sponsors' intent for the change and apply effective approaches to execution.

As change facilitators, our fundamental goal is to help orchestrate these critical shifts in mindsets and behaviors among sponsors, agents, and targets, building their individual and collective commitment toward the new way of operating so that each group can contribute to achieving full realization. The problem is that many practitioners lack a sufficient grasp of what commitment is and/or how it can be encouraged.

Across the life span of a change initiative, a series of predictable modifications needs to take place among various groups of sponsors, agents, and targets. Understanding the sequence and timing of these alterations can help orchestrate movement toward the desired outcomes. Yet, unless we understand and appreciate commitment dynamics, we won't be able to exercise the influence our role calls for.

As is true for all the issues discussed in this blog, there isn't a singular view on commitment building that takes precedence over others. In fact, it is only through sharing the array of approaches used by our practitioner community that we have any hope of advancing our comprehension of this all-important component of our craft. In this series of postings, I'll relate some of my observations and lessons learned about building commitment. I encourage you to share your experience as well so we all benefit.

Defining Commitment

Based on my experience, people essentially display commitment in five ways:

- Invest resources such as time, energy, and money to ensure the desired outcome
- Pursue the goal consistently over time, even when under stress
- Reject ideas or action plans that promise short-term benefits but are inconsistent with the overall strategy for ultimate goal achievement
- Stand fast in the face of adversity, remaining determined and focused in the quest for the desired goal
- Apply creativity, ingenuity, and resourcefulness to resolving problems or issues that would otherwise block the achievement of the goal

Given this, it's easy to see why commitment is so important to the success of organizational change. It's the cement that provides the critical bond between people and the change process.

That said, commitment shouldn't be confused with "eagerness" for the intended outcomes of a project. Commitment to major change in the organization may or may not include intellectual agreement with or emotional support for the actions being taken and/or the intended outcome of the effort. A sponsor may have the necessary awareness to recognize that some significant downsizing needs to occur. He or she may be fully committed to seeing that it is carried out flawlessly, while at the same time hating the fact that such actions are necessary.

As vital as commitment-building is to our craft, far too many change facilitators appear not to understand its underlying dynamics, what it requires, how it is built, and how it can be lost. In my next post, I'll outline a model for building and sustaining commitment that has been helpful in my practice.

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