Change Leadership Accelerator

Sustaining Change by Achieving Critical Mass

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Most change initiatives are not simply one-time events that have a defined beginning, middle and end, but rather individual and organizational change is inherently dynamic. The reality is that most change initiatives fail. John Kotter, leading guru of change management, research suggested that only 30 percent of change programs are successful.[1] A survey in the last decade conducted by McKinsey & Company of business executives indicated that the percent of change programs that are a success today is still 30%.[2] So what can we do to increase the likelihood of successfully implementing and sustaining change?

Momentum – The Essential Success Factor

Essentially, the success factor of a change program is momentum. In physics, momentum is defined as "mass in motion".[3] This implies a combination of motion (or *velocity*) – the speed at which the change is introduced and *mass* – the depth and breadth of commitment from the stakeholders. Since momentum is critical to change success, a leader must develop an intentional strategy to build and sustain it. The strategy should include frequent communication of the vision, inspiring others to take action, and recognizing the need to deliver results quickly to engage commitment from those invested and impacted by the change.

Achieving Critical Mass

Achieving critical mass is a key part of building momentum and making change stick. Without it, stakeholders will likely revert back to the ways things were done before the change was introduced and there is a risk of not being able to sustain the change. Creating a sense of community and support is the way to embed change and achieve a sense of critical mass. According to Malcom Gladwell, author of the *Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, "If you want to bring a fundamental change in people's beliefs and behaviour…you need to create a community around them, where those new beliefs can be practised and expressed and nurtured."

Before you can even achieve a critical mass, you need to build the case for change and mobilize the effort in the first phase. In the *Mobilization* phase, stakeholders must believe that the change benefits outweigh the risks involved, the vision is attainable, the leader is trustworthy and the processes are reliable. As a leader you need to be able to acknowledge the losses that people may be feeling and adapting your communication to address the concerns of staff. Frequent communication, whether formally or informally, will encourage mobilization towards the desired future state.

The next phase is *Implementation*. This is where the old the new systems are competing for survival. People will feel a range of emotions from anger, resentment, and resignation to relief and excitement. It is important to continue explaining the vision, create temporary structures as necessary to encourage the new behaviour, and encourage staff to think of new ways to do things as well as take risks. It is in this phase that we push hard for critical mass. Once critical mass has been achieved, the last phase, *Solidification*, accelerates the change and solidifies the new state by essentially removing the old approach.

5 Strategies to Accelerate Change to Critical Mass

In Christopher Meyer's (2010) article *The Frontier of Change: Five Strategies to Accelerate Change to Critical Mass* he suggests bringing the future forward, limit scope, recruit and expand change ownership, compel network growth and accelerate the pace. Further explanation for each strategy is detailed below.

1. Bring the future forward to mobilize action faster

"When there is a large time gap between actions and consequences, people aren't motivated to change." By bringing distant consequences forward, we can get people to embrace the need for change sooner than they normally would.

2. Limit scope, start many fires and always offer an actionable next step

"Limited scope shortens the distance to critical mass and reduces distractions." Get early support, look to where small wins have been achieved and build a foothold there. Create networks of support across the organization. Providing concrete actionable steps will shorten the mobilization time since people can burn far too much time deciding what to do first.

3. Recruit and expand change ownership with "wired" leaders

Creating momentum for change and sustaining it depends on having committed change leaders who meet four criteria, which include: 1) they are "players" in the organization, who regardless of title or position, are naturally called upon for critical decisions; 2) people who bring wide and trusting personal relationship networks with them to spread the change faster; 3) leaders with a sense of politics, since "all change is political" in the organization, and know how to seize the moment as well as how to find ways to deal with conflict when it arises; and 4) are humble yet outgoing leaders who have the temperament and social skills that create good feelings among people, address underlying issues, and help transform the change effort into a deeply felt cause that others will readily champion.

4. Compel network growth

This requires constantly shifting people, power and assets to the change's forward edge. It also means working interdependently versus with a hierarchal decision-making authority – change network members are part of the communication and decision making.

5. Accelerate the pace for critical mass

"Fast implementations follow a very different rhythm than slower ones." As momentum reaches critical mass, faster change processes accelerate by deliberately purging the old approach.

How you implement changes within your organization will shape how you sustain them. Reinforce the change through acknowledging success, dealing with challenges, engaging excitement, and continuing your integration efforts. Consider the individual, team and organizational needs when sustaining change. Lastly, you cannot have lasting change without employee involvement. After all, employee involvement truly is at the heart of sustaining all changes in your organization.

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References

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[2] McKinsey & Company. (2008). *The Inconvenient Truth About Change Management.*

[3] The Physics Classroom. (2014). *Momentum and Its Conservation - Lesson 1 - The Impulse-Momentum Change Theorem.*