Bridges Implementation Survey Results

Why does change fail?

The most common reason to date has been lack of top management support. **Not any more.** In the results from the Bridges Business Consultancy Int survey conducted across South East Asia from 2001 to 2003, with over 150 managers, it was discovered that the top reason organizations fail to implement changes successfully is:

Gaining support and action

In the last few years of management practice, we've witnessed a plethora of change initiatives: CRM; Six Sigma; Vision-Mission-Values; ERP; Balanced Scorecard; ISO; Customer Service; Core Competencies; Total Quality Management… the list just keeps growing. As a result, staff and managers have become battle weary, tired of being "called to arms" too many times and too soon after the last initiative.

The results of the survey shows that people don't change either the way they work or the way they think about their work, because both staff and managers suffer from change fatigue and thus a *lack of support and action from the people in the organization* is the top reason change failed.

Lack of support from top management is ranked fourth on the list. This result has dropped from number one to number four possibly because senior managers have repeatedly heard that if change is going to succeed, they must get personally involved. It seems they have finally taken that message to heart. Alternatively, it is possible that

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leaders see the need for gaining support, taking action, communicating change and overcoming resistance as *even more important* than having top level commitment.

The Most Common Initiatives and their Challenges

The two most common change initiatives implemented by organizations in the survey are the **Balanced Scorecard** and **Vision, Mission and Values**. These are followed by **New Corporate Strategy** and **ISO**.

Almost one-third of the change initiatives were scheduled for completion within 12 months and were actually completed within the timeframe, though they didn't deliver the desired results largely due to a lack of support and action from people in the organization, poor communication and overwhelming resistance from staff.

The top 10 challenges in implementing change initiatives

Ranking	Challenge
1	**Gaining support and action**
2	**Communicating the change**
3	**Overcoming resistance from staff**
4	**Support of senior management**
5	**Aligning processes**
6	**Tracking success of implementation**
7	**Changing rewards and recognition**
8	**Acquiring customer feedback**
9	**Implementing new technology**
10	**Acquiring budget**

According to the survey, the most common vehicle for communicating change initiatives to the staff was via email followed by briefings and newsletters. Only 5 percent of those interviewed felt that staff members clearly understood their roles after hearing or reading about a change initiative. This tends to show that while email is a useful means of communication, it is not strong enough to stand on its own; even when it is complemented with briefings and newsletters.

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The survey also revealed that most communication was front-loaded—too much information and activity at the start and lack of a consistent communication strategy over the term of the initiative or implementation.

Staff members resist change when they don't clearly understand why it's being adopted and what they're supposed to do. Staff resistance was more apparent in cases where the change wasn't communicated well. People simply didn't know what they were supposed to do.

The greatest resistance in the organizations came from middle managers—54 percent versus 13 percent from top management and 23 percent from front-line people. This surprising conclusion reinforces the importance of involving middle managers in the change process and communicating effectively with them and through them.

Middle managers are sometimes referred to as the *thermal layer* of an organization because they absorb many of the key initiatives being driven through the organization and strongly influence actions taken. For this reason, it is important for leaders to work closely with middle managers, providing guidance and encouragement, and articulating reasons for implementing changes.

Other Key Findings:

- 90 percent of change initiatives fail to deliver the desired results stated by the management at the outset of the change initiative.
- 97 percent of the people interviewed agreed with the statement "Implementation fails because of bad execution, not bad strategy."
- 20 percent of the changes lasted three to five years.
- 60 percent of the changes were driven by local initiatives, 20 percent by regional and 20 percent global.

Some of the most common top-line views on why change initiatives failed were:

- No follow through
- Lack of commitment from top management to enforce the strategies
- Resource constraints
- Change of leadership
- No clear directions and purpose conveyed to staff at all levels
- Constantly changing performance indicators
- Changing priorities

The Benefit of Hindsight

With the benefit of hindsight, here's what survey respondents said they would do differently if they were to implement the same strategy or initiative again:

- Get total commitment from top management.
- Act fast.
- Communicate aggressively.
- Identify champions/leaders (Mavericks).
- Give all staff members a clear idea of the changes to be made.

- Determine clear targets (benefits for employee) and communicate them through the whole organization.
- Clearly identify top management as the driving force.
- Increase emphasis on developing an action plan.

Two-thirds of the organizations surveyed employ more than 10,000 people. Key industries represented were energy, utilities and government bodies. One-third of the interviewees were senior managers and two-thirds were middle managers. In the survey, the word *implementation* was replaced with *change* because change is a commonly accepted word in business, while implementation is not as familiar.

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