Why Life Sciences Change-Management Initiatives Fail

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Leaders driving mission-critical and operational excellence projects grapple with the fact that approximately 70% of change-management efforts fail. This statistic holds regardless of the change model used or the type of change initiative. The good news is that there are some common threads and solutions that can be implemented to ensure program success and employee satisfaction.

Oftentimes companies excel at the technology and process elements of organizational change management but do not take into consideration the "people" part of this important triad. The result is that projects are unable to gain the necessary traction for project success and sustainability. Here, we give some insights and best practices on how to overcome this misstep.

CHANGE EXHAUSTION

The reasons cited for this discouraging statistic vary, yet constant and often competing initiatives can lead to "change exhaustion" and may lead to a person's or organization's subconscious aversion to change. This subconscious aversion to change works as a subtle undermining force within corporate cultures and the individuals who contribute to them. The impact of these factors often spells trouble for projects from the start and stalls the timely completion of transformation.

Many studies point to two co-contributing causes of failure:

1. rush to change for change's sake
2. challenge in keeping people focused who are tasked with other initiatives.

While some theorize that project success hinges on identifying key milestones and celebrating small wins along the way, these theories do not address the cumulative effects of constant change on individuals. When left unacknowledged and unmanaged, this oversight threatens the sustainability of company initiatives and is likely a contributing factor to employee turnover. The impact of constant change for those who are not given tools to manage it plays out in many ways, causing friction and draining the creativity from a company's best and brightest employees. It works to subtly undermine the spirit of innovation, which is critical for organizations trying to navigate the cycles of disruption when implementing new tools and processes and channeling them into new ways of working. The impact of constant change on individuals, if left unaddressed, accumulates over time and, like muscle memory, is likely to be triggered during the next change initiative.

DRIVERS OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Some of the most common drivers of organizational change include:

- implementation of a new technology
- mergers and acquisitions
- change in leadership
- change in organizational culture
- times of a crisis

What complicates these initiatives is that each individual may be experiencing change in other parts of their lives. The changes may be compounding.

HUMAN PHYSIOLOGY AND THE CONNECTION TO PROGRAM FAILURE AND SUCCESS

Making the leap to successful organizational transformations requires a look into human physiology and the limbic system. From this perspective, change agents can gain an understanding of how the primitive brain reacts to change. And with this insight, leaders can learn to lift projects and teams out of the mire of blame and spiraling loops of "this is the way we always have done it" narratives, which only serve to keep people and teams stuck.

Research in neuroscience is shedding new light on how our brains are wired and the biochemical cascade that is set off when we have an emotional response. Our brains are wired to fear change. Such a perspective offers insight into how human emotion works as a biochemical hijacking of behavior at a subconscious level. It helps to explain why individuals, teams, projects, and initiatives fail. When individuals and teams experience fear or have fight-or-flight responses, it can impair their ability to focus and respond in ways that contribute to creative solutions.

If strategies for assisting people under stress are not addressed, survival behaviors that individuals fall back on to cope can stall the change initiatives. Providing a framework is not only vital to organizational evolution, but also for individuals to thrive in dynamic environments. For example, it is possible to learn mindfulness techniques that allow us to move past the fight-or-flight response and open the possibilities of higher-level thinking and more successful, collaborative problem-solving behaviors.

STRATEGIES FOR ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Planning for successful organizational change initiatives should seek to foster self-awareness in change champions and understand how change impacts us as individuals who make up the organization. Mindfulness techniques can be learned and included in training programs. Corporate cultures seeking to bring out the best in the talent they've attracted can begin to integrate change awareness before change-management initiatives, which supports overall organizational excellence.

The key takeaway in planning for any successful change initiative is recognizing that change is first and fundamentally an inside job. Accepting this fact and opening the dialogue on how change works within individuals can open the door to exploration of self-awareness. And, importantly, how humans can learn to adapt and thrive in dynamic environments. Progressive companies can teach their employees why their nervous systems have evolved in the ways they have, and employees can learn how this biochemical response works to trigger the cascade of chemicals that serves now to hold them hostage to fearful responses. Mindfulness techniques free us of the fight-or-flight cycles and teach us to help ourselves and others to successfully navigate in environments that are dynamic and shifting.

THE MISSING LINK TO SUCCESS OR FAILURE

In life sciences, technology, equipment, and system transformation can deliver next-generation solutions to better support the organization's needs along with high-level business initiatives, whether it be across the enterprise, laboratory, R&D, or manufacturing environments. While each company's approach to technology, equipment, and system change management may vary, it typically includes variations of the following steps:

1. prepare the organization for change
2. craft a vision and plan for change
3. implement the changes
4. embed changes within company culture and practices
5. review progress and analyze results.

This approach explains why companies excel at the technology and process elements of organizational change management yet fail to take into consideration the "people" part of this important triad. By turning inward and adding more support that focuses on the human element, organizations can ensure program success and employee satisfaction.

Whether the organizational change is developmental, transitional, or transformational, the failure rate for change initiatives is extremely high. Key elements of failure include employees who are uncomfortable leaving their comfort zone and poor internal communications.

While companies excel at the process and technology aspects, the human element needs to be considered in any successful organizational transformation program. Creating a culture that embraces employee-focused programs and incorporates mindfulness techniques contributes to the spirit of a learning environment and recognizes the human elements in our complex world.

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