

Change Management Needs to Change

by Ron Ashkenas

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As a recognized discipline, change management has been in existence for over half a century. Yet despite the huge investment that companies have made in tools, training, and thousands of books (over 83,000 on Amazon), most studies still show a 60-70% failure rate for organizational change projects – a statistic that has stayed constant from the 1970's to the present.

Given this evidence, is it possible that everything we know about change management is wrong and that we need to go back to the drawing board? Should we abandon Kotter's eight success factors, Blanchard's moving cheese, and everything else we know about engagement, communication, small wins, building the business case, and all of the other elements of the change management framework?

While it might be plausible to conclude that we should rethink the basics, let me suggest an alternative explanation: **The content of change management is reasonably correct, but the managerial capacity to implement it has been woefully underdeveloped.** In fact, instead of strengthening managers' ability to manage change, we've instead allowed managers to outsource change management to HR specialists and consultants instead of taking accountability themselves – an approach that often doesn't work.

Here's an example of this pattern: Over the course of several years, a major healthcare company introduced thousands of managers to a particular change management approach, while providing more intensive training in specific tools and techniques to six sigma and HR experts. As a result, managers became familiar with the concepts, but depended on the "experts" to actually put together the plans. Eventually, change management just became one more work-stream for every project, instead of a new way of thinking about how to get something accomplished.

Obviously, not every company lets its managers off the hook in this way. But if your organization (or your piece of it) struggles with effectively implementing change, you might want to ask yourself the following three questions:

1. Do you have a common framework, language, and set of tools for managing significant change? There are plenty to choose from, and many of them have the same set of ingredients, just explained and parsed differently. The key is to have a common set of definitions, approaches, and simple checklists that everyone is familiar with.
2. To what extent are your plans for change integrated into your overall project plans, and not put together separately or in parallel? The challenge is to make change management part and parcel of the business plan, and not an add-on that is managed independently.
3. Finally, who is accountable for effective change management in your organization: Managers or "experts" (whether from staff groups or outside the company)? Unless your managers are accountable for making sure that change happens systematically and rigorously – and certain behaviors are rewarded or punished accordingly – they won't develop their skills.

Everyone agrees that change management is important. Making it happen effectively, however, needs to be a core competence of managers and not something that they can pass off to others.



Ron Ashkenas is a managing partner of Schaffer Consulting. He is a co-author of *The GE Work-Out* and *The Boundaryless Organization*. His latest book is *Simply Effective*.

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