

Real improvement requires real change



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'Tis the season for making personal resolutions. According to a poll conducted by CBS in 2013, roughly a third of us make an improvement promise to ourselves at the beginning of the New Year.

Most involve health (lose weight, quit smoking, drink less) while others strive to improve a relationship, find a better job, further education or save more money.

Unfortunately, the enthusiasm doesn't last long. Researchers at Scranton University reported that almost a quarter of well-intenders fall off the wagon during the first week and roughly half during the first month.

The defection rate slows considerably after that, reinforcing the theory that it takes roughly a month to change a habit.

Forty percent claim to be working on their resolution after six months. Ultimately, less than 10 percent of resolution goals are achieved.

And that's just one person trying to change! Is it any wonder then that leading change within an organization is really tough?

Every couple of months I receive a call from an organization inquiring about my services. Occasionally, the caller is the senior leader, in which case I get pretty excited. But too often the call is delegated, as if leading an organization through change was akin to changing the oil in the company's vehicles.

The calls often go something like this:

Caller: We're interested in eliminating the waste in our (fill in the blank) process. Our president recently attended a seminar on Lean and she's convinced that this can really help us.

Rick: I see. So tell me, how do your employees feel? Do they recognize problems with the process?

Caller: Oh no. They're pretty comfortable with the way things are. In fact, it will be a battle to get them to change.

Rick: Well, I can certainly help you improve your process. But if you want those changes to stick, we're going to have to change the way your employees think. We'll have to make them sensitive to problems and motivated to solve them. That involves a lot more effort than a three-day process improvement event and it involves your management team.

Caller: Oh ... OK, we'll get back to you. Needless to say, few call back.

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situation any more than the latest fad diet will help them keep 30 pounds off forever.

Improved results come from changed behaviors. Changing organizational results means changing the behaviors of the majority of people within the organization. In order to do that, the habits and ultimately the core beliefs of the organization must change. That's not something one impacts during a couple of weeks.

Obviously, while knowledge of various tools and techniques is necessary for successful implementation, sustained success goes way beyond education. If education sufficed in driving change, there

wouldn't be a smoker left in the country. Yet, time and again we see increases in cigarette taxes as more effective than any new warning or TV commercial citing the dangers of smoking.

Unfortunately, a lot of dollars are foolishly spent each year providing cursory training, believing that employees will emerge from a two-hour introductory class as born-again waste avengers. I suspect that's often the next call made following our aborted conversation above.

So, if you're still game for implementing real, lasting and positive change within your organization, here are some thoughts for getting started:

- Clearly articulate why change is needed. You're likely battling complacency, especially in a strengthening economy.

Don't keep your concerns to yourself.

- Identify the core beliefs that drive behaviors today and what those beliefs must become.

- Specify behaviors of managers and supervisors that reinforce the old belief system and required changes to support the new belief system. Creating management behavior lists to start doing, stop doing, do more of and do less of can be helpful.

- Make it clear that this is where you are going. Patience is required, especially with those making a real effort to change. Realize, however, that ultimately success will depend on the actions of managers and supervisors. Hold them accountable.

The good news is that some people do successfully realize New Year's resolutions. Some leaders do lead their organizations to dramatically higher levels of performance. Granted, it's a small percentage of those who try. But for those who succeed, it's life-changing.

RICK SAYS

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