

You Can Keep the Change

There is so much advice about change that it fills the pages of innumerable books found in just about every manager's office. Admit it, you probably have one. If you ask anybody about an existing process, they will probably come up with a way to change it. There are as many reasons to change something as there are to keep things the same. With so many different opinions, it's hard to know which direction to follow. But let's forget all that for a second and assume a business needs change and you have determined the ideal path. The important, and often overlooked, question is, **How do you make change sustainable? The truth is that usually change doesn't stick.**

You've probably laughed about it, or worse, been part of it: a consultant comes in and makes recommendations that get implemented to great fanfare, only to be cast aside a short time later for a watered-down variation of the plan. The project gets chalked up to a swing, but if we are completely honest, it's a swing and a miss.

The funny thing about change is that the right people have to want it and if they don't, it won't stick. That seems like an obvious statement, but it may not be the people you think. While it's important to gain approval from executives at the top of the pay scale to make the change, it's the people who actually perform the work that really matter if you want to keep the change. Whether it's a senior graphic designer in a marketing firm or a machinist in a manufacturing facility, real change comes from the people who do the work.

Make It Simple. For change to stick, it has to be made simple. If employees don't "get it," change won't happen. Simplicity will lead to consistency.

Communicate It. Everybody has to understand the big picture and the parts they play. Good leaders are able to communicate the big picture to all levels of the organization. It's not an easy task, and that is a major reason why change often doesn't last.

Own It. Change has to be owned by the people doing the work, and those employees need to feel like they are contributing. A manager implementing change with a stick will only breed turnover. A recent example illustrates the point. In planning for a major redo of a distribution center, I asked a warehouse employee some questions about what she would do. She proceeded to lead me around and point out all the major issues and what she would do to make improve the process – move certain products closer, add more shelves, build more flexible shelf space to accommodate different order quantities and product sizes, create pick-ready slots for shorter people, something the 6-foot-five warehouse manager had never thought of. All of the ideas were implemented within a few weeks, she was committed to the changes and the company experienced major efficiency gains. It's the perfect example of organic change. Management listened and authorized the employee's suggestions, and she implemented them without any need for "buy-in" or supervision. When front-line employees have the opportunity to contribute, they typically rise to the occasion and can play a pivotal role in making change stick.

The ripple effect can be interesting as well. A change suggested by one is often noticed by other employees who have good ideas. When they witness management following through with suggestions, the ball starts rolling, and as long as the ideas implemented are good ones, the momentum continues.

So what have we said? Change has to be simple and it has to be owned by the people responsible for doing the work. If you can accomplish those two concepts, sustainability becomes a natural by-product. The best phrase I have heard that sums this up is, "Simplicity leads to consistency, and consistency leads to longevity."
In other words, you can keep the change!