#1 in a series

Thoughts on Effective Change Projects: Don't move until you get the objective clear.

"What part of 'Improve POE locates by 5%' don't you understand?"
No matter who sets the project objective, whether derived from the strategic plan, mandated by a regulatory agency, or set by a project team, one rule should always be held: **Never assume everyone (or anyone) on the project team or in management understands it the same way**. Gaining a shared understanding is critical; there is little more frustrating and demotivating than getting well into a major project only to discover that participants are working toward different goals.

"I thought 'improve' meant more money."
Face it; words are vague, fuzzy things that are handy for communication but terrible for defining specific concepts. Worse, we don't know when others don't share our own understanding. We think we are being clear, we understand the words we are saying, but the person sitting right there next to you, the one nodding in understanding, very likely has a very different conception of the objective than you do. So what to do about it?

"I thought 'improve' meant more locates."
Nit-pick and start arguments. Even if they are saying they agree, ask each person what they think they understand; specifically... Get the disagreements out in the open. There are all sorts of reasons for it, but the fact is that people will agree with almost anything. Getting to disagreements will take some work. Don't trust a nodding head; ask the person to define the terms. Don't allow more assertive people to tell others what they think.

"Is that five percent of total wage assignments?"
Get the objective up on the wall, on a flip chart sheet, where everyone can see it, and keep it there. The team should not meet without the objective (and measurements tracking performance against it) clearly posted. Agreement is not cast in cement, it can and will wander over time.

"No, I think it is five percent of total current cases"
Define the objective in measurable terms. Nothing makes it clearer. What measurement will have to change by how much for the project to be successful? This will open up major discussions about what's being measured, how exactly the measures are being formed, where data come from etc., but at least the objective is getting clearer.

Once the words and measurable goals are clear within the team, share this understanding with senior management. "Here is what we think we are supposed to accomplish. If we do that, then we will be considered successful?"

"We all understand…, right?"
Take the time. Urgency can cause this critical step to be set aside, but lack of shared understanding will cost far more than time once the work is underway.

Counter advice on growing an organization: mentoring vs. learning organizations

Mentoring, one-on-one, long term training, may seem to be a good idea but if the goal is to create a learning organization and to improve performance it should be used cautiously, for several reasons:

- Mentoring can seem like progress when it is really covering up dysfunctional processes. The first ingredient in growing an organization should be business processes that are capable and efficient. Without effective processes, case officers will continue to spend too much of their time, usually over 40%, just trying to cope with poor processes.

- Senior employees training and mentoring new ones (especially without effective, efficient, documented processes) will add undocumented variation to work. Undocumented variation makes it much harder to carry out substantial performance improvement.

- Individual knowledge only becomes really valuable when it is transformed into explicit, shared knowledge, available to and understood by the team (and organization). Teams are the basic unit of a learning organization.

Before mentoring, try improving key business processes. Focus organizational learning on:

- Developing systemic understanding of these key processes and how they work

- Building a "platform" for individuals to air perceptions and assumptions for discussion and scrutiny.

- Creating a means for team learning, where individual knowledge, such as a mentors, can be shared and add to the organizational knowledge base.

- Building processes that support the employees.

Effective processes enable personal mastery. They move employees from spending their time coping with the process to applying their expertise where it is needed: getting support to the children.

O&A #4 Quick thought:

The medium is a big part of the message. How major change information is carried to managers and employees will have a great deal to do with how it is understood and their reaction to it. This is critically true when the changes will directly affect them and their jobs.

Recommendations.

- Don't introduce a new communication medium, like a newsletter or intranet site, to introduce a major change effort; in times of change people are most likely to use their usual and trusted sources – and least likely to use a new one.

- Strengthen existing communication channels. Ask if you don't know.

- Don't rely on mass communication alone. It won't respond to individual questions.

- Give middle managers and first-line supervisors extra information and extra support to answer questions about the changes. They rank high as trusted information sources.

- Actively use formal and informal communication channels.

- Communicate both good and bad news. Leaving bad news out will hurt the credibility of the source. Besides, it will get out anyway and it will sound a lot worse.

Case Study: Blue Mountain Resort Golf Slow-play

Blue Mountain, a four-season resort situated due north of Toronto, is Ontario's largest and busiest mountain resort
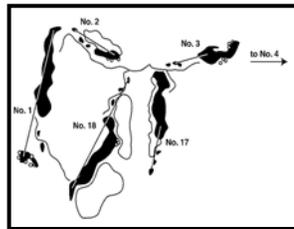
*"**We chose slow play** because that was the number one cause of customer dissatisfaction with our course. We tackled the issue by studying the course, the way golfers move through it and the amount of time it took them to move from one hole to the next. We tackled holes where play was taking the longest over expected time."*

A cross-functional team was launched made up of mid-level managers and senior employees from each department that effected play- through time. Groups that were used to working independently were now expected to act as a team, to understand the customers' experience in playing golf on their course, and to improve on their level of satisfaction with that experience.

> *Sometimes the process is people moving through your operation*

"The effort has been a combination of changing staff perspective, but changes to the process itself have given us, all of us, the greatest gains. And the role of the cross-functional team, getting the different groups that work with the golf course to realize that it is going to take a team like this to really make this golf course work, pro-shop, outside staff, player support, maintenance, everybody.

"Cross-functional cooperation has become a style of working for us out here. I don't mean just my style of management; I mean the whole staff, each person, has become involved in helping to make this a better place to play golf.

"We were successful; the proportion of people who say that slow play is the number one dissatisfaction item dropped, leveled off and then stayed stable. Satisfaction is improving; mainly that we are getting a lot of customer compliments and our business is way up, over 60% in the last three years, from 24,000 to about 35,000 rounds of golf per season.

> *"Now even on my worst day, even the toughest, things are manageable"*

"Now even on my worst day, even the toughest, things are manageable. We discovered that it took a cross-functional approach to really manage play. The Team developed 'the system' and the staff believes in it. It has become routine."

Team Leader
Director, Golf and Tennis
Blue Mountain Resort

Excerpted from *William, D., Mining the Middle Ground: Developing Mid-level Managers for Strategic Change," St.Lucie Press, Boca Raton,, 2001, p. 107*

Welcome to the first issue of WAI Child Support Services Observations and Advisories; a quarterly forum for the exchange of information and professional opinions about process-based change execution. Our goal is to present a mix of ideas and perspectives; to challenge some common held ones; always with an emphasis on making process based change projects effective in the real-world work place. We invite your input.   David N. Williams,   Principal and Executive Consultant, www.williamsalliance.com.   (760)735-8674   (613)722-8945