

Why Change Efforts Often Fail

David J. Chinsky

In his best-selling book Leading Change, John Kotter points to *lack of urgency* as one of the most significant factors in failed change efforts. While a senior leadership team may be on board and in agreement with moving down a new path, quite often this very team under invests in creating sufficient energy and buy-in on the part of the rest of the organization. *Complacency with the status quo turns out to be a powerful barrier to change initiatives even when leaders confront it head on.*

Case Study: One of our clients, shortly after announcing a change in handling customer returns, learned that employees didn't perceive any real problem in how customers were currently being treated. Our client decided to paint a more visible picture of the crisis being faced so its employees could see the negative results of inaction. This compelling prediction of lost clients and missed financial targets moved employees to see the need for a new approach to customer retention. *Effective leaders persuasively make the liabilities of "staying still" come alive for their people.*

A second source of complacency derives from a lack of sufficient performance feedback from sources outside of the organization. *Seeing reality only from internal lenses can blur the true consequences of maintaining the status quo.* Leaders can enhance the clarity of their sight by reaching out to customers, vendors and other key stakeholders, and by insisting on unfiltered feedback from as many sources as possible.

Case Study: One of our clients, in an effort to become less insular, decided to solicit customer feedback as a critical input to annual performance appraisals. Establishing this new channel of communication has since reduced the tendency for leaders of this organization to miss important signals, and succeeded in teaching the organization how valuable client input can be in adapting to the marketplace.

Organizations that successfully overcome their lack of urgency still face the struggles of getting their people to let go of old ideas, programs, and strategies. *Effective leaders acknowledge that until employees successfully leave the old behind, any hope for sustainable change is unrealistic.* These leaders play a critical role in enabling the organization to come to terms with what it is giving up so it can reach out and claim a new future.

We know from our work with organizations that as they grow, change, and adapt, they often benefit from the advice of trusted advisors and expert consultants. Our work across industries and product lines provides us with numerous opportunities to cross pollinate as we enable our clients to successfully lead change initiatives.