



Big Bang — Big Bust **Five Warning Signs of Change Effort Failure**

"It must be considered that there is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies in all those who profit by the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in all those who profit by the new."

Niccolò Machiavelli

It starts with a big bang...the CEO makes a presentation, a Task Force is created, a series of kick-off meetings ensue, and everyone is trundled off to events designed to educate them in the new order of things.

Welcome to the wonderful world of large-scale change efforts in corporate America. Driven by competitive forces and the rapid rate of external change, the leaders of organizations attempt big changes: Total Quality, Reengineering, Culture Change. Yet the failure rates of these efforts are staggering: nearly 70% do not succeed.

In his 1999 book Dance of Change, Peter Senge concluded that "this failure to sustain significant change recurs again and again despite substantial resources committed to the change effort (many are bankrolled by top management), talented and committed people 'driving the change', and high stakes."

Grim reading if you are in the middle of a big change effort. How do you know if it's not working? Here are five warning signs ...

1. Where are the Leaders?

Senior leadership has vanished, at least in terms of their active and manifest support of the change effort. Highly visible at the outset, leaders often go on to other things, and without their evident support, the change effort stalls out.

2. Clique Here

Cliques begin to emerge. Often formed (at least, initially) with good intentions, the cliques now represent opposing camps:

- The "Insiders" are champions of the change; as time goes by and resistance is met, they adopt the mindset that they alone have the answer, and other cliques are at best ignorant and at worst a danger to the organization.

- The “Outsiders” are active opponents of the change, either through overt resistance or covert subversion. Their mindset is that if you fight change long enough and hard enough, it will go away.

The rest of the organization represents the “Inertials”. Caught between the other two cliques, they aren’t completely against the change, but they aren’t sold either. Fear of change plus unclear benefits equals organizational stasis.

3. Lots of Action Plans, Not Much Action

Change efforts often begin with a flurry of meetings, leading to a multitude of action plans. Six months on, the plans are gathering dust and the actions evident in the organization look suspiciously similar to those before the change effort began.

4. Not My Day Job

Most people’s daily activities don’t reflect the change effort. They have other priorities, so – no surprise – that’s where they focus their efforts. If annual goals, performance reviews and compensation aren’t directly tied to the change effort, behavior change is unlikely. And those people who’s day job *is* the change effort (champions, task force, committee, etc.) are viewed by the organization as having sole responsibility for the change. “They” will take care of it, and “we” don’t have to do anything differently.

5. And Never Is Heard An Encouraging Word

People have stopped talking about the change, with two exceptions: “What ever happened to...?” and “Well, I knew *that* wasn’t going to work.” The change is no longer part of every conversation, every presentation, every interaction between people in the organization. It has become the “project du jour” and “something we tried once”.