

Mapping Out a Game Plan for CHANGE

By John Austin, Ph.D.

Demystify the challenge of change management by following five important steps.

Today's human resource professional cannot succeed without change management skills. HR executives are able to see the organization holistically. They act as translators within an organization between organizational levels, locations and divisions. They are in position to sense early warning signs about market transitions, employee concerns or disconnects between strategic visions and operations.

For these reasons, it is often HR professionals who are tasked with implementing change initiatives or leading efforts to align organizational systems with strategic shifts. Fortunately, with vigilance, a deep well of patience, and a good change management planning process, any manager can successfully undertake the complex challenge of leading change.

Organizational change is deceptively easy to understand. The change management process boils down to reducing barriers to a change and generating momentum and enthusiasm. >

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But while it may be easy to explain change management, it can be frustratingly difficult to actually do change management. The disconnect between theory and practice is due to stakeholders' complex, seemingly irrational and often political reactions to new initiatives.

A well-designed change implementation process anticipates stakeholder interactions and enables the implementation team to adjust their actions and arguments to match stakeholder reactions.

There are five essential steps in an effective change management planning process. When I facilitate change implementation

teams, I use these steps to keep the team focused on the dynamics of the change process and not get distracted by the environmental noise that accompanies change.

Identify Stakeholders

"Stakeholder identification is key, not only to define who you need to get on board, but to continue to refine and scope out the problem," says Jeff Sabo, senior manager, human resources for Life Technologies, a Carlsbad, Calif.-based biotechnology company with 9,500 employees. Stakeholder identification is an iterative process. Throughout change planning and imple-

The change process can create an opportunity to strengthen bonds between key stakeholder groups.

mentation, change agents check and re-check for missing stakeholders.

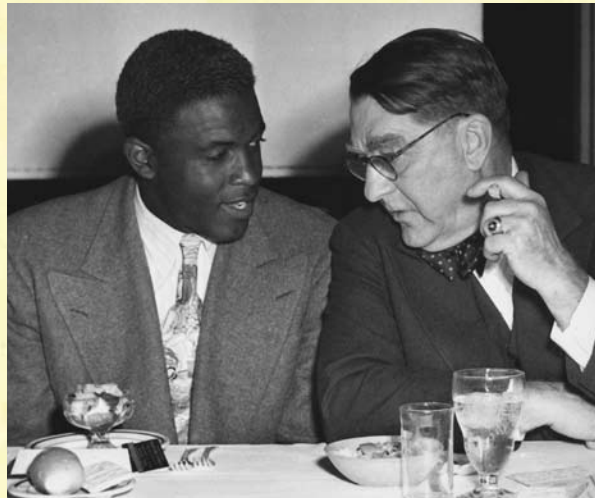
A Major Change—Integrating Baseball

In 1942, Branch Rickey initiated a change process that would take five years and define his legacy.

Rickey, the general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, set out to desegregate Major League Baseball. In 1945, he found the ideal partner in this effort in Jackie Robinson. Together they set in motion a chain of events that would racially integrate all Major League ball clubs and offer a template for integrating institutions throughout the United States.

Rickey's actions in 1942-47 illustrate each of the five essential steps in an effective change management process.

Stakeholder identification: Rickey identified five key stakeholder groups that needed to be persuaded to support the change for it to be successful. His list included the owners of the Dodgers, the commissioner of baseball, the Dodger players, players on other teams and the media. Rickey identified other stakeholder groups as well, but targeted these five as primary due to their influence and power to block the change.



Robinson and Rickey in 1948.

'Luck is the residue of opportunity and design.'

—Branch Rickey

Momentum-building frames: Rickey tried to keep his arguments for the change set within a meta-frame of talent acquisition and winning. He actively resisted any outside group attempts to frame the change as a civil rights issue. Rickey was concerned that the signing of black baseball players could become a civil rights issue before the players proved themselves on the field of play. If this happened, he

suspected that it would become easier for players to build support for player strikes and could embolden other team owners and politicians to speak out against the change. But it would be hard for others to argue against change if it was framed as an opportunity to ensure the best players were in the Major League.

A stakeholder engagement strategy: Rickey paid close attention to the timing of

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Stakeholders are sorted based on their power to block the change and their interest in the change. Obviously, the change team needs to work with stakeholders who have high levels of power and interest. The need to consider powerful but disinterested stakeholders and interested but relatively powerless stakeholders may not be so obvious. The former groups may become barriers to change attempts if they suddenly take an interest in the change. The latter groups may be motivated to form coalitions or partner with more powerful stakeholders to gain voices in the change. In both instances, change

implementation can be helped by consistent and early considerations of their potential interests.

Align Arguments to Build Momentum

A strong implementation plan builds momentum for the change among key stakeholder groups. Justifications for the change can be linked to strongly held stakeholder values. If done carefully, this process can create a sense of ownership and connection among stakeholder groups. Essentially, the change process can create an opportunity to strengthen

bonds between the key stakeholder groups by linking their underlying values.

“Individual stakeholders can be barriers to change but a group of *aligned* stakeholders can make all the difference when implementing a plan,” says Renee Bradford, senior vice president for human resources at Hospice Compassus in Brentwood, Tenn.

“Stakeholders don’t come to the table all on the same page. It is important to create an environment where stakeholders can share their own and listen to others’ points of view. Be sure to build in time to have this open dialogue and to help the stakeholders focus on the central issues. >

his interactions with stakeholders. He did nothing until he received approval from the Dodgers’ owners in 1943. He knew it was essential to have the support of Red Barber, the immensely popular Dodgers radio announcer. Rickey told Barber about his plans over lunch in 1945, prior to any public action on the change. He did not want to go forward until he was sure he could count on Barber’s support. Barber was honored that Rickey confided in him and after much soul searching decided it was his responsibility to support Rickey’s effort.

Identifying trigger points: Kennisaw “Mountain” Landis had been commissioner of baseball for more than 20 years and had virtually complete control over the league. Rickey knew it would be difficult to move forward without the support of the commissioner. He also knew that Landis was not to be swayed on the issue of desegregation. Over the years, Landis had actively blocked numerous desegregation attempts. Landis was in his 90s, so Rickey simply waited and planned. After Landis died on

Nov. 25, 1944, it is no coincidence that the Dodgers’ efforts to sign a black ballplayer moved rapidly forward in 1945. Rickey had everything in place to act as soon as Landis was no longer commissioner.

Plan to be wrong: Rickey put a lot of thought into winning over the Dodger players. He had Robinson play for one year in the minor leagues so players could see that desegregated teams could be successful: Robinson’s team won the minor league world series. He moved spring training to Cuba to avoid Florida Jim Crow laws, and he organized numerous scrimmages between the Dodgers and their minor league club. Rickey was convinced the players would see how good Robinson was and request he be signed to the Dodgers. However, none of these plans worked and Dodger players remained unsupportive.

Eventually, Rickey realized he needed to modify his plan. He made plans to have his team manager, Leo Durocher, demand that Rickey promote Robinson to the Dodgers so that Rickey could “reluctantly”

acquiesce to his manager’s demands. Unfortunately, the day before Durocher was to make the demand, the commissioner banned him from baseball for associating with gamblers. Rickey was forced to once again change his plans. He simply announced that Robinson would be the starting first baseman for the Dodgers, and set about figuring out different ways to get the players to accept Robinson as a teammate early in the season.

Rickey made sure the Dodger players were aware of the personal abuse and death threats Robinson endured and hoped that once they saw his baseball skills they would begin to accept him and stand up for him as a teammate. Within a month, Dodger players began to view verbal abuses and attacks on Robinson as attacks on their team. It is a stretch to say many of the players became friends with Robinson that year but by the end of the summer it is fair to say they accepted him as their teammate.

—John Austin

Successful implementation involves anticipating the unexpected and being ready to rapidly design a plan B.

Anything less than this will greatly reduce the opportunity to strengthen bonds between the stakeholders and thereby build momentum in support of the change project.”

Create an Engagement Strategy

Once stakeholders' interests and links to the change initiative have been identified, the change leader can chart an engagement strategy. The engagement strategy outlines the timing, order and actions for connecting with key stakeholders.

Which stakeholders need to be approached before the change becomes public? Do some need to hear about the change from you before they hear about it from another source? Do you want to invite certain people or groups to become partners in the change? Are there groups you want to avoid until the change gets to a certain point?

Address these questions in the engagement strategy. This step connects the stakeholder analysis with specific engagement actions and forces the change leader to consider how stakeholders influence each other.

Identify Trigger Events

Sometimes, trigger events must happen for the change to be successful but are outside the change leader's control. Trigger events can include competitor actions, changes in regulation, changes in leadership, support from powerful stakeholders, or other environmental shifts.

All too often, change implementation teams devote limited time and resources attempting to force trigger events to occur

that are not within their control. The change team must recognize events they do not control as soon as possible. The sooner the team can recognize the limits of its influence, the sooner the team can devote its time to actions within its control. Recognizing trigger events enables the change leader to assess the probability of the change's success based on the probability the trigger event will occur and begin making plans for rapid action once the trigger event occurs.

Plan to Be Wrong

Change implementation is fraught with the risk of overconfidence. The change design process often involves months of extensive analyses, comparisons of alternatives and intense debates about the relative merits of different actions. After all this effort, it is easy to fall into the trap of believing nothing can go wrong—after all, the design team spent hours debating all possible contingencies.

Dan Spaulding, director of human resources for mergers and acquisitions at Life Technologies, emphasizes the importance of building flexibility into the process. “Acquiring a company requires certain assumptions. Those assumptions are not always going to be right on target. The reality is, you are going to make errors and you need to prepare for how you will correct for them, before you even know what they are.” Spaulding suggests working through possible scenarios during the planning stage and building contingency plans to reduce the tendency toward tunnel vision that can emerge during the planning process.

During change implementation, count on one outcome: Something will go wrong, or at least not as expected. Successful implementation involves anticipating the unexpected and being ready to rapidly design a plan B, or a plan C. Environmental monitoring can be built into the change-implementation process so the change leader can identify weak signals indicating unanticipated reactions to the change.

The complexity of change management often comes back to the myriad stakeholder interests and their reactions and interactions throughout a change. By bringing these external perspectives into your change planning process you greatly improve your chances for a successful outcome. As Sabo recommends: “Recognize that you need to give people time to process their reactions and build that into the change process.” ■

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