



Finish what you start

Too many organizations give up on change and wind up wasting time, money, credibility.

By Tim Smith, Principal

Let's make a cake.

First, we'll get a mix and toss it in a big bowl. Now, throw in some eggs, a bit of oil, and some nuts and raisins. Pour in the milk.

Done. Isn't it great?

Ahhh, but of course, our cake isn't really finished yet, is it? It's just a big glob of ingredients sitting in the bottom of a mixing bowl.

Until we follow through and bake it, we don't have cake. Just batter. And batter's pretty tough to adorn with candles or cover with frosting.

Starting but not finishing

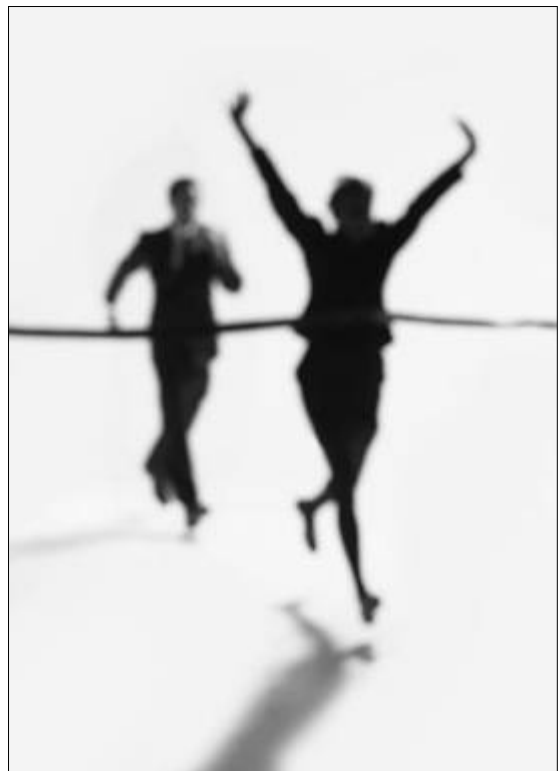
This "everything but the baking" story is a common one in business. We see what we want to accomplish, come up with ideas for reaching our goals, but give up before we finish the job.

We're left with batter, when we really wanted cake.

Early in my consulting career, I met with a prospect who knew his company needed help. During our conversation, he talked about a wide range of problems the organization was experiencing – everything from declining profits to employee turnover.

As we explored the issues deeper, he rattled off a list of actions they'd tried to implement to solve the company's difficulties. Unfortunately, they never finished anything they started!

- They defined processes and procedures for key operations, but no one followed them.
- They purchased and installed a system for managing the sales force, but people stuck to the old manual methods.
- They defined key performance measures, but didn't track them.
- They gathered data to analyze the composition



Some companies never get to the finish line with the projects they start.

and profitability of their sales, but didn't look at the data.

- They assigned people to improvement teams, but the teams didn't meet.
- They defined strategic and operational plans, but didn't execute.

In my mind, I saw a management team standing in place, with half-completed projects and initiatives strewn around – as the company continued to sink deeper and deeper.

Why weren't any of these excellent paths to improvement followed? The answer is that it's easy to start a program or project – but often quite difficult to finish it. That old bugaboo – human nature – gets in the way.

The obstacles to change? People and time

Recently, a client of mine was expressing frustration at his company's slow pace of adoption of a new order fulfillment process. Some employees didn't want any part of it, and he was struggling to understand why. "They just don't care," he surmised.

It's not necessarily that people don't care, I explained. Certainly, employees often resist new programs or initiatives but it's usually because they simply don't like the idea of change. It's hard work, often painful, and it means stepping outside of the comfort zone.

Even initiatives that will save employees time and effort can be looked at suspiciously if it means learning a new way of doing things.

The other factor that often sabotages change is management's lack of time and attention in carrying out the initiative. There's no real buy-in from the men and women running the company, so when employees balk, management gives up.

And that sets a bad precedent that usually leads to trouble.

Implementing new procedures, programs, systems and structures is a vital part of any organization's evolution. Change is often necessary in our world, and successful organizations understand that a culture of change is a strong competitive advantage. At progressive companies, employees accept the idea of change, and trust that management values and supports new ideas.

On the other hand, abandoning good ideas or useful projects in midstream negatively affects the organization in many ways:

- The pattern of abandonment tells people that change is not necessary, and employees quit trying to adapt and grow. They have a tough time getting motivated for something that they believe won't get completed, so they don't even try. It also stifles creativity because people lose their motivation to think of new approaches, since they know instinctively that their idea will never be implemented.

- Companies gradually stagnate because critical changes never get done.
- An abandoned change makes matters worse when some people follow the new way and others stay with the old way. It's confusing and creates instability.
- Employees place no value in your word. You lose credibility. And your employees learn that if they resist long enough, you'll give up and shift your focus to something else. Allow enough efforts to "die on the vine" and there's a good chance your employees will begin to view you as a push-over.
- Your word isn't the only word that loses value. Failing to lead your company through change fosters a culture where people can't count on others – because employees see that others don't do what they say they'll do. And why should they? If you don't follow through, there's no reason they should.
- Abandoning changes before they are complete is a complete waste of money. You shell out real cash, but get no real result.

Nine nifty tips for keeping change alive

So how do you keep important change initiatives alive and moving forward? First, recognize that change is critical to your company's success, and commit fully to the process.

Then, treat the change as you would a new client or customer – with enthusiasm, excitement and a plan for implementation that is detailed, focused and realistic. Here are nine nifty tips for following through that will help you implement any important change or new program or process:

1. Charter a team.

Create a group of employees who will be most affected by the change, and "share the power." Get their feedback about the problem. Engage them in defining the solution. Holding out for what you believe is the best solution? A less-than-ideal solution that people accept and implement is more valuable than an ideal one that people reject and resist. Chartering a team establishes accountability and responsibility, and also distributes the work among a larger group of people.

2. Learn how to implement change.

Educate your leaders – including managers, supervisors, and opinion leaders – about how to manage change. Most people don't necessarily have the knowledge or skill to lead change implementation because it's not something they do frequently. Give your leaders the training they need to be able to engage the interest and energy of others, establish plans, keep projects on track, remove obstacles to

progress and handle resistance constructively without shutting people down.

3. Clearly define success.

Describe in detail how you'll know the change is complete. What result are you looking to see? What are the expected benefits of the change? Use that definition as the "north star" for guiding your project.

4. Have a plan. Share it ... but treat it as a guide.

Put your plan on paper. Include milestone outcomes, due dates and the names of people responsible for producing those outcomes.

Communicate your plan to the team, but be sure that everyone understands that it's just a guide – and that the plan could change if necessary. Business organizations are complex, and you'll likely encounter unexpected and unintended consequences or obstacles along the way.

By ensuring that everyone understands that adjustments may be necessary, you can help to minimize the impact of unforeseen issues that in the past would derail any implementation.

5. Remember that you're dealing with people.

Even small changes can trigger strong emotions. Expect some resistance. And don't be surprised by a temporary decline in productivity and attitude when implementation begins. Things get muddy in the middle while in transition. You can help by implementing the change over a reasonable time period, controlling the number of changes you implement at any one time and setting short-term, achievable goals to give everyone a sense of momentum and accomplishment.

6. Channel the energy of opinion leaders.

Who are the opinion leaders in your company – the folks that people unofficially turn to for guidance? Include opinion leaders in the change – both designing the change and implementing it. If they support it, others will too. If they don't, you're doomed. Give those leaders a reason to participate, and encourage them to be visible with their support.

7. Communicate more than you think you need to.

Change is a process, not an event. Ask anyone who has been through a merger or acquisition. The purchase/sale transaction is minor compared to the work required to bring two organizations together. Communicate the plan and the status of each step, and also solicit feedback from those affected by the change.

8. Don't forget the training.

Make sure people understand completely what is expected and why the change is necessary. Ensure that they understand the benefits of change to their

own jobs and departments, and to the company as a whole. And remember to follow up after training to ensure that people follow the new way and have access to people to help them through rough spots.

"Change is a vital part of any company's evolution. Companies that abandon changes gradually stagnate."

9. Monitor your progress.

It is not enough just to define a plan and say "Okay, go do it." People get distracted and pulled in other directions. You get the results you pay attention to, not the results you merely hope for. Monitor progress regularly and address any delays in getting steps completed. Dig into the causes of the delays and find solutions to get progress back on track. Don't fall into the trap of paying attention only to daily work and forgetting the change project – that's one of the most frequent causes of implementation failure.

Embrace change and find success

Does your organization embrace change, and follow through with the important initiatives that can make long-term success possible?

Take a few minutes – right now, before you get sidetracked by daily responsibilities – to make a list of recent changes your company or department has tried to implement. Which ones didn't get finished?

Pick one of those, and then using the nine tips here, see if you can lead the way to change. And remember ... it's not a cake until you finish baking!

More Information? If you'd like to learn more about planning and implementing change at your organization, please send an E-mail to tim@plaidgroup.com, visit our web site at www.plaidgroup.com, or call us at 713-627-3569. The Plaid Group publishes a free bimonthly e-mail newsletter filled with insights and ideas you can use to enhance your company's operational performance, spur growth and increase bottom-line profits. To subscribe, change your e-mail address or unsubscribe, please visit www.plaidgroup.com/newsletters_subscribe.asp.

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