Mapping a healthy change trajectory

There is no standard recipe for creating a healthy organization. Rather, HR professionals must work with others to create the most suitable way to connect employee well-being, working conditions and performance. This requires an appropriate healthy change trajectory.

Becoming a healthy organization is more of a journey than a destination. Yes, the "what" is important but so too is the "how." What's needed, then, is not better change management — an overused concept — but change leadership from many groups and individuals. Change agents need to till the ground, providing fertile conditions for new ways of thinking and acting to take root and eventually flourish.

5 principles to map healthy change trajectory

These five principles can help you to map your organization's healthy change trajectory:
• Understand your organization's readiness to change.
• Align structure and culture.
• Link people initiatives to the business strategy.
• Widen the circle of involvement.
• Make time for learning and innovation.

Understanding change readiness: A basic insight from the field of health promotion is the importance of a person's readiness to make changes in her health-related attitudes and behaviours. A person's readiness to change determines realistic goals and timelines — and whether she will make any progress at all. Readiness assesses past actions, knowledge and awareness about change benefits and the motivation to adopt new lifestyle practices.

Organizations also can be assessed for their readiness to change in a healthy direction. Develop a checklist of the basic features of the organization (such as leadership, managers and supervisors, training, HR model, communication and culture) and assess each as a source of resistance, readiness or momentum. Develop a vision you would like to see the organization aspire to achieve. Now use that vision (and at some point validate it with co-workers) to assess the organization's readiness to take the actions needed to realize the vision.

Aligning structure and culture: One of the great truisms of 21st century workplaces is change is constant. But if this is accurate, why does research show most major organizational change initiatives fail to achieve their intended goals?

To resolve this paradox, it helps to view workplace change in terms of yin and yang, with complementary but opposing forces in constant tension. These forces are structures and cultures, the hard and soft sides of every

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workplace. Structures are visible in organization charts, headcounts, job classifications, information technology and rules about how work should be done. Culture is the organization as a community — the workplace's social glue created by shared meanings of how life in the office, at the service counter or on the production line ought to be lived.

In practice, however, structural change goals usually trump cultural change goals. So if you want an organization to get on or stay on a healthy change trajectory, changes in structures or operational processes must be balanced with the values and other elements of culture.

Linking people initiatives to the business strategy: Many larger organizations have too many separate people policies and initiatives. They are trying to do too much at once. As a result, it is difficult for even the HR champions of these initiatives to see how all the strands tie together, never mind convincing line managers of their strategic relevance. So while there is readiness and some momentum, finding a path forward requires cutting through all this dense underbrush of language and initiatives.

A strategy-focused approach to healthy change must address three issues head-on. The first emphasizes the risk factors or the underlying job characteristics and organizational conditions that enhance or impair health and performance. The second zeros in on an integrated set of desired outcomes, in terms of employee health, organizational results, social and environmental impacts, and an organization's long-term sustainability. The third highlights the actions required to address these underlying factors and achieve the desired outcomes.

Widen the circle of involvement: Successful change requires widespread collaboration. Healthy change processes move organizations forward by providing ever-expanding opportunities for others to become involved. Change is an opportunity for employees to be engaged in solving problems and taking ownership for results. While leadership from the top of the organization is a big plus, employees throughout an organization can become change agents, contributing to making their own work environments healthier.

One prominent model of change suggests senior managers can manage change just the way they would any corporate project. However, the major weakness of this traditional approach is a reliance on top-down, executive-driven plans. Avoiding the limitations of change management requires balancing top management support with employee involvement or, in other words, combining top-down and bottom-up approaches.

Make time for learning and innovation: A healthy organization strategy is an innovation because it introduces something new, institutionalizes its use and diffuses the healthy practices and their supporting values more widely. After all, the goal is to make healthy practices a routine part of daily workplace activities. In this sense, not only is the content of the change innovative, but the actual strategy for carrying it out must also be innovative.

Furthermore, an organization's learning capacity is critical for successful innovation. Learning and innovation go hand-in-hand as defining characteristics of a vibrant workplace. Successful implementation of change requires ongoing reflection and learning by the groups and individual change agents involved. Looking at organizations that have implemented healthy organization strategies, a key success factor is clearly linking a vibrant work environment with HR goals and bigger strategic goals, from customer or client service to operational excellence.

In short, the change process itself must contribute to healthy workplace goals. How people experience the journey is what builds toward a more vibrant organization that truly inspires employees. If people experience change as stressful, imposed from the top or inconsistent with an organization's people goals and values, then both the process and end results will be unhealthy.

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