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The Art and Science of Change Management

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The Art and Science of Change Management

Stop for a moment and picture the Duomo in Florence, Italy, the Taj Mahal in India, or the Greek Parthenon. Their very creation relied on a combination of science and art. One element without the other, and these world-renowned masterpieces wouldn't be quite so magnificent.

The same is true for effective change management. It, too, takes the right combination of art and science. A new model created by Buck Consultants brings this fresh perspective to what has traditionally been a linear approach.

"For years, we've worked with linear models, which were good but incomplete," said Erik Van Slyke, principal in the human resource management practice of Buck Consultants, an ACS company. "Our change management model takes a more integrated approach, where the architecture of change is both an art and a science. We address the fact that change occurs *during* change. That's one area where other models tend to fall short."

By combining art and science, the Buck model combats some of the most common stumbling blocks: inconsistent messaging, competing agendas among stakeholders and continuing down a path that is no longer valid, among others.

The Players Make the Difference

Science represents the heavy lifter. In building terms, this would be the general contractor, the builder or the plumber. In the world of business, this translates to the taskmaster – the person responsible for structure, tasks and milestones.

Art represents the architect or the interior designer. In terms of your change management team, this is a person, typically very well-connected throughout the organization, who gathers feedback, asks "why" and is outstanding at motivating people to do things, because of his or her relationships.

Scientists are the drivers of the change, while artists are the navigators who cycle in and out, asking the questions that keep things on track. They're the people who make sure that everyone isn't so intent on the destination that no one realizes the car is out of gas.

"When you think about it, there is always a little architect in the builder and a little builder in the architect – human beings are not absolutes," Van Slyke explained. "Successful change management requires a team that consists of both scientists and artists – and a very clear understanding of why the change is happening in the first place."

The Art and Science Change Management Model

The Buck change management model is depicted in a circular diagram, where the top half represents science and the bottom half represents art. More important are the responsibilities assigned to each side.

The Science Side

The science side is the tactical side, driven by outstanding time managers who are detail-, schedule- and task-oriented. These responsibilities capitalize on their strengths.

Project Management – Regardless of the model, someone has to manage the timelines, deliverables and due dates. This function is ideal for the scientist, who is an expert at getting from point A to point B.

Task Master – The scientist is the driver who keeps everyone on the team accountable and makes sure no detail or deadline slips through the cracks. The scientist is also the person who not only sends out the schedules, but also follows up with calls and e-mails to make sure the task is completed. Scientists are essential in balancing the artists, who are thinking, evaluating and questioning – but sometimes not staying on task.

Divisions of Labor – Who's on first? What's on second? "I thought YOU were doing that." Successful change management means everyone clearly needs to understand who is responsible for which tasks and who is accountable for their completion. This is particularly critical for communications, training and other tactical measures that ensure the change is accepted companywide.

Clear Divisions of Work – Change, as a whole, can be overwhelming. The science side breaks the "whole" into less-intimidating chunks and assigns these to work partners to streamline the process.

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Tested Tools – If 20 teams are gathering data, it's critical that they use uniform templates. That makes it easier to compile the data, as well as to make sure the right questions are asked.

Regular Meetings – Communications and regular meetings to check status and talk about what's going on are a critical part of the process. Although the art side consists of the socializers, the more tactical science side is the one that brings everyone on the team together – with a focused agenda – to make sure everything is integrated and moving forward.

The Art Side

Modern art breaks down the perspectives we hold as truth and offers these back in a different way. The same is true for the art side of the Buck model, designed to ensure that perspective and feedback get back into the system so that the outcome works for the company and accomplishes the ultimate goal.

Go to the Balcony – So often in change management, we view what's going on from the "front row." This function makes sure someone steps back and gets the balcony perspective to see what else is going on in the company. In other words, it prevents the change management team from working in a vacuum.

Listen – Although this seems obvious, many times, when change teams are in the middle of deadlines and deliveries – particularly if their bonuses are based on timelines – they stop caring about input. If someone in the organization says, "This doesn't meet my needs," the artist on the team says, "Tell me how, and I'll make changes." It's critical for the artist to listen for the hidden, underlying messages and communicate them back to the science part of the team so that adjustments can be made.

Find the Real Problem – Instead of responding tactically when problems arise, it's important to sift through the issues to uncover the real problem. For example, let's say a client signed off on a plain vanilla implementation. Throughout the course of the implementation process, a bevy of change orders keeps coming through. While, on the surface, it looks like the implementation is flawed, what really happened is that management told the team to be creative, so they continue to make changes. The real problem is that the original business case is now invalid.

Be Brutally Honest – People are polite, and traditional feedback mechanisms don't allow for genuine honesty. The key is to recognize that being honest is not being judgmental: it is seeing reality for what it actually is.

Ask Tough Questions – The translation of this is: "Be polite with a question mark at the end." The idea is not just to ask probing questions but to change the lens in order to look at the situation from all angles. Again, the artist is supplying the perspective.

Build Relationships – The true artist understands the advantages of listening and letting people know they are being heard and understood, which makes them more willing to work together to find a solution, instead of digging in their heels.

As an example, a company was in the process of changing financial software, and the two people in charge didn't like each other, creating a major divide. Their senior vice president ordered them to have lunch together once a week for six weeks, on him. The only condition: they were not allowed to talk about work or the project. The first time, they ate in total silence. A few lunches into it, they decided to make the best of the situation and at least try to talk. Before the six weeks were over, they went to the senior vice president and told him they had broken the rule – they had spent two hours talking about the project, brainstorming and working on ways to make it go more smoothly. For the first time, they saw eye-to-eye, because the "artistic" eye of the senior vice president forced them to create a relationship.

The Times, They Are a-Changing

Buck's holistic approach to change management combines science and art, not only to achieve the objective at hand but to build relationships and stronger teams, ensuring that the change that results is the change that's truly needed.

To find out more about The Art and Science of Change Management or how to put it to work for your company, please contact:

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