"The right change, the right way, with the right people"

10 pitfalls to avoid for a successful change journey

How to use this article

This article is listing the most common pitfalls we've experienced during complex change execution. We suggest you use it as an inspiration to give yourself a chance to avoid the same pitfalls during your journey.

1. An ill-defined starting point

A change project requires a solid foundation. In reality, change leaders often start off with a partial definition and assessment of an organization and its processes, roles and responsibilities, applications and infrastructure. It is important to control the gaps in the 'as is' situation and take corrective action early in the project. This can include defining and obtaining sign-off on the 'as is' before using it as the cornerstone of the change project.

2. Too much on the change plate

There is a limit to how much change an organization can handle. There is also a limit to an organization's change execution capacity and capabilities at any given point in time. These are two different aspects of one problem – an unrealistic change agenda. When multiple change initiatives collide in teams or departments with key functions or resources, the risk of failure becomes significant. Sponsors need to stay in tune with the organization to ensure that change ambitions match internal capabilities. Priorities must be clearly defined and projects implemented accordingly. If necessary, less important initiatives should be deferred.

3. Scaling up takes time

The change has received the go-ahead, funding has been secured and the sponsor and driver have been appointed. Expectations are high; so is the demand for results. However, a delivery organization must first be built. There is a limit to how fast this can be done and how quickly real results can be achieved without overstretching. Growing a delivery organization too fast will result in immature execution that threatens the cost-efficiency of short and medium-term deliverables. Ensure that stakeholders' expectations are managed in accordance with the challenge of building and maturing the change organization.

4. Not seeing the bigger picture

Change typically has a long reach, affecting the organizational structure, business and IT processes, IT systems and of course, individuals. However, often only one or a few are formally defined within the scope of the change initiative. It's an important mistake that implies a risk that the full scope of the change is not sufficiently well managed which drives risk of failure in various ways.

5. Volatile steering reduces focus on key change activities

Steady steering is a must. Inconsistency and overreach tend to shift attention from managing change to managing activities such as breaking and accelerating. Management is vital for starting off the change in the right direction. After that, its goal is to minimize interference with progress and results. Less is more.

6. The 'new' risk

New people, new partners, new processes, new tools, new architecture, new ways of working – a change project can bring a long list of new ingredients to an organization. Even if each addition can be justified as necessary, together they create an increased risk of instability and ineffectiveness. Achieving a healthy balance between new and proven practices is key.

7. Too little organization change management, too late

A short item in a top-10 list cannot do justice to the complexity of this topic. So let us focus here on its importance. Inadequate organization change management tends to generate push from management instead of pull from the people affected by it. To avoid this enthusiasm gap, change should be advocated not only by the management team but also by change advocates throughout all levels of the organization. It is also important to create additional pull in the organization by delivering and recognizing real benefits along the way to maintain momentum in difficult periods.

8. Not having the basics in place

Successful change projects are built on the systematic application and execution of core methods. This includes basic program and project management disciplines such as scope control, planning and tracking, risk management, progress reporting, escalation structures, etc. Ensure that the basics are in place and keep them simple and to the point.

9. Losing sight of the target

During the course of the change project, the world keeps on turning. As key stakeholders move in and out of the picture and the competitive landscape shifts, new change needs come up. Ever-evolving external factors expose the change project to new requirements. The longer the change initiative, the more likely this will happen. Now, these types of external processes are not a bad thing. They just require flexibility. For example, agile ways of working are very much geared towards adapting to new realities. However, there is a risk of strategic objectives getting lost in the process. It is imperative that execution leaders never lose sight of the objectives and why the initiative was started in the first place and should communicate with internal stakeholders if the strategic agenda runs the risk of dilution.

10. Lack of benefit realization approach

The goal of a change project is not change itself, but the benefits it generates. Unfortunately, benefit realization and measurement rarely get the attention they deserve. A high-level approach should be determined early as part of the business case. Equally important, the approach should be amended throughout the entire change journey. Change leaders who neglect benefit realization compromise the effectiveness of the entire project, limit internal education opportunities and reduce the quality of future investment decisions.