

WHITEPAPER

Five Reasons to Improve Change Readiness

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Introduction

Organizational readiness is a set of managerial strategies used to overcome workforce resistance to the operational changes resulting from the implementation of new systems or other initiatives. Readiness is an important concept because it impacts (either positively or negatively) executive and employee satisfaction, operational efficiency (vs. disruption), and a project's ability to realize desired benefits.

Readiness enables an organization, its leaders, culture, and employees to successfully implement a change. The greater the scope and complexity of the change, the more important change readiness becomes. Some organizations are so excited about their new initiative that they fail to realize the potentially negative impact it is likely to have initially. We hear them say things like, "Change readiness is not an issue for us—everyone wants this to happen." In reality, any initiative involving new systems and changes to processes, procedures, roles, and norms is fraught with hazards. Here are the top 5 reasons organizations should take the time and energy to assess their readiness *before* implementing a major change.

1. There is no magic bullet.

Regardless of what the change is—a new CRM, a learning management system (LMS), an HRIS, a SharePoint collaborative site, or a cross-functional process, it is *not* a magic bullet. Simply implementing and rolling out the new initiative won't make people want to adopt and use it. Statistics indicate that in most organizations, 15% of the workforce are "early adopters" of any new initiative, 15% actively resist it, and 70% are on the fence, with a "wait and see" attitude.

Magic bullet projects will *not* achieve intended usage goals and ROI on their own. A good plan for managing the change that the new initiative triggers will help you achieve the results you want. And a good change management plan requires that you assess your readiness and understand the *real* gaps and issues.

2. What you don't know *can* hurt you.

Think that everyone (or almost everyone) really wants this new system, process, or initiative? Think again! Organizational antibodies can—and do—conspire to attack and doom many well-meaning initiatives to failure. Time spent doing a good readiness assessment as you prepare to kick off a new initiative can produce substantial value.

Do you understand how easily your culture accepts new things, and the most effective way to introduce a change into the culture? Have you evaluated how well previous new initiatives were accepted by the culture, and have you reviewed the lessons learned from these projects? Can you predict how well the executives in your organization lead big changes, and how well they engage people in making the journey together? Are you certain of the best way in your organization to incent, reward, and engage people in making the transition? Have you determined the effectiveness of different types of communications, enabling you to craft the right communications strategy? If you answered “No” to any of these questions, you are in a vulnerable position. A readiness assessment can help you get the answers you need, from the right levels of people, so that you can put the best possible plan in place to move forward.

3. Leaders are more likely to demonstrate the behaviors the workforce needs to see.

Your CEO or Sr. Executive really meant it when she said how critical the new initiative is to the organization. Reality will intervene, however, and there will always be other fires to put out. Improving change readiness means helping leaders see and be ready to address the potential barriers to achieving the results the new initiative was launched to produce. If you understand your leadership level’s readiness for the change, you can coach them to focus on key behaviors, messaging, and to address potential risks and issues upfront. Spending time with leaders to accomplish the following improves the organization’s readiness—and the project’s chances of success:

- Getting the change vision right, aligning it with the organization’s strategy
- Planning ways for leaders to demonstrate and communicate their support, strong ownership, and personal commitment to the initiative
- Identifying ways to win the commitment of their direct reports
- Planning reinforcement strategies tied to specific desired behaviors from all levels of the workforce.

After all, in many organizations what is important to the leader, becomes important to the rest of the workforce.

4. Your change management plan can be customized, instead of generic.

The goals of a change management plan are to align executive leadership, build commitment, and give you the ability to manage the change, enabling the organization to adopt and use the new initiative effectively. Many change management plans take on a generic look and feel. But organizations are *not* generic! Each has its own culture, beliefs, leadership style, approach to training and rewards, and communication strategy. Assessing your organization’s readiness for change enables you to see the patterns, the gaps, the barriers, and the biggest risk areas. It also enables you to see the organizational strengths that can be leveraged to improve change success. With this type of information at hand, you can build a living, relevant change management plan to address the needs of *your* organization.

Many change management plans look mainly at Leadership and Communications. While these are important, it is also valuable to address comprehensive approaches to Training and Documentation, and the use of Peer Networks to support change at the employee level. Unless you have first assessed readiness, it will be difficult to develop the right activities in each of these four areas. Without understanding readiness, you risk defining activities that are not aligned with your organization's needs, miss a critical area, or are overkill.

5. The “status quo” is a potent force.

Change is tough. Your new initiative will affect some pretty powerful elements: governance issues, organizational policies, cross-functional processes, managerial concerns, and in some cases, status and power of certain jobs. These elements must be addressed if you are to achieve benefits beyond simple cost savings. Chances are, your policies, procedures, policies and other governance must be modified or they will hinder easy access to, adoption, and long-term use of the new initiative.

But these same policies, procedures, policies, and governance may have become very comfortable for the workforce and its managers and leaders. That is, they offer security and some level of satisfaction. In order to continue to feel secure and satisfied, there will be a tendency for the workforce to resist change and cling to the status quo. To these types of workers, change equates to risk, and not changing equates to security. Or perhaps the old way of working has become so much a part of peoples' mental models that they cannot even *conceive* of a change without experiencing cognitive dissonance.

Developing a shared sense of readiness is difficult, even when people can see value in the new initiative being implemented. Arm yourself with all of the readiness information you can gather. Be prepared, be ready, and understand how ready your organization is for change—*it's a Goliath you're facing!*

Conclusion

Don't underestimate the degree of change that your new initiative will cause in the short term, even if its implementation should eventually produce positive results. Change initiatives require a carefully-thought-out approach. This begins with a thorough assessment of the organization's readiness to implement and benefit from the change.

By gathering readiness assessment data – through online surveys or group working sessions—you can identify *real* organizational needs. Good readiness data helps your organization prevent obstacles that otherwise could delay and derail your initiative. Identify the barriers so that your organization can develop a customized plan to address issues before they escalate into major barriers. Use the readiness assessment findings not only to create an effective change management plan, but also to educate your leaders, project sponsor, and team about the potential obstacles you must be prepared to face.

Remember, just having a great new system or initiative won't be enough. Ultimately the success of any major organizational change effort is dependent to a large extent on the "readiness" level of the organization and its employees.

About Silver Bear Group

Silver Bear Group is a business consulting and performance improvement firm in Austin, TX specializing in change management, performance improvement, and talent development. We apply our extensive expertise in human performance and cognitive science to improve our clients' organizational effectiveness, tailoring solutions to attain target results within budget and timeline.

As a Native American-owned business, an SBA EDWOSB/WOSB, and a third-party certified woman-owned business, we improve your results *and* diversity.

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