Chapter 12

Reinforcing Change

Reinforcement is the final element of the ADKAR model and is achieved when the necessary mechanisms are in place to sustain the change.

With effective reinforcement, you avoid losing momentum from the initial deployment of the change and you can prevent employees from reverting to old ways of doing work. By building reinforcement mechanisms, the probability that project objectives are met increases dramatically.

An example of a failed change that resulted from a lack of reinforcement occurred with a bank that was attempting to deploy quality-improvement tools and processes throughout their entire organization. The project was started by the information systems vice president. He formed a cross-functional team from departments throughout the business. After an extensive selection process, his team chose a methodology and tool set. The team carefully crafted a project plan and followed that plan to the letter. Executive business leaders were engaged to sponsor the change. The training department created a training curriculum with the help of an outside vendor. The IT group put tools and resources online. The IT vice-president effectively communicated the need for quality tools to employees and other senior business leaders.

When the training program was initially deployed, the implementation team provided direct oversight for the program. They managed the communications and orchestrated each training event. They worked actively to "sell" the need for quality tools and processes across the organization. The implementation was going well. Classes were full. The program was working.

Then a critical error was made. Early in the implementation, the project team disbanded. The program was transferred to an existing staff group responsible for quality in manufacturing. The training group added this quality improvement program to their standard courses and treated it like business as usual. The course became part of an open enrollment program. Within one year of disbanding the team, six courses had been cancelled. Interest in the program had evaporated and, for all practical purposes, the program was dead.

What happened in this case study can happen to any change that lacks reinforcement. The first mistake the implementation team made was to assume that managing change is essentially completing activities in a project plan. They completed the plan and disbanded without ensuring that the change had taken hold and that reinforcement mechanisms were in place. They failed to assess the progress of the change and to take the pulse of the organization after deployment was underway. They did not create processes for ongoing accountability. Measurement systems were not in place to evaluate success. Corrective action was not implemented to address problems that surfaced. Sponsorship that was strong at the onset faded in the time of greatest need. Recognition and reward programs were absent. The change was not cemented into the organization's culture or value system. This was a prescription for failure.

Several tactics for building *reinforcement* are described below. These are certainly not the only tactics for sustaining change, and your team should consider which methods would have the best result for your situation. They include:

Tactic 1 – Celebrations and recognition

Tactic 2 – Rewards

Tactic 3 – Feedback from employees

Tactic 4 – Audits and performance measurement systems

Tactic 5 – Accountability systems

Tactic 1 – *Celebrations and recognition*

Managers and supervisors play a key role in recognizing employees and celebrating successes. Employees view their direct supervisor as a preferred sender in the change process, and these managers are in the best position to recognize employees in a meaningful way. Supervisors have a variety of tools at their disposal to accomplish this task. The biggest mistake most supervisors make is that they simply forget this step or become busy with other tasks.

The first and easiest way for supervisors to recognize employees is by one-on-one conversations that are informal and private. This is also one of the most effective methods. The supervisor should acknowledge the change that was made, the effort it took to make the change and what results they are seeing. They should directly thank the employee for their support and hard work throughout the change process. The goal of this recognition is to make the employee feel genuinely appreciated for their contribution to the change.

The second method is public recognition. This approach is useful to acknowledge outstanding performance and for creating a role model for the change. Care must be taken if selecting only a few individuals for recognition. The risk is that a supervisor may alienate other employees who believe they have done as much as, or more than, the person being recognized.

The third method is through group celebrations. A supervisor should seek out activities or events that are fun for the group and that serve as a celebration for key milestones associated with the change. Examples include small events such as a pizza lunch to large events such as a group outing to a sporting activity.

The primary sponsor also plays a key role in the reinforcement process for successful change. This is not a responsibility that can or should be delegated. The primary sponsor of change must publicly recognize the achievement of key phases of the change with as much vigor as when he or she initiated the change. Employees look to the person in charge to share the ultimate outcomes of the change and to celebrate that achievement. Employees view the lead executive as a preferred sender and the best person to convey the nature of the change for the business. Employees also want to hear from this leader when success has been achieved. Celebrations are counter-culture for some organizations. The primary sponsor must find ways to publicly celebrate the change in a way that is meaningful to employees.

The primary sponsor should also be looking for short-term successes – those quick wins that occur early in the change process. If these early successes are celebrated and recognized, then the momentum for change builds. If they are ignored, then energy around the change can fade. In some ways the celebration of these early successes must be exaggerated to demonstrate recognition of the desired behavior and to create role models for the change.

Tactic 2 – *Rewards*

Rewards can be used to reinforce change under certain circumstances. In many cases you can identify performance objectives that, if met, would result in rewards for employees. In the case study with the customer service call center agent who was having trouble cross-selling products, the incentive was monetary. They were offered 15% of the incremental revenue for every product cross-sold to customers. This served as a reinforcing mechanism that directly rewarded the agent's ability to sell

more products.

If monetary bonuses or incentives were offered early in the process as a resistance management tool or to build motivation for the change, then it is critical that managers follow through with these commitments. The process of awarding these incentives should be similar to non-monetary recognition. The manager should acknowledge the effort of the employee and the hard work associated with the transition. They should thank the employee for their contribution to the change and to the organization's success.

Some people ask if incentives are a *reinforcement* device or a method for building *desire*. The answer to this question depends on when the incentive is offered. If the incentive was offered as a method to solicit support and engagement, then the purpose of the incentive was to create desire. If the incentive is offered as a result of employees successfully implementing the change, then the focus is on reinforcement. Typically, incentives that focus on reinforcement are better termed "rewards" since their purpose is to affirm and reward something that has already been accomplished.

Tactic 3 – *Feedback from employees*

Part of reinforcing change is to understand how employees are reacting to the change. You would probably be surprised how often project teams never ask employees how they are doing with the change after initial implementation. Project teams commonly fail to gather data from employees. This process of gathering feedback through interviews, focus groups or surveys can help the project team understand where the change is taking hold and where the change is struggling.

Tactic 4 - *Audits and performance measurement systems*

Compliance audits and performance measurement systems are essential tools to determine the adoption rate of the change.

These tools could be based on system usage data, process checklists or other measurement systems related to outputs from the changed process or system. Compliance audits should not be viewed as a negative activity on the part of the project team. You should be proactive in understanding how many employees are using the new processes or systems. What is their level of proficiency with these new processes or tools? What fraction of employees are not engaging in the change at all? How many employees are struggling with the change? What is the root cause for low adoption rates or non-compliance?

Only by completing formal assessments and reviewing performance data will you know if the change is taking hold. Armed with this data, the project team can determine the root cause of failure and implement corrective action.

Tactic 5 – *Accountability systems*

Effective changes include building accountability into normal business operations. If a change is implemented and no associated changes are made to performance evaluation programs or compensation systems, then the change lacks accountability. If a change has objectives to improve performance, these must be integrated into the quarterly or annual objectives of managers. Failure to build accountability into the system removes the ongoing element of reinforcement.

Building accountability into the system essentially means that leaders and managers in the business have assumed responsibility for the change and that they are held directly accountable for its success. This transfers accountability from the project team back to the business. If a change is to be sustained and fully realized, accountability must reside with day-to-day business operations and the associated managers in that business.

Frequently asked questions about reinforcement

What reinforcement techniques are the most effective?

The most effective reinforcement technique is dependent on the person and the situation. What is most important is that the reinforcement and recognition process is meaningful to the individual. Prosci's research indicates that in many cases the most effective reinforcement technique is the personal expression of appreciation by an employee's direct supervisor. In other cases, active and visible reinforcement by the executive sponsor is necessary.

Can some types of reinforcement backfire?

Some actions you could take to reinforce the change can have no effect or the opposite effect. For example, providing irrelevant rewards, like a DVD player to someone who does not watch TV, may not be seen as reinforcing to that employee. Recognizing one individual when an entire team contributed to the success may also have a negative effect on those not recognized for their contribution. The best reinforcements are those actions, words or rewards that are meaningful and equitable to that person or group.

What about customers? Does this process apply to them as well?

Although customers have not been explicitly named in every chapter as an audience for change, the building blocks for change as described by the ADKAR model apply equally to customers and suppliers. For changes in the government sector, the public is also an audience for change. For changes in our school system, teachers, parents and students are all impacted and will need to achieve each element of the ADKAR model if these changes are to be successful.

Summary

Reinforcing change is just as critical as that first communication to build awareness of the need for change. Reinforcement is that process of "pushing down the home stretch" and finishing the change. In short, reinforcing change can be any event that strengthens and sustains the change, including:

- Celebrations and recognition (even recognition of small successes)
- Rewards (that are relevant and meaningful)
- Feedback from employees
- Audits and performance measurement
- Accountability systems (to sustain the change over a long period of time)