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*by Ron Ashkenas and Rizwan Khan*

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# You Can't Delegate Change Management

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Many managers, even at the most senior levels, don't fully appreciate the difference between announcing a major change initiative and actually making it happen. When senior leaders disappear after a big change announcement, and leave lower-level managers to execute it, they are missing in action. And it's probably more common than most realize.

The announcement is the easy part; it makes the manager look bold and decisive. Implementation is more difficult, because no matter how good and compelling the data, there will always be active and passive resistance, rationalizations, debates, and distractions -- particularly when the changes require new ways of working or painful cuts. To get through this, managers have to get their hands dirty, engage their teams to make choices, and sometimes confront recalcitrant colleagues -- none of which can be delegated to subordinates or consultants.

Consider this example.

The CEO of a large telecommunications firm announced an enterprise-wide cost-reduction and simplification effort as a way of responding to rapidly changing technologies and new competitive threats. The initiative was launched with great fanfare and positioned as key to the company's long-term success. A well-known consulting firm was then hired to identify opportunities for streamlining, and with help from an executive sponsor from the CEO's team, they set up a project management office and war room.

Over the next two months, the consulting firm and internal staff collected data on spans and layers, benchmarked industry cost levels, and gathered process improvement ideas. When it came time to present the first set of recommendations to the senior team, however, the CEO was out of town meeting with investors -- so the discussion was postponed. A month later, the CEO delayed the

meeting again due to a customer problem. The next month, the CEO asked the executive sponsor and the lead consultant to meet with each of his direct reports individually to bring them up to speed on the findings. This led to a series of polite discussions and several requests for more data, but no action. Eventually, the CEO suggested that the executive sponsor figure out a phased approach to implementation, starting with one or two areas. This led to a further series of debates with each senior executive – most of whom had strong reasons why this was not the right time for them to restructure their units and take out key people.

You probably get the picture. After six months, the company had accomplished very little other than to run up a large consulting bill and to waste the time of some of its best and brightest staff. Why does this happen?

In this example, the CEO was a conflict-averse individual who wanted his team to “work things out” when there was a problem. As he began to realize that not everyone was in agreement, and that the process of change would involve some battles, he withdrew, and perhaps subconsciously, let the project slowly fade away.

We could just blame the CEO, or any senior manager in a similar situation, who tries to delegate the implementation of major change. However, when a senior leader is missing in action, the subordinates and consultants who were charged with carrying out the initiative also play a role: They can either reinforce the hesitancy of the senior leader or try to do something about it. The reality is that senior staff people and experienced consultants often continue to collect more data, have more discussions, prepare more reports, and make more presentations – without calling a halt to the process, confronting the boss about his or her role, or suggesting an alternative way of proceeding. It’s like shadow puppet theater with everyone playing his or her role but knowing that nothing will really change.

In this case, the executive sponsor and the consultants knew the CEO was conflict-averse and receding to the background, but they still played along as if the CEO would eventually step up and intervene. Alternatively, they could have either halted the project or scaled it down to something more manageable as a test case. But by taking the path of least resistance, they just reinforced the dynamics of the executive who was missing in action.

Making major change happen in any company isn’t easy. But when senior executives delegate what should be their responsibilities – and staff and consultants let them get away with it – the chances of success are pretty slim.

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