Getting Your Change Solution Implemented: How to Have Your Cake and Eat It Too!

Linda Ackerman Anderson
Dean Anderson
Most executives think of change as designing and implementing a solution to a problem that their organization has not been able to solve, perhaps a new IT system, a restructuring, merger or acquisition, upgraded business processes, or new products or services that better meet customers’ needs. These examples of solutions are the “content” of the change, which execs are keen to get right. Then, when the content solution has been designed and approved, executives typically delegate implementation. Getting the right solution is usually their sole interest. It is, for them, having their cake.

However, having the right solution on paper does not produce a solution in reality! Why is it that these organizations so rarely get to have their cake and eat it too?

Leaders frequently design their content solutions in ways that nullify the organization’s ability to get the true results of the change. In other words, the process they use to design the content creates problems that inhibit people’s willingness or ability to implement and succeed with the new solution. This prevents everybody from the reward of eating the cake they worked so hard to create! Let’s look at why.

First, leading change is more than coming up with the right solution. Sole focus on the content of change, and neglecting the process of how the design is produced, does not work. There are three key components to leading change effectively: content, process, and people. We have defined content. Process—the way the change is planned and rolled out—is so much more than implementation! The process of change begins the moment the reason for the change is recognized. Change process includes how you will define your need and outcomes, govern the effort, set your change up for success, create your roadmap from A to Z, and how you will adjust course as the change unfolds. The people component refers to the range of human dynamics triggered by change, as well as the conditions and strategies used to ensure that people buy in and succeed…motivation, commitment, emotional reactions, resistance, engagement, people’s mindsets, skills, and cultural fit with the new state.

Adding the people and process requirements to content design requires executives to expand their view of change. Leaders must alter the way they think about how to come up with the best content solution. That only gives them their cake—on paper! To eat it, they must avoid these four common mistakes.

To begin, if the first mention of planning for the change process happens after the design phase, beware! The process of change must be thought of strategically from the onset. Implementation is a late stage in the process of change, and must be positioned for success early on!

Second, if your change is complex or transformational, its planning cannot be delegated to your project management office and succeed. While project management is important, it typically does not address the people dynamics in the change that require careful attention long before implementation. And, it does not easily establish your ability to readily correct the process or desired outcomes, which is essential!

Third, do not leave implementation or change management up to your content experts. They are wired differently than what is required. Our experience shows that content experts, while well-intentioned in their offer of change management, do not understand the people or process components of change well enough to ensure the eating of the cake. They see implementation through their content lenses, not through the eyes of people’s readiness,
engagement, capacity, or mobilizing ownership and action. Typically by the time content experts have come up with the “right solution” on paper, people are angry, disenfranchised, resistant, or threatened by the change. The solution never comes to pass.

The process of change, including design, needs to engage the people who must make the new state a reality. It cannot be foisted upon them. The process of change includes the use of your content experts in ways that deliver the best solution—a solution that is owned and shaped by the people of the organization, not experts who likely represent a pre-determined formula and a top-down mandate to implement.

The implementation of your solution must be planned in a way that works for the organization, its culture, and your people—in ways that can actually deliver real results—the eating of the cake. The more engagement you use in design and planning, the more excitement and commitment you generate, and the more cake you get to eat.

And fourth, do not limit your change management services to communications and training. These are essential, but not adequate to the people and process requirements of change. Change management must also address the building of your case for change and desired outcomes, your change strategy, establishing conditions for success, engaging your people, and how to account for the organization’s readiness, capacity, culture and mindset. It must clarify how to govern your change from the onset, and develop your change roadmap to get you from the first insight about the need for a new cake to the actual enjoyment of the cake fully cooked!

These directives are essential to how your leaders guide the organization through change. They are hard-learned lessons that executives must incorporate into their expectations for how to achieve their intended ROI from change. They are key ingredients to not only having your cake, but eating it with delight! Enjoy!