

The People Factor: Collaborative Decision-Making

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Times are, um, interesting: companies are either stripping down to the bare necessities or recreating their business models so they can be ready for the future in new ways. In your company, you may be creating new strategic initiatives or hiring/firing/reorganizing staff. You might be adopting CRM technology or extending your current technology into other departments. You're rebranding. You're repositioning products.

Whatever you are doing right now to ride the storm of what's happening in our national economic business environment, it most likely involves Change.

Problem is, while your companies are using strategies and tactics to steer new initiatives, you are changing far more than the way things are done: all of your change initiatives involve people.

People Issues Ignored At A Cost

So much of business has focused on the 'doing'. Even when 'change agents' reside within a company or are hired in from outside, they focus on the 'change initiative,' not the human issues that seem, surreptitiously, to enter into the equation.

I just spoke with an editor of a well-known CRM e-zine. All of the articles she's published over the past years have been based on the technology, or the output, or the implementation procedures. None have been based on the critical alignment of People Factors that are necessary for a successful implementation.

In 2000, Nike Inc.'s Q3 earnings dropped \$100 million (\$100 MILLION IN ONE QUARTER) because their management, their technology provider and the internal technical department couldn't communicate. The techies needed the management to make some decisions. The management left decisions to the techies and the vendor. The vendor communicated directly with management to get the software implemented, and circumvented the technical people. So, the result was not only a whopping financial loss of revenue, but bad press, bad blood, distrust, a tumbling stock price, and harmed shareholders. Not to mention a failed initiative that took months, if not years, to recover from.

The problem? Lack of communication. What type of communication? The ability to help teams and stakeholders, partners and staff, managers and users and techies, make collaborative decisions.

The Doing VS. The Being

We all generally get the 'doing' just fine: we know how to introduce strategic initiatives, how to begin the implementation process, how to offer our people 'change management' programs so the new systems (or whatever) are up on time and do what they are supposed to do.

But how do we help our people adjust, and do a competent job, when we are asking

them to simultaneously work with new people, new technology, new vocabularies, new outcomes, and new job descriptions – and aren't teaching them how to juggle all of that while maintaining their daily job requirements? How are we helping them work when their jobs depend on the collaboration of several collegial support functions to succeed? Indeed, they may go about attempting to execute their new activities and not even recognize that they aren't communicating or collaborating as effectively as they need to.

In business today, collaborative decision-making skills are not taught as part of change implementation. If we are not doing so because we assume our people have these skills, we assume incorrectly.

When we don't take the time to teach our people these skills, we are putting them under stress. Not to mention failing to get the maximum output possible.

Speaking Different Languages

When we think of people merely as objects that convey our initiatives, we forget that people work in systems that are unique. Each group, each job description has a unique set of attributes that not only is different from other groups or teams, but is quite idiosyncratic. They each are so self-contained that the only common language they speak, for the most part, is the language of social interaction. It's similar to the language spoken in London: It sounds like the American English I am familiar with here in the States, but the nuances are different, the slang and referents are different, the built-in assumptions are different.

When I owned a company in London, I remember wanting to send one of the technical staff to a training program.

"I'd love to have you take this course," I gaily offered one day.

"Oh!" she said in horror. "I couldn't do THAT."

"Why not? You'd learn a lot, and I think you'd really enjoy it."

"I would not enjoy that at all! I am not good enough."

"Not good enough to take a course? That's the reason to take it, so you can learn the material."

"There are easier ways to learn. I could read a book, for example."

"I don't understand. What is the problem here?"

"I am not qualified to take it. Maybe next year."

I was stumped. I asked one of her colleagues, who understood her position, and actually seemed annoyed with me. It took hours before someone explained to me that 'taking a course' in London meant 'teaching a course' rather than attending as a participant.

Now, I had lived in London for 3 years at that point. All of my staff were British, my friends were British, and my American friends in the States accused me of speaking British. But I did not know that 'taking' meant 'teaching' in that context.

This is what goes on within our unique teams and job functions. We do different tasks,

speak different languages and assume we understand each other. The problems arise when we act as if we've understood.

Factors Of Distinction

Here are some 'givens' to give you an idea of the types of communication issues that can differentiate groups and can cause problems:

1. Each job description has a unique set of skills, outcomes, and belief systems inherent in the daily activities. As a result they see problems and procedures through different lenses.

People were hired for their job because they have excellent skills. Obviously, managers, technical people, finance people, etc. all have different skill sets and view their worlds differently. This is huge.

Consider a tiny subset of this issue, the time element. Each job function carries a unique sense of timing – what needs to happen, how, when, and why – that is unfamiliar to people doing any other job.

Managers, for example, let things take their course, going through the different iterations it takes for people to handle change in some sort of sequential fashion.

For their part, technical people can make changes instantly, and assume a much shorter time frame than managers, even if it means breaking down a large project into smaller segments that each have a specific time frame.

The financial people operate in months and quarters and years, and have little flexibility due to their reporting responsibilities.

Without clarity around time – not just target dates for scheduled completion, but the entire way the time issues are thought about and worked with – you've got a mess. And this is only one element of many that need to be handled through change.

Unique Communication Styles

2. Every job category has a unique vocabulary, social behavior, and style of communication.

Because different jobs attract different types of people, their socializing and communicating will obviously be different. You can tell when a salesperson walks into a room. Ditto with an accountant. It's difficult to imagine an accountant with an outgoing, fun, irreverent personality, or a sales person who is quiet, asocial, and driven by assignments completed.

The vocabulary in each job description is vastly different. Not only are the words different within the job – techies use slang terms that are unknowable to managers, for example – but the way words are used within relationships and the way vocabulary represents the authority that people hold over each other.

Technical folks have a baseline respect for each other because of their technologic skill. Their egos and vocalizing are directed toward their job prowess. When in a roomful of techies, it's difficult to tell who is more senior; whoever has the skill necessary to carry

the ball - and this changes regularly and with fluidity - gets to call the shots.

Managers, on the other hand, have personal egos; they are hierarchical and competitive, social and clever. They tease, play, and have inside stories about each other that are most likely embarrassing. Yet, in a roomful of managers it's not hard to know who's the boss.

Accountants are much quieter; they do their jobs, heads down, and are doing task to the exclusion of surrounding social goings on. They don't see the need for chit-chat, and don't necessarily enjoy socializing.

Group Decisions

3. Every unique job category has an idiosyncratic way of making group decisions.

Given their focus, each job has a unique hierarchy of criteria in the areas of beliefs, values, expectations, standards, reliability, and characteristics, to name a few.

Technical people will manage to get along, even when they don't like each other, if they can respect someone's output. Prowess is their guide.

Managers have very strong opinions, and set up political games behind each other's backs while being nice to their faces.

Accountants just don't give a damn; they want to get on with their work. Decisions get made around the efficacy of the outcome and how it all fits together with the time demands.

Through these three conventional job descriptions, I've shown you a representative glimpse of what goes on in a sliver of the sociological components. You can easily see how very differently they all operate. One type of job and personality focuses on task, one on relationship. One group is social and people-driven, one is job driven. And each human being gravitates toward the job that makes them most comfortable.

It's All A Sales Job

Now, imagine that you have an initiative that involves managers, techies, and accountants. Do you seriously believe that giving them a job to do together will be easy to achieve?

What needs to happen for them:

- To be able to work together?
- Decide together?
- Create together?
- Disagree together?
- Get the necessary work out in a way that will keep them all happy, on target, and collaborating regularly?

What's the difference between sales and supporting people through a collaboration effort? Nothing, really. It's all the same. It's about each person make the decisions necessary to buy-in to the change. It's about teaching people how to work together in new settings with new vocabulary, and how to agree to learn what needs to be learned

to maintain a collaborative effort.

Each person in a team needs to recognize for himself and his team:

What's missing in what they are doing that needs to be fixed to support another group and the whole;

How can they fix this themselves, within the team, and what needs to happen for the established team to be willing to work with others;

What cultural norms need to be addressed and maintained in order to join efforts with another group and still maintain the integrity of both the individual groups and the effort as a whole.

Think of a band. They've got different instruments, different people, with different skills and even different music. Yet they all work together toward the whole. I live in Austin, TX. It's the music capital of the world, with bands in every restaurant, every corner of every street, playing music music music. Very often, the bands are pulled together at the last moment, from people who are friends and strangers – yet they sound great together. How? Because each musician knows her instrument, knows how it communicates with the other instruments, and how it fits into the overall system of the music. Are they better after rehearsing together and understanding each other's riffs and idiosyncracies? You bet. But even as strangers, their instruments are better together than alone, and have the capacity to make music with strangers by listening to each other, supporting each other, trusting each other, and understanding that the whole is greater than the parts.

It's all a 'sales' job – pitching initiatives or strategies does not get an idea sold. You must use a collaborative decisioning process – Decision Facilitation - to help the people learn how to buy-in to change, to cooperation and teamwork, and to understand the systemic vision.

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