ChangeStart
P R E S S

Pitfalls: why does change go off the rails?

Change within organizations frequently evolves in unpredictable and unsatisfactory ways. There are countless potential pitfalls. Unintended consequences abound.

Even in change efforts that are well-planned and well-executed, people have a natural tendency to ask questions and to analyze purpose and implications—especially if they haven't been involved in the planning. This can slow down the process and create challenges and additional workload. But it can also provide insight and information about how best to manage the process.

Following are a few of the pitfalls that cause change to get off-track:

- Managers communicate a case for change that is unrealistic or incomplete; it isn't readily understood.

- The costs of implementing and supporting change are not adequately acknowledged or planned for.

- Leaders assume they know what people think. They fail to identify key concerns and obstacles.

- Training or other support—including resources to assist with the workload of those involved in planning and managing the transition—is limited or nonexistent.

- Existing systems (e.g., rewards, training, information) don't support the new model.

- Leaders expect to persuade and inform by one-way communication. Their audiences have limited opportunity to ask questions, offer ideas, or engage in discussion about the changes.

- Communication about the change is too lengthy, unfocused, or detailed to command attention, comprehension, and buy-in.

- Managers don't support the direction and approach.

- Leaders fail to address dissent from individuals or groups who do not respond to efforts to inform and engage them.

- Input, questions, and ideas aren't recorded and documented. As a result, responses and tactics don't reflect the needs.

- The organization relies on only one communication method (e.g., e-mail) to convey information about complex changes.

- Leaders make a premature assumption of success and fail to follow up, support, and drive continuing change.

Awareness of these and other pitfalls doesn't ensure success. But it does provide ideas about where change most often gets off track, and opportunities to implement course corrections. Each pitfall has a positive counterpart—a proactive measure to support and facilitate change. *Changemaking* discusses many of these pitfalls and tactics to address and avoid them.