



Are You Ready to Improve?

By Rebecca A. Morgan
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The pace of change is picking up steam. That is why each of us must consider "change" now. Here's how to get started.

Business is not easy. Increasing globalization, rapidly changing technology, increased mobility of people, continually changing regulations - all of these and more serve to make success ever more difficult.

Some of you might ask, "We've made money doing things 'this way' for 20 years; why should we change now?" The very simple answer is, the world has changed, and will continue to evolve, and so must your business. The pace of change is picking up steam. That is why each of us must consider "change" now. No "get out of jail free" cards on this one.

But change is a challenge. Some organizations do it well, energized by the process, while others tire from the struggle. So how do you become one of the good ones?

Athletes stretch before they begin the race, preparing their bodies for optimal performance. Similarly, as you position your organization for the long unending race, begin with some simple stretching. Make sure your organization is in good "change" shape.

Stretching for the improvement process means two things. First, define a clear case for change, and second, assess your change track record. Know why you are driving change, as well as how good (or bad) you are at it.

You have defined a clear case for change when your organization sees a clear and convincing need for improvement. Not change for change's sake, but for survival, for growth, or for dominance.

Start with yourself. If you are unclear on the need for change, review the market, listen to your customers, and analyze the competitive environment. You may think you're doing okay, but look and listen carefully to the feedback before you decide you can afford to skip this race. Don't ignore the rumblings coming from customers, competitors, technology, suppliers, regulatory agencies, or other sources. Waiting for crisis may be waiting too long. Examples of once healthy and now lifeless organizations are everywhere, from thousands of small multi-generational family owned retailers to Montgomery Ward, unable to withstand the competition of Wal-Mart, to tool and die makers and plastic injection molders unable to survive Asian competition

and critical material cost fluctuations.

When you can clearly articulate the need for change, make sure your employees can as well. It is not enough that they take on faith that improvement is necessary. Help them see what you see. Employees can only be expected to make good decisions when armed with an understanding of the goal and the challenges at hand. Communicate with them regularly, consistently, and factually.

While you lay out the case for change, begin the second key component of "organizational change stretching": Realistically assess how well your company accomplishes change. Use the following exercise as a tool.

- What is the last major initiative that your management team determined was necessary, then planned, executed, and sustained successfully? The last one that failed?
- What are 5 recent minor projects that your company has determined were necessary, then planned, executed, and sustained successfully? Five others that failed?

Looking at the examples you have chosen, ask yourself, "Why did some fail, and some succeed? What was different?" Identify the change skills that fueled the successful changes, and the weaknesses that allowed the failures.

Three keys to successful change are planning, execution, and conviction. Planning includes goal identification and project planning. Execution includes communicating the goal, and communicating and carrying out the project plan. And importantly, it includes making good decisions to respond to real world obstacles that

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arise. Conviction is management standing firm in the face of resistance. Not brutally, not coldly, not irrationally, but with conviction. To do so wisely, you must be clear on the goal, and able to help others understand how the goal is important, relates to them, and is accomplished by the identified change.

Failed change can emanate from several sources. Poor execution of a good plan. Good execution of a poor plan. Or good execution of a good plan, stopped

in its tracks at the first sign of trouble by a lack of conviction.

Every company that grows and succeeds over the coming years will be extremely good at change management. Your organization may be improving successfully toward an understood goal right now. If not, examine why not, and focus on addressing those issues. Start stretching now, so you can win the race!



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