



OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH & SAFETY

Clearing Six Roadblocks to Change

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By [Robert Pater](#) | Sep 01, 2011

When you're snarled in traffic or construction, perhaps at risk of missing an important appointment, ever wished you'd pre-planned an alternate route? I've seen similar problems occur during new improvement processes. Too many instances where well-intentioned, expensive-to-implement change strategies miserably fail. Or, at the very least, greatly disappoint, where impact is flash-and-gone.

Resources are squandered, as is the change driver's credibility. Who in turn can become perplexed, frustrated or angry. Or, at the very least, rue achieving only a fraction of hoped-for results.

But we've also seen newly adopted training systems, structures, promotions, and other changes significantly elevate performance and culture in a relatively quick time. Where gains grew and expanded and measurable results -- from milestone indicators of receptivity and visible actions to look-back statistics -- illuminated patterns of increased confidence in and commitment to next-level achievements.

Master leaders know their attention and actions influence outcomes, and they're thoroughly committed to making a significant difference. So how can you move from slow leaks in your efforts to robust step improvements? Begin by recognizing and sidestepping these six shortcomings:

1. *Not getting the right support in advance.* As goes the expression, "for want of a nail the war was lost," sometimes a small, seemingly insignificant lack can derail potentially big safety improvements. In addition to getting A, B, and C managers aboard early, be sure also to persuade assent from lateral staff pros in Contracting, Legal, HR, Medical, Ergonomics, Industrial Engineering, Hygiene, and more. At the

very least, alert everyone early to head off potential resistance that might otherwise stem from their feeling not considered.

Also bridge communications with bargaining units, Safety committees, and key contractors who affect your own workers and their safety record. Consider positioning Safety as a marketing tool for your clients. Elicit input and approval from critical clients who may provide you with the external drive for safety performance that may sharpen senior managers' attention.

2. *Not identifying, communicating real expectations.* Too often expectations are mixed or muddy or unexpressed. When traveling to a new destination, it's most efficient to map your route up front. Further, if you wish to help prevent premature programmatic plug pulling -- as in, "You put this carpal tunnel syndrome program into place and so far we've seen *more* injury reports; we're going to end this right now!" -- it's critical to first formulate and then transmit what you specifically wish to see changed, to what degree, by when and who, with what resources. What will look different? What are the "deliverables"? By when do you expect to show return on investment?

Go beyond one and done; be sure to re-transmit your expectations in different ways to consistently convince without being a broken record and lulling away others' attention.

3. *Not "disturbing" inertia.* Ever notice how culture pushes back when you're trying to shift the status quo? Change masters understand they have to rock the complacency boat. They can accomplish this by surfacing missed opportunities, broadcasting close-calls/there-but-for-luck-go-we, offer benefits that draw people toward trying new methods, sending stories that inspire going beyond old autopilots. Seen it time and again: Excitement and energy can lift people out of deeply entrenched ruts.

When a body's at rest, you have to get it moving. You can sometimes do this by persuading very short-term change ("Would you be willing to use this new PPE for just two weeks to see what you think?"); many are able to do a limited-time trial. Be sure to check back at the promised time; very often, resistance to change/inertia works in your favor so that using the new tool, procedure, or PPE then becomes incorporated into their work habits.

4. *Not sequencing logistics.* The right lumber alone won't build a ship; also secure nails of the right size. New adoptions frequently founder when crucial steps are missing, out of order, or late. Ever discover you need the signature of one manager, only to find she *just* began extended leave? Or seen a group of participants restlessly congregate because the key to a training room key is missing? Lack of

sequencing signals lack of competency to others; it can create push- and pull-back (the former results in conflict and anger, the latter in demotivation, giving up, presenteeism).

Look back. What's worked in the past? Through what cracks have previous interventions fallen? Look ahead. Analyze and secure all buyoffs and approvals needed for an intervention to go through. What measurements will we apply and who will determine these? By when do we need them?

5. *Not making needed adjustments.* Setting things in motion is only the beginning. As Will Rogers said, "Planning gets you into things; hard work gets you out of them." Only weak leaders blithely continue without watching and adapting; stronger leaders monitor and redirect.

Observe if a newly planted process is growing in the right direction. Does the seedling need support? If so, what kind? Don't blithely continue without monitoring and adapting.

Time to ask the right questions: Are you getting what you'd thought? Have your assumptions -- or conditions -- changed from times of initial planning? If you had it to do over, what would you have done differently? What do the initial indicators of "Receptivity" and "Actions" tell you? Which small adjustments can we use to course-correct?

6. *Not accounting for/reducing blockages to sustaining change.* In my June 2011 *OH&S* column ("Leadership: Letting Forces Be With You"), I discussed how to assess and redirect force vectors affecting performance. By identifying what propels acceptance and, on the other side, blocks adoption, you can focus on lowest-energy-expenditure methods for reducing obstacles to new interventions while minimizing resistance.

By identifying and stepping around six common obstacles to improvement, you can plan for and actuate changes that significantly upgrade safety culture and performance.

About the Author

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