Change Management: Slaying the Myths

Resistance to change management is futile—and that’s a good thing.

By Eric Hammons

Today’s Environment

Change management has devout fans and die-hard skeptics. Many organizations are avid users of change management strategies that empower their people to transform processes, launch products and services, form new partnerships, and take bold action with confidence. Others resist change management, considering it difficult to define and quantify. They’ve done without it so far, the reasoning goes. Why invest time and money in it now?

Skepticism is fueled by a few stubborn myths about change management, which we look forward to debunking right here.

Point B’s Perspective

We are champions of change management because it works. In our experience with organizations of all stripes, the ability to manage change is key to innovation, competitive strength, talent retention, brand equity, new partnerships and bottom-line success. Conversely, a lack of change management can impede innovation, sap competitive strength, undermine a merger, erode a brand, and make it tough to retain the best people.

Here’s a look at the myths that keep some organizations from embracing change management:

“Nobody knows what change management is.”

In some organizations, change management remains esoteric and elusive. If nobody knows what it is, how important could it be? More to the point, how would you use it?

In fact, change management is a structured approach to helping people and organizations make a transition from a current state to a future state in order to achieve positive, lasting change. It’s that simple—and that complex. Change management is about helping people as individuals, and organizations as a whole, understand why change is needed, inspire them to get on board, prepare them for what’s to come, and support them along the way.

For example, when a major healthcare system’s EPIC installation began to miss key milestones, we found a lack of change management was part of the problem. We created a guidebook that included goals, checklists, ways to adjust workflows—all tactical, tailored change management tools that our client credits as a factor in the project’s success. Our client has gone on to adopt and apply these change management tools at other hospitals in their system.

“We don’t need that touchy-feely stuff.”

Change management is about people—understanding what makes them tick. But it’s not some vague “feel good” exercise. It’s a discipline that includes proven, tactical tools and methodologies to help people make change. An array of tools and templates can be customized to guide the organization’s change, create leadership understanding, and build stakeholder buy-in. These tools can be mapped to project management tools and actions that can be tracked through many parts of the project management lifecycle.

The results can be eye-opening. In a multi-year implementation of a medical records system, change management was initially seen as “soft,” with no way to build a project plan around it. Once we showed how change management could be tactical, with critical-path deliverables,
it earned a pivotal role in the project. Our client credits this change management work with improving stakeholder adoption because Training was fully supported by Communications.

“There’s no ROI.”

Considering that change management can make the difference between project success and failure, its ROI is significant. According to a recent benchmarking report from Prosci, projects with excellent change management are six times more likely to achieve project objectives—and far more likely to stay on budget and schedule, too. We find change management delivers measurable ROI in multiple ways:

• Increasing the success and long-term adoption of significant change.
• Helping to contain costs associated with change.
• Reducing the time needed to implement change.
• Enabling change to be implemented without negatively impacting the day-to-day running of the business.
• Increasing the number and proficiency of people who adopt a new tool, process or behavior.
• Supporting a smooth, successful transition from the old to the new while maintaining morale, productivity, company image and customer relationships.

“Change will happen anyway.”

True, change is inevitable. But leaders often send the wrong signals to the very people being counted on to implement the change. If the change involves a tool, the change may be perceived as only a technology, overlooking the need for process training. If the change involves a process, people may receive instruction but never understand the context that would provide them with the meaning and motivation to change. The “why” of change is as important as the “how.”

That said, leadership engagement and communication play an important role in change management by keeping people informed and involved. Without it, change can seem chaotic and show up as a lack of leadership or empathy. Productivity can fall as people are consumed with trying to read the tea leaves and speculate on what the change means for them. Overt or covert resistance can occur. Just as serious, without leadership engagement, employees may become apathetic. Apathy is like a canary in a coal mine; it’s a sure sign that change will fail.

When fear, uncertainty and doubt prevail, good employees are the first to leave because they have valuable skills that others want. Those who stay may revert back to old ways, use work-arounds, never make the change at all, or make well-intentioned progress in the wrong direction.

Once people have had a negative experience with change, they’re less likely to believe that a future change will be positive. Employees can quickly lose faith in leadership, which makes future transitions tougher for executives.

“We don’t need help; we manage change every day.”

It’s often difficult for an organization to see how its behavior and culture keep it from being what it wants to be. Dedicating a neutral resource to change management adds an unbiased perspective that can help leadership see organizational strengths, weaknesses and solutions in a new light.

An external resource can also bring tools and processes to help assess and address issues fairly. As change is planned and implemented, an outside perspective brings a fresh set of eyes that can see beyond status quo positions and political agendas to serve your organization’s best interests.

The Bottom Line

Change management is an asset and competitive advantage worth having on your side. But old myths die hard. Sometimes they become excuses for inaction. If you’re finding a few of these myths about change management in your own organization, maybe it’s time to challenge them in the interests of your collective success.