

Process Improvement Alan Ramias and Paul Fjelsta

## The Behavioral Side of Improvement Work: Engaging Leaders

In our first Column in this series (February 2015), we pointed out a remarkable amount of agreement about the causes of failure in improvement projects in more than 20 years of studies and Columns. The research repeatedly points to the same failures of leadership in initiating, championing and supporting change efforts.

So in this final Column of the series we will focus specifically on the role of management and discuss how a behavioral approach can vastly improve the impact of leaders on initiating, owning, leading and supporting successful improvement efforts of all types. To do so, we will suggest some principles from a practitioner viewpoint—that is, a set of guidelines for anyone in charge of facilitating or guiding a change effort who wants to be more effective in obtaining the right kind of leadership involvement.

### Principle 1: On-going, Hands-On Leader Involvement from the Outset

It's a standard practice to get leaders and other key stakeholders on board at the beginning of an improvement effort, to communicate the need, paint a vision of the future, commit resources and authorize initiation of the project. But in most improvement approaches we've seen, the visibility and active involvement of leaders gets sporadic and passive soon after the project kickoff. There are periodic progress reviews and an eventual final presentation but in the meantime, leaders are spending their attention on other things. It's true they may be very busy and have a lot of other priorities but their waning attention to *your* project is typically because there's not been a proactive approach to engaging them.

So we recommend you keep them actively engaged. This can be done with a variety of tactics throughout the stages of the project, such as:

- Utilize the behavioral deliverables (and fit-for-purpose leadership oriented formats) to educate them on the importance and causes of the behavior dynamics influencing current and future performance and eventually their role in reinforcing critical performer behaviors.
- Showing them the details of the project team's current-state analysis work, using the behaviorally annotated deliverables we described in the earlier Columns in this series. This is the most critical, optimal checkpoint to gauge leader understanding and on-going support for the change requirements anticipated in the future-state. (We realize the conventional wisdom is that leaders are too impatient to be guided through the details of a process map,

for example, but we find that's not the case if we keep returning to (a) helping leaders understand why people are doing, or not doing, what is expected in the current-state and (b) what *they ultimately have to do* as leaders to support the required improvements. We have found it's not the detail that turns some leaders off, it's the lack of clarity about what they should be doing since they are not the performers of the work.)

- When it's time to design the future state, leaders should be defining the key process and behavioral design characteristics of their own roles as well as key performer roles, with a focus on how they can reinforce the critical behavior changes they expect from their employees. This framing of the future-state design sets the stage for the design team to incorporate into the process design more effective and focused antecedents, consequences and feedback for key and critical behaviors. employees. This framing of the future-state design sets the stage for the design team to incorporate into the process design more effective and focused antecedents, consequences and feedback for key and critical behaviors.

## Principle 2: Engage Leaders in Behavior Analysis

In earlier Columns we described some of the foundational theories that underlie our approach, such as the Human Performance System and the Antecedents-Behavior-Consequences (A-B-C) model. These theories harken back to the work of B.F. Skinner and other behavioral researchers in the mid-twentieth century and can be summarized as applied behavioral science (ABS). It's the best available body of information about why people do what they do.

What we have found is that this particular field of study, if couched in the right language and examples, is fascinating to leaders. We are all amateur psychologists. Why do we read mystery novels, go to movies, get hooked on *Breaking Bad*? We can engage that deep interest in human behavior as we're studying the causes and effects of desired and undesired performance. Some techniques for doing so:

- Use storytelling, not theory, to describe examples of poor performance in the workplace. Engage leaders, using relevant illustrations, to figure out why people do seemingly illogical things. Use ABC analysis on current-state behaviors done by the design team to drive home the point that feedback and consequences are the key components influencing behavior. Sure, you'll always run into a few leaders who summarize all supposed problem performers as "lazy" or "dumb" but their more thoughtful peers will recognize that the causes are more often a complex mixture of workplace deficiencies that can be identified and amended.
- Don't spoonfeed conclusions about the causes of poor performance to leaders; guide them into thinking and doing the analysis themselves. The experience is often a powerful lesson in the truths about behavior in the workplace and their conclusions will often be more accurate than yours. Actual conversation between two senior leaders at a bank:

Leader #1: "I still don't get it. New Accounts Specialists can get a bonus if they cross-sell, so why don't they do it?"

Leader #2: "You didn't hear it? They got a line of customers waiting, the unit supervisor breathing down their necks, a ton more paperwork if they do it, and it's quitting time. Would you?"

Leader #1: "For a bonus later, yeah, I would."

Leader #2: "Bonus next month, pressure right now. I wouldn't."

Leader #1: "So you'd behave just like them."

Leader #2: "I *am* just like them."

### **Principle 3: Have Leaders Plan their Own Support & Sustainability Role**

Once it becomes clear what performer behaviors are critical to successfully installing and sustaining the future state design, leaders (and *their* leaders) should be guided in developing their coaching plans that spell out exactly how they are going to reinforce the desired performer behaviors. These Leader Coaching Plans (a template is shown in Figure 1) are a contract that specify the amount and type of support each leader commits to making the future state design a reality. Based on the nature and complexity of the changes required, these coaching plans are developed for 3-4 levels of leadership to support the leader-to-leader support required.

### **Principle 4: Integrate leader reinforcement into the management system**

Leader reinforcement is not just important for installing organizational changes. It really should be part of every leader's repertoire of daily practices. To ensure that coaching, reinforcement, recognition and rewards become a permanent part of the organization's culture, the Leader Coaching Plans can be used as the genesis for more meaningful metrics (behavior and in-process) and dialogue (meetings, 1-on-1s, etc.) that positively reinforce the behavior changes required.

### **Principle 5: To Change Culture, Change Behaviors**

In the literature about organizational culture, much is made of defining and instilling a desired set of values. No argument with that, but what is an effective way to nurture those chosen values? We would posit that behavioral management is necessary. For organizational culture is enacted in all the daily behaviors of employees and leaders, and when change in culture is required, it is through the judicious reshaping of behaviors that cultural alteration can be achieved.

Here's an example: We once worked with the leadership team of an oil refinery that needed some serious cultural change. Although there were plenty of safety requirements and practices presumably in place, a culture of taking shortcuts had insidiously taken over, until a fire destroyed property and caused injuries. This crisis forced a reexamination of current processes, especially in preventive maintenance and inspections, but just as important it put a spotlight on the activities of managers at all levels who were supposed to be monitoring daily performance and enforcing safety regulations. The leaders realized that as they had slackened in their attention to safety, so had employees, causing a virtually invisible erosion in standards until the accident occurred. The turnaround required managers to pay close attention to all the little details of employee safety and to endlessly reinforce desired practices while taking immediate, strong counter-measures when even a little infraction was

observed. Had the focus only been on making technical changes to the inspection and preventive maintenance processes, not much might have been changed. But an all-out focus on behaviors made a huge difference.

**Summary**

The behavioral change challenge can only be addressed by taking a more proactive approach to educating and engaging leadership. The approach we have refined over the years has its basis in minimizing resistance by more meaningful, on-going engagement of all key stakeholders and designing the future-state change to maximize “discretionary effort” versus “have-to” effort. As you can see, we advocate a more systematic and on-going stakeholder management process using behavioral tools and deliverables. Yes, this takes a more focused and purposeful level of effort but the rewards are great: a more efficient and effective design phase, earlier adoption and acceptance of the design, and ultimately, real sustainability.

**Figure 1**

*Accomplir* Leader Coaching Plan Format, Page 1

<b>Leader Coaching Plan</b>				
Leader: (Accountable for Performance)		Targeted Business Result:		Lagging (Business Results) Metrics:
Performer:	Critical Behavior(s):		Leading (Behavioral) Metrics:	
Critical Behavior Inputs	Critical Behavior Consequences & Feedback			
What will initiate / support the Critical Behavior?	What will the performer experience after the Critical Behavior?	Encourage / Discourage?	Immediate / Delayed?	Meaningful to Performer (H-M-L)
Does the performer have the skills & knowledge to perform the desired behavior? If not, identify the actions needed in Leader Actions section below.				

## Authors

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organizational, business process, technology, and behavior changes required to bring about timely, sustainable and measurable business results.