

CHAPTER 1

Grappling with Implementation

Some Preliminary Thoughts and Relevant Research

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It is an organizational reality that the adoption and implementation of almost any system, process, or tool is likely to clash with certain organizational interests and internal alliances. Various groups in organizations may resist change because it upsets the status quo they are comfortable with, or because it interferes with the pursuit of their personal agendas. Although such resistance is unrelated to the technical merits of an intervention, it nevertheless undermines successful implementation. Thus, marketing efforts that spotlight an intervention's technical superiority may not only fail to convince people of its merits but also fail to motivate them to adopt it.

Obviously, the people, the environmental context, and the technical merits of an intervention all contribute to its successful development and implementation. This may be why the techniques advocated by industrial/organizational psychologists are used less often than might be expected, given their scientific foundation. Johns (1993) suggested that the technical merits of an intervention have little relationship to the likelihood of its actual adoption and long-term success, and argued that it is not the complexity of the science that is at the heart of many implementation

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failures but the lack of understanding by psychologists of how organizations identify and select business solutions.

Although considerable attention and numerous volumes have been devoted to the development of technically sound interventions, comparatively little attention has been paid to figuring out how to make them work in organizations. This is, perhaps, because developing interventions is relatively easy compared with implementing them. Consider, just as one small example, the relative ease with which a set of performance appraisal rating scales can be developed compared with the much more onerous task of getting supervisors in organizations to rate employees in a manner that truly discriminates effective from ineffective performers.

But if the organizational interventions we develop are ever to have the full impact they could, then the complexities associated with their implementation must be dealt with head-on. Specific models and guiding principles like those already in the development literature must be devised for implementation. Although there is a significant literature on change management, innovation adoption, and other related topics, this book is the first to translate broad implementation principles that have been offered into practical and concrete steps for specific organizational interventions.

In the following section we offer a brief overview of some of the main principles culled from the different literatures to guide implementation success.

Insights from the Organizational Change Literature

Organizational change and development is more complex than merely choosing a new approach for modifying an organization's structure, people, or technology. Forces operating at the individual, group, and organizational levels influence management's selection of a particular approach. Often, managers are attracted to the latest workplace fad or fashion, without examining its proven effectiveness or how well it fits the situation. Beer and Eisenstat (1996) suggested that too often companies adopt in a top-down manner programs such as total quality, employee involvement, incentive compensation, and reengineering, and then find that they

fail to yield benefits commensurate with the time and money invested in them.

Kiechel (1979) surveyed management consultants and concluded that over 90 percent of American companies were unsuccessful in carrying out changes in corporate strategies. Lawler and Mohrman (1987) noted similar findings with quality circles in the United States; they described a process that began with enthusiasm, was followed by implementation failure, and was then abandoned before any payoff could be realized. Beer and Eisenstat (1996) cited more recent studies reporting that more than 70 percent of all corporations adopting total quality management or reengineering programs said these programs did not live up to expectations.

Certainly, initial enthusiasm and acceptance are insufficient to manage change through all the stages required for successful implementation. Even carefully adopted changes are sometimes abandoned. This may be due in part to the fact that when popular programs are introduced, many of the implementation steps that must be advocated by management and embraced by the members of the organization are overlooked. For example, O'Neill, Pouders, and Buchholtz (1998) noted that managers often express surprise about unexpected developments that arise after implementing strategies touted as successful elsewhere. This should not be so surprising, however, because the administrative details that form the fabric necessary for embedding the system into an organization will almost always be less visible than the strategies themselves. Thus, preliminary acceptance and even enthusiastic embrace of an intervention at introduction fail to ensure real organizational change.

Obviously, most changes produce resistance in the individuals or groups affected by them. The organizational change literature (see, for example, King, 1990; Hultman, 1998) suggests possible reasons for resistance to change, including the vested interests of organizational members, fear of uncertainty, misunderstandings, social disruption, inconvenience, organizational incompatibility, lack of top-level support and commitment, and rejection of outsiders. Exhibit 1.1 describes these variables in greater detail.

A number of years ago, Margulies and Colflesh (1982), writing about planning and implementing a new technology, offered some

Exhibit 1.1. Reasons for Resistance to Organizational Change.

- **Vested interests of organizational members:** Change affects the status quo and employees worry that positions may be eliminated or they may be terminated or reassigned. Not surprisingly, then, change is likely to meet with resistance.
 - **Fear of uncertainty:** Employees in most jobs establish a routine; they become familiar with the expectations and responsibilities of the job. Simply put, the known is more comfortable than the unknown.
 - **Misunderstandings:** Whenever situations change, misunderstandings may arise—often because of lack of clarity. Misunderstandings are especially likely between higher management and those on whom change is imposed.
 - **Social disruption:** Comfortable patterns of communication and information flow are established after working with other employees over time. Changes tend to disrupt such established patterns of interaction.
 - **Inconvenience:** The normal routine of performing a job is affected when new processes or procedures are introduced. If the change is merely perceived as an inconvenience that may be enough to elicit resistance.
 - **Organizational incompatibility:** Poor fit (or poor perceived fit) between the current organizational structure and the new strategy and its desired outcome may create strong resistance among organization members.
 - **Lack of top-level support and commitment:** If employees perceive a lack of enthusiasm, support, or commitment from management (especially top management) they may be less likely to embrace the change themselves.
 - **Rejection of outsiders:** When change is introduced by an external change agent, there may be resistance merely because the individual is considered an outsider who cannot possibly know what is best for the organization.
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recommendations based on their own successful experiences, including the following:

- Successful change programs depend on informed and motivated persons in the organization.
- Key management should initiate and support the change process.
- Cooperation must come from all levels in the organization.
- Management should be routinely engaged in monitoring the new system to ensure its continued alignment with the organization's goals and objectives.
- People likely to be affected by the change should be involved early in the process.
- Honest and open sharing of plans is crucial to minimize the feelings of threat that come up in the face of technological change.

More recently, Beer and Eisenstat (1996) offered similar advice, outlining three basic principles derived from the organizational behavior and development literature that they believe should characterize successfully implemented change processes:

- The change process should be systemic (that is, the broader perspective of issues related to organizational alignment or fit should be taken into account).
- The change process should invite open discussion of barriers to effective implementation (that is, any successful implementation plan must anticipate potential impediments).
- The change process should develop a partnership among relevant stakeholders (that is, change requires people at all levels of the organization to adapt).

The authors concluded, however, that these basic principles appear to be rarely followed in actual intervention practice.

As Porras and Robertson (1992) noted, any change program must pay attention to both individual and organizational needs. The personal benefits to be gained, and the likely problems to be confronted, should be communicated early in the process to establish an atmosphere of trust. In addition, employees and work groups may

wish to participate in planning, analyzing, and coordinating the change effort. This participation, in turn, may offer employees some insight into the need for change and help minimize resistance.

Insights from the Organizational Innovation Literature

Beyer and Trice noted in 1978 that up to that time any real focus on implementation had been directed at understanding and overcoming initial resistance to change by organizational members. They suggested that more attention had been given to how changes are initiated than to the processes and mechanisms involved in actually putting them in place. These authors pointed to the innovation literature as providing a particularly relevant body of research helpful in understanding the implementation process. In this body of literature, *innovation* is defined as a technology, product, or service that is used for the first time by members of an organization, whether or not other organizations have used it previously.

Numerous models have characterized the organizational innovation process. For example, Hage and Aiken (1970) identified a four-stage model (evaluation, initiation, implementation, routinization); Zaltman, Duncan, and Holbek (1973) proposed a two-stage model of design and implementation; and Nord and Tucker (1987) adopted a four-stage model (diagnosis, design, implementation, stabilization). Regardless of the model used, the conclusion is the same: most of the research has focused on the design component and relatively little research has been done on implementation.

Nord and Tucker (1987) suggested that this was unfortunate because implementation activities have much more to do with an innovation's success than design activities. They concluded that implementation is the "payoff" stage of the innovating process. Once the innovation is made, the process of embedding it into organizational life becomes the central activity. Therefore, the authors examined the available research and suggested a number of characteristics that might be critical to successful implementation. They categorized these overall as characteristics of the innovation, characteristics of the organization, and characteristics of relevant interpersonal processes. Exhibit 1.2 lists and describes in brief some of the variables in each of these categories.

Exhibit 1.2. Variables That May Affect Innovation Implementation Success.

Characteristics of the Innovation

- **Routine or radical:** Routine innovation is something new yet similar to what the organization has done before. Radical innovation is new and different from what has been done previously; it may require changes in employee behavior and organization structure.
- **Technical or administrative:** Technical innovations originate in the organization's technical core and include ideas for a new product, process, or service; they tend to succeed with low formalization, distribution of power, and decentralization. Administrative innovations originate in the organization's administrative core and pertain to recruitment policies, resource allocation, and structuring of tasks, authority, and rewards; these are best carried out with high formalization, centralization, and tight structures.
- **Central or peripheral:** Central innovations involve major day-to-day work of the organization and affect activities of almost everyone. Peripheral innovations are associated with specific or limited projects in groups or units; they do not have a central impact on the whole organization or a critical impact on work units.

Characteristics of the Organization

- **Structure:** Organic structures are usually characterized by participative processes and free-flowing communication; mechanistic structures are governed by rules and procedures that reduce ambiguity and potential conflict, and provide clear guidance.
- **History:** To some degree, all organizations are unique and many elements of an organization's history influence its current behavior.
- **Strategy:** The strategy is the organization's main objectives, purposes, goals, and policies.
- **Size:** Smaller organizations may be more facile in their ability to design and implement innovations, but large organizations may have more available tools with which to facilitate implementation.
- **Culture:** Shared key values and beliefs may help or hinder innovation adoption.
- **Organizational learning:** Employees' shared new understandings about the relationship between actions and their outcomes.

**Exhibit 1.2. Variables That May Affect
Innovation Implementation Success, Cont'd.**

Characteristics of Interpersonal Processes

- **Employee involvement:** Employee participation in the change event may facilitate implementation success, or even reshape the innovation.
 - **Politics and influence:** Individual pursuit of self-interest, whether or not that self-interest conflicts with larger organizational interests.
 - **Communication:** Frequency, methods, and direction of information flow may affect employee commitment to successful innovation implementation.
 - **Leadership styles:** The underlying need structure of the individual leader, which motivates various behaviors in leadership situations, can affect perceptions of the leader's commitment to the innovation and the subsequent support among organizational members.
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Klein and Sorra (1996) argued that an organization's inability to benefit from adopting an innovation more likely reflects a failure of implementation than a failure of the innovation itself. The authors believe that implementation effectiveness is influenced by both an organization's climate and the perceived fit of that innovation to users' values.

They described an organization's climate for the implementation of a given innovation as employees' shared perceptions of the degree to which their use of the innovation was expected, supported, and rewarded by the organization. The fit between the users' values and the intended innovation was defined in terms of the degree to which users believe the innovation would foster (or inhibit) the fulfillment of their values. Klein and Sorra encouraged organizations to foster a fit between climate, innovation, and values by providing participation opportunities for employees at all levels and educating them about the organizational need for the innovation.

Taking a Marketing Perspective

Leonard-Barton and Kraus (1985) stated that individuals responsible for guiding a technical innovation's transition into operational use are often more adept at overseeing its development than its implementation. Certainly, competencies required for development and adoption of an innovation are different from those necessary for ensuring its acceptance. Consequently, they recommended that the organization adopt a marketing perspective as perhaps the best framework through which to accomplish implementation.

In clarifying their recommendations, they also differentiated the notion of a marketing perspective from a selling perspective. Whereas selling starts with a finished product, marketing begins with gathering information on user needs and preferences. They concluded that a marketing approach was the proper framework to adopt when it comes to change initiatives because it looks at how to position a product in relation to all other products vying for attention. A marketing perspective also emphasizes the importance of understanding available or required distribution channels and the infrastructure needed to support product use. Further, Leonard-Barton and Kraus (1985) noted that a marketing perspective encourages implementation managers to involve users in the early identification and strengthening of fit between a product and their own needs, prepares users to operationalize the innovation, and shifts "ownership" of the innovation to users.

The authors suggested that many implementation efforts have failed because the importance of preparation for implementation is underestimated. As we noted earlier, an innovation's technical superiority and even its strategic importance do not guarantee its acceptance or continued use. Yet it is this misperception that leads individuals and organizations to "overcommit" to the purchase or development of a technology but "undercommit" to its implementation. Just as marketing managers carefully plan the details for gathering critical product information, so implementation managers must develop a framework to guide decisions about when and how to collect needed information from relevant users.

Leonard-Barton and Kraus (1985) emphasized the importance of identifying the individuals or groups whose acceptance is essential

for the success of the intervention. Thus, it must be decided who to approach, when, and with which arguments. Certainly, both top management and end users must buy into the innovation to make it succeed, but marketing an idea to these two groups requires very different approaches. Top management, with an eye on the bottom line, tends to focus on return on investment and payback. Involving end users in the decision-making process whenever possible instills a sense of ownership of the intervention. Leonard-Barton and Kraus's simple message is that it is overly optimistic to believe that an innovation will sell itself, and it is equally dangerous to oversell the potential impact of a new system.

Conclusion

Beer and Eisenstat (1996) noted that the constantly changing work environment—with global competition and rapidly changing technology—is forcing corporations to rethink their strategies and realign their organizations to implement these strategies. They stated that corporate leaders may have to learn to reformulate strategy and realign their organizations routinely if they are to thrive, or even survive, in such a turbulent environment. Because of this rapidity of change, individuals and organizations also must become more proficient at successful implementation of programs, techniques, and procedures required to help organizations stay viable. When implementation is viewed as the transition process from the decision to acquire a new technology, process, or tool to its incorporation in day-to-day work, the cyclical, never-ending nature of the process becomes more apparent.

Consequently, it will become more and more crucial to understand the factors that affect implementation success in today's world of work. The importance of the implementation component of any program, practice, or technique seems indisputable. But extensive coverage of the topic has yet to emerge in the research or practice literature. The remaining chapters in this volume describe different types of organizational interventions, the implementation activities involved, lessons learned, and specific, practical guidance for the reader that should facilitate implementation success and enhance our understanding of implementation processes.

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