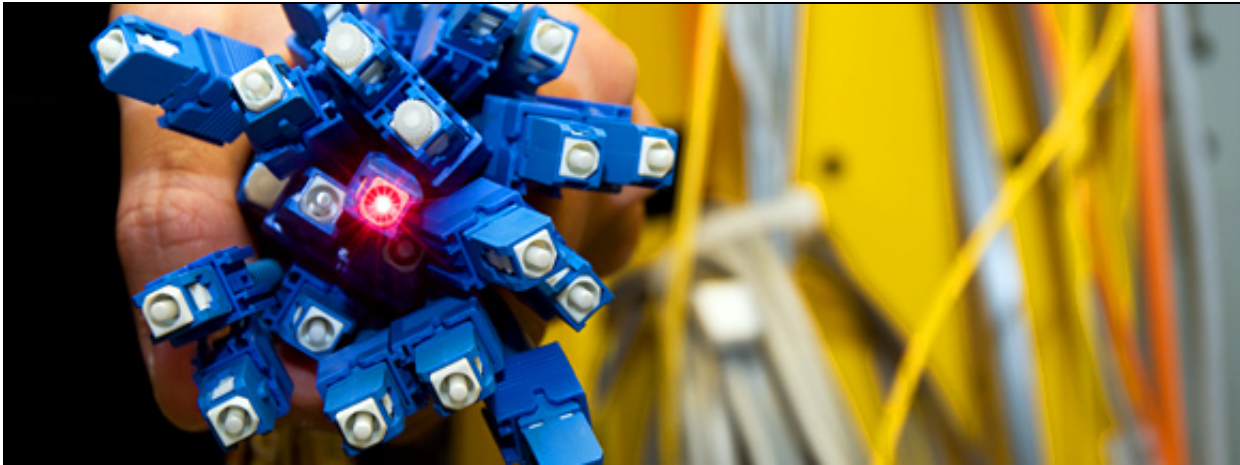


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### No One Likes to Be Changed

by Daniel Markovitz | 10:00 AM May 16, 2013

Listen to the language that any leader, consultant, or HR professional uses, and you'll hear them expound at length about how "we" need to change "them." That says it all: the fact is, no one likes to be changed, even if the change is ultimately beneficial.

In his recent HBR blog post (<http://blogs.hbr.org/ashkenas/2013/04/change-management-needs-to-cha.html>), Ron Ashkenas argues that the reason most change management initiatives fail is due to stunted managerial capability to implement change. He points out — correctly, I believe — that in many organizations the responsibility for change initiatives has come to rest with HR, and not with the line supervisors and managers. However, I believe that there's a deeper, more fundamental problem with the way we frame the whole notion of change management. In fact, I propose that we dispense with the concept of "change management" entirely. History shows that's a recipe guaranteed to foment fear, resistance, and — ultimately — failure (<http://www.reply-mc.com/2010/09/19/why-70-of-changes-fail-by-rick-maurer/>).

Many factors underlie that failure. Research shows that there's actually a decrease in cognitive function ([http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2013/04/stop\\_telling\\_your\\_employees\\_wh.html](http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2013/04/stop_telling_your_employees_wh.html)) when people feel as though they lack control over their work environment. Moreover, repetitive change initiatives — particularly ones that include layoffs — inevitably lead to cynicism and often to a kind of learned helplessness (<http://blogs.hbr.org/ashkenas/2012/06/learned-helplessness-in-organi.html>).

A far more effective approach would be to actually involve workers in solving business problems. As Dan Pink writes in his book *Drive* ([http://www.ted.com/talks/dan\\_pink\\_on\\_motivation.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/dan_pink_on_motivation.html)), the autonomy and skill development that comes with solving problems for oneself will do more to overcome resistance and motivate change than any strategy a cloistered HR professional or consultant can develop. I'm partial to A3 Thinking (<http://a3thinking.com/>) as a powerful way to solve problems, but the truth is — the tool you use doesn't really matter. **The key is to pose a business problem to the workers actually doing the job and then having them design the change.** Consider the following cases:

- A group of senior R&D engineers at Abbott Vascular spent six to seven hours each day handling email. They were demoralized and frustrated by their inability to find time to do any engineering. On their own, they developed a new communication protocol that defined when and how to use email ([http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2012/08/how\\_to\\_break\\_free\\_from\\_email\\_j.html](http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2012/08/how_to_break_free_from_email_j.html)) (never for urgent or complex issues), and now they can safely unshackle themselves from their smartphones and focus on engineering issues.

- The interventional radiologists at a major cancer center were asked by leadership to lower costs and increase revenue by accelerating room turnover. They decided to standardize the devices (stents, guidewires, catheters, etc.) they use for basic cases. Reducing the variation lowered inventory-carrying costs and enabled technicians and nurses to set up rooms more quickly.
- In her book, *Sleeping with Your Smartphone* (<http://leslieperlow.com/book>), Leslie Perlow recounts how she set a goal of one day per week of "predictable time off" for a team of consultants at the Boston Consulting Group. The consultants themselves then devised radically different work habits and client communication procedures to make it happen — an initiative that has now been adopted by over 900 teams worldwide.
- A typical Toyota assembly line in the U.S. makes thousands of operational changes in the course of a single year. As journalist Charles Fishman writes ([http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/111/open\\_no-satisfaction.html](http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/111/open_no-satisfaction.html)), "that number is not just large, it's arresting, it's mind-boggling." Toyota doesn't have change management consultants driving those changes; the workers themselves make them (<http://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/toyotas-secret-the-a3-report/>).

In each of these cases, it's easy to imagine how externally imposed solutions by leadership or HR would have been fiercely resisted, leading to lengthy disquisitions on how to manage or overcome employee intransigence. The real secret to successful change, therefore, is not to change people at all. Let them figure out how to solve their own problems, and they'll do the rest.