

Damn the Ideas — Full Speed Ahead

To achieve successful transformations, leaders must develop a culture that celebrates implementation efforts at least as much as the genesis of new ideas.

By Ron Wiens



AT A GLANCE:

- ◆ Many organizations value the *idea* of change more than the *implementation effort* required to realise the benefits of change. When this is true, large-scale transformations are likely to fail in achieving significant results.
- ◆ Successful transformations focus on the *implementation phase*, in which doubts and criticism may make it difficult to maintain the strategic focus required for success. Leaders must have the courage to “map out a course of action and follow it to an end.”
- ◆ Leaders need strategies for *building a culture* that emphasises, embraces, and thrives on the *disciplined implementation* of ideas.

Damn the Ideas—Full Speed Ahead

Organizations are bloated with progressive ideas while suffering from a poverty of execution.

Have you ever considered that organizations are actually drowning in good ideas? Surely what all businesses crave are bright people putting forward lots of good ideas to improve their business and make it more successful? So, how can there be a problem with too many ideas?

The first problem is that new ideas are seductive. It is easy to fall in love with the next great idea before you have finished with the previous one. This changing of horses in mid-stream can become a habit, a habit that leads an organization to lose its strategic focus.

The second problem is that while organizations are willing to invest a great deal of creativity, concentration and time into ‘coming up’ with new ideas, they are reluctant to invest any where near the amount of creativity, concentration and time required to turn these ideas into business reality.

On their own, each of these problems adversely impacts the organization’s ability to deliver on its goals and objectives. But if you put them together, they become a powerful force for anchoring an organization in its past.

We love ideas – they are fun, they are stimulating, they engender debate, dialogue and they are not threatening, after all it is only an idea. There is not a whole lot of risk in coming up with an idea. If people don’t like my idea, I can alter it or quickly move on to another idea. If I can come up with a ‘great’ idea I will be seen as a ‘hero’ in my organization and rewarded accordingly. The problem is that an unimplemented (or poorly implemented) idea has no inherent value and there is the rub. Implementation involves a lot of tedious sweat and pain.

Rather than concentrating on implementing a few good ideas, the temptation for an organization is to be seduced by a flashy launch and a superficial implementation before moving on to the excitement of the next great idea. Many organizations whose leaders proclaim

commitment to change often fail to achieve significant results because they have built a culture in which it is the idea itself that is valued and not the implementation effort required to realize the benefits. In such cultures, creativity is considered to be an intellectual proclivity for generating new ideas, new strategies, new policies and new action plans. In these cultures, the idea people are hoisted up on shoulders and paraded around the organization while the implementers are left starving for attention.

THE IDEAS ICEBERG

Ideas are like icebergs in that 90% of the effort involved lies below the surface. You can think of the life-cycle of an idea as having two phases:

- ◆ **first phase** - the generation/ formulation/ articulation of the idea
- ◆ **second phase** - the implementation/ realization and sustainment of the benefits

The first phase (the generation of the idea), accounts for 10% or less of the total effort in the idea's life cycle. New ideas are usually articulated to a small, like-minded audience of blue-sky thinkers, not a whole lot of pressure here. There is little accountability associated with the generation of ideas. In the world of ideas, the challenge of implementation belongs to someone else.

In contrast, the implementation phase accounts for a whopping 90% of the total effort in the idea's life cycle. Those tasked with implementing change are often dealing with an audience that sees no reason to change, that has to be wooed, persuaded and convinced to do things differently – and the implementers are held accountable for ensuring these people adopt the new ways. Implementing and sustaining the change required to make the idea real is difficult, time-consuming, and involves a lot of custom built communication, attention to detail, tedious toil, sweat and pain. Implementation involves change and change is always scary. This is why as the implementation starts to become real, the implementers often find themselves standing alone, not a fun place to be.

Like the iceberg, those working on creating new ideas are highly visible whereas those charged with bringing the ideas to fruition disappear below the surface and from the leaders' radar for long periods of time. Is it little wonder that our bright young people who

want to get ahead are drawn to idea generation and not idea implementation?

3

WHAT DRIVES SUCCESS?

There is a significant amount of research which shows what makes an organization successful and differentiates it from the competition is its ability to 'stick to it'.

- ◆ Jim Collins' book **Good To Great** was based on seven years of research involving 1,435 Fortune 500 companies. His research concluded what moved a company to greatness in terms of its bottom-line performance was picking "one big thing and sticking to it'.
- ◆ Nitin Nohria, William Joyce and Bruce Roberson, in their paper "What Really Works", (Harvard Business Review, July 2003) followed 160 companies over a 10 year period. They concluded that strategy was less important than the ability to implement a strategy and that success came less from the specifics of any given strategy and more from the leader's ability to highly focus their organization on the delivery of a single strategy.
- ◆ Jack Welch, General Electric's former CEO and one of the most successful business leaders of the twentieth century in terms of bottom line performance, was known for picking one major change initiative and focusing his organization on it for 3 to 5 years.

Ideas are important and choosing the idea in which to invest is critical to an organization's success. However, study after study demonstrates that the really successful organizations are differentiated from the rest by their ability to implement. Once an idea is chosen, the successful organizations are able to stay focussed and invest the time and resources required that transform the idea into their reality. Clearly, the competitive differentiator lies in the 'land of implementation' rather than in the 'land of ideas'.

The iceberg model makes clear why this is so. An organization can easily generate many more ideas than it has the energy to realize. An organization that is unable to choose or attempts to ride multiple ideas under the mistaken assumption that this approach keeps their options open and thereby reduces risk is doomed to paying lip-service to the

implementation process - there is simply too much to do. Many organizations have attempted one or more (usually more) of the three letter acronyms (e.g. TQM, BPR, CPI, etc) but few had what G.E. had under Jack Welch, namely, the implementation discipline required for success.

What the 'great' firms did was to "stick to it" and not allow other seductive opportunities to side-track them.

The research carried out by Collins and his team found that those firms that achieved a 'great' status did not spend any more time on strategic planning than the also-rans. What the 'great' firms did was to "stick to it" and not allow other seductive opportunities to side-track them.

By contrast, those firms that can not "stick to it" create a complexity in their organizations that end up driving their people away from investing their energy in the implementation process. Strategy is sacrifice, try to do everything and you have no plan, no hope, no future.

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WHY IS CHANGE SO HARD?

Organizations fail with change, in large part, because they have failed to build a discipline around the implementation of ideas.

In those cultures in which it is the idea and not the implementation that is valued, the leader will be constantly bombarded with alternate ideas that if listened to will distract and pull the organization off its strategic track. What those around the leader are saying often sounds intelligent and reasonable. As a leader, you don't know for certain what the outcome of a current implementation is going to be and you feel fear. Leaders are human – and so they are tempted to give way to their fears and the voices recommending distraction. If they do, they abandon the implementation of the existing idea, start the implementation of a new idea, and the cycle of wasted effort repeats itself.

As launch day gets close, people who previously had no interest in the new idea start nay-saying, undermining your strategy, doubting your judgement, telling you to go here or there or stop altogether or telling you about a much better idea that should be swapped for the idea that is on the brink of implementation. Other people will get frightened and with the best of intentions undermine the action you have

committed yourself to – and they will do this at a very senior level. When this happens, you need to go out of your way to support your implementers – be steadfast and enable these people to deliver in line with your strategy.

In the end, when the organization hops from idea to idea, little is accomplished, even though the organization expends a great deal of energy. This is where leaders lose credibility, resulting in their people abandoning the leader’s strategy and reverting back to their own ‘reliable’ agendas. In this situation, the organization starts to resemble the incandescent light bulb with energy going off in all directions.

Maintaining the strategic focus required for successful change is difficult. But in a culture that does not value the discipline of idea-implementation, it is all but impossible. As a leader you must not let your fears and doubts become the lens through which you view your organization’s way forward. As Ralph Waldo Emerson so eloquently said “Whatever course you decide upon, there is always someone to tell you that you are wrong. There are always difficulties arising which tempt you to believe that your critics are right. To map out a course of action and follow it to an end requires courage”.

BUILDING THE CULTURE

So how does a leader build a culture in which the disciplined implementation of ideas is valued?

Firstly, the leader needs to create a clear strategy for change and articulate the ideas chosen for implementation to all his/her people.

Secondly, the leader needs to ensure that his/her management team does not allow itself to act without first checking whether its proposed actions are aligned with the leader’s strategy. If there is a lack of discipline at the senior level around sticking to a common strategy, people will interpret this as a license to set their own direction. Energy that should be used to realize the leader’s strategy gets diluted into lots of mini-strategies. This leads to conflicting agendas and wasted energy.

Thirdly, the leader needs to redirect a large part of the energy and creativity reserved for idea generation into energy and creativity for delivering on implementation (see below ‘The Importance of Hope’).

Fourthly, the leader needs to pay attention to a governance process that manages the implementation phase. Leaders have to put some

real effort into ensuring that a rigorous governance process is established. A process that:

- ◆ ensures a solid implementation ‘action plan’ is produced for each ‘accepted’ idea,
- ◆ builds a sense amongst those responsible, that they are going to be held accountable delivering on the ‘action plan’ for each accepted idea.

Fifthly, leaders need to visibly demonstrate through their actions that implementation and implementors are valued. Leaders generally feel more at home in the ‘land of ideas’ than they do in the ‘land of implementation’, and as a result there is a natural tendency for the leader to return back to the ‘land of ideas’ as quickly as possible. Building a culture that has the discipline of execution requires the leader to take up residency in the ‘land of implementation’.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HOPE

The leader also needs to build hope. Ideas represent hope—hope for a new way, hope for a better way, and hope for change. This is why we like living in the ‘land of the idea’. On the other hand, when it comes to making the ideas real, things rarely work out as expected. As the implementation projects run into difficulty and we find that we are going to have to compromise on what we can actually deliver, hope turns into disappointment. And as the disappointment builds, people look for ways to abandon the implementation process and return back to the ‘land of purity’, the ‘land of ideas’. But the hope contained in the ‘land of ideas’ is illusionary, for as pointed out above; an unimplemented idea has no inherent value. The challenge for the leader is to bring some of the hope that is so abundant in the idea generation phase into the implementation phase. The leader needs to put a significant amount of energy into helping those responsible for implementation to stay connected with the importance of what they are doing. The implementors need to believe that if they are able to deliver on the original idea, even partially (after all business is one of those activities in which close often counts), that their work is going to make a real difference. It is this hope/belief that will cause people to become excited about entering and living in the ‘land of implementation’.

Your job, as a leader, is to keep your people focused on and excited about the implementation process. This will end up being your organization's competitive delta.

Yes, ideas represent hope and leaders that jump from idea to idea are trading on hope but eventually they end up hollowing out hope as the organization fails to deliver because it does not have the discipline to

do so. When the bee hive is buzzing, you need to stay focused and remember that new ideas are often procrastination dressed-up as innovation. Your job, as a leader, is to keep your people focused on and excited about the implementation process. In the end, this will be your organization's competitive delta.

THE NECESSITY OF DEVIATION – A REALITY CHECK

As a leader, there will always be times when you are required to make a decision that represents a deviation from your basic strategy. At these times you should:

- ◆ Examine the case for deviation,
- ◆ Weigh the benefits and costs,
- ◆ If you decide to deviate, make explicit why you are doing so,
- ◆ Communicate with your people what you are doing and why,
- ◆ Return to your strategy when the need to deviate has passed.

Toby Ziegler is Director of Communications to President Bartlett in the TV series 'The West Wing'. He is a pain in the backside and the audience often wonders "What purpose does Toby serve?" and "How did he ever get that job?"

And indeed Toby was not the first or the second choice for the job, but as the complexities of his responsibility unfurl, he is undoubtedly an inspired appointment. Toby's role is to constantly remind the President of his driving principles, his strategy, his goals and his priorities. The President of the United States is faced with many complex decisions and finds he cannot always adhere to his principles or his strategy. Toby's role is to intervene whenever the President is about to deviate. He does not allow the President to deviate inadvertently or permissively. He forces the President to face the deviation and demands that he articulate his deviation and explain the reason for it.

The White House staff and the President find life with Toby difficult. But Toby creates the capacity for the President to return to his principles/strategy once the requirement to deviate is over. Toby prevents the President from becoming mentally/morally corrupted by the occasional requirement to abandon his principles.

The character of President Bartlett demonstrates leadership by allowing Toby to deliver the pain the President is so anxious to avoid, he ensures his own salvation and that of his Administration.

8

Every organization needs a Toby.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ron Wiens has spent the past 30 years helping organizations build high performance cultures. His most recent book, titled '*Building Organizations that Leap Tall Buildings in a Single Bound*' is a leader's guide to culture as competitive advantage. To contact Ron, send him an email at ron@ronwiens.com