Implementation Planning and Change Management with The Six Boxes® Approach

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How often have you seen great new programs, systems, processes, strategies or initiatives that are well conceived and well designed, fully funded, and enthusiastically launched, only to watch them fail during implementation?

*Change management* – that magic phrase that means *making something new happen and continue* – is often the missing element in such efforts. More often than we’d like to admit, we make the announcement, send out the email, and figuratively cut the ribbon, after which a flurry of activity and excitement settles back into business as usual. It might take months for the flurry to fade, but as it does, our hopes for a large sustainable return on investment fade with it. People continue to do the old thing the old way, maybe with minor revisions. This is not a new problem, and it is fairly common. And there are many variants of it, depending on what is being implemented.

**Typical Implementation Challenges**

Training programs, for example, are among the most typical examples because their sponsors, designers, and facilitators often see them as *events*. Consequently, there is often little if any proactive planning for what happens after the training itself. Once the event is over, the classic problem is that new skills and knowledge don’t “stick” on the job. It’s not necessarily that the training itself didn’t work. Rather, there is often no systematic plan for integrating new skills and knowledge into ongoing job performance.

Execution or implementation of strategic plans is another common situation where follow-through doesn’t always happen as hoped. Polls and experts claim that a remarkably low percentage of strategic plans are ever fully executed. The challenge is to translate high-level business goals and objectives into day-to-day operation through the behavior of people. This is where the Six Boxes Approach can help us define required human performance and then plan how we’ll support new behavior, applying models and language that can be shared across all levels and functions in any organization.

System implementation is a common challenge when rolling out new technology. If people are accustomed to using a given set of tools or software enablers, no matter how clunky or outdated, it can be difficult to ensure the switchover to new technology. Training and user manuals might not be enough. Technology Help Desks are accustomed to this situation, and typically plan for a lot of extra work during the days and weeks following system go-live. While additional help might prevent big problems until users become accustomed and willing to use new systems, a more systematic performance planning process can sometimes make a big difference when it comes to the cost of implementation. Again, we need to plan for human behavior.

…this is where the Six Boxes® Approach can help, since it is about defining and supporting human performance with models and language that can be shared across all levels and functions in any organization.
One last example is in the area of process implementation, often linked to new technology systems described in the previous paragraph. We may have a beautifully designed, streamlined process for doing some old thing a new way. But often getting the people to follow the new process can be a big challenge. Many organizations that engage in process improvement fail to take the human behavior influences into account, so new processes may remain un-used, under-used, or used improperly. While there are many different strategies and models for change management and implementation in the field of process improvement, the Six Boxes Approach can help is this application, too.

**Implementation: A Separate but Related Performance Improvement Project**

Implementing a new program, process, system, strategy, or initiative usually involves behavior and milestones or “outputs” that go beyond those required for the thing being implemented itself. For example, in a training program intended to support on-the-job sales behavior and ongoing learning in the field, both sales representatives and their managers have to engage in activities and achieve milestones or produce outputs as part of applying what the sales reps learned during training. Sales reps might need to record their own daily activities, engage in field-based practice, or ask for and receive feedback from their managers who serve as on-the-job coaches. To serve as coaches, managers need support and easy-to-use tools, along with effective motivation. We need to plan for new activities and outputs if the program is to succeed.

Executing strategy also involves new behavior and milestones, or work outputs, on the job. To plan for execution, leaders and managers must define who needs to do what in order to achieve what outputs and milestones at each level and in each function where the strategy requires new activity. Once performance requirements are clear, then management needs to figure out what the organization must provide to support the new behavior. This is its own “performance improvement” project, separate from but necessary for rolling the strategy down through the organization to front-line operations.

Processes and systems are similar in that implementing them involves not only the milestones and activities that are part of the processes or systems themselves, but also such milestones as technicians able to complete the new test, operators willing to stop the line despite a history of negative consequences for doing so, and data captured by line workers at new points in the process. These all might require new behavior with different expectations and criteria, updated tools, new motivators, and even job re-assignments – not merely training plus a new user manual. We must change both the behavior of people and the conditions that support that behavior.
How The Six Boxes® Approach Can Help

If we re-frame implementation planning as a performance improvement project, like any other one, we will apply the Six Boxes Approach much as we would to any other situation where we want to understand and develop or improve human performance. We’ll use the Performance Chain to define performance, identifying the milestones or work outputs needed to achieve the business results targeted by the implementation. We’ll then figure out who has to do what (i.e., the behavior) to produce or achieve the desired outputs or milestones.

In following these steps, we’ll define the change we seek in terms of the elements of human performance, including performance of different individuals or groups who will need to behave differently to produce different work outputs or milestones.

Once we’ve identified business results, work outputs or milestones, and behavior (including who will need to behave differently), we can go to the next step, which is to select measures. The Performance Chain again provides guidance, since the change we seek can be measured as business results, work outputs, and/or behavior. Since work outputs or milestones, if we identify criteria for good ones, can be counted, it is often most convenient to measure them often (e.g., daily, weekly, or monthly) to make frequent decisions about progress. Measures of business results, though important, are often lagging indicators and do not support frequent decisions.

Measures of behavior can be expensive and, while worthwhile, might be most important only when we are attempting to diagnose why work outputs or milestones are not being achieved as expected.

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Using The Six Boxes® Model to Develop an Implementation Plan

Once we have defined performance using the Performance Chain, creating a plan to develop, support, and encourage the needed behavior is relatively straightforward, if we use the Six Boxes Model as a guide.

Once we have decided who needs to do what to achieve implementation or execution milestones (outputs), the planning team can figure out what it will take in each box to optimize conditions for success as cost-effectively as possible. While the details of this can vary tremendously from situation to situation, the simple mental models and logic of this approach provide powerful, easy-to-understand guidance. After configuring behavior influences to support needed behavior, the final planning stage involves assigning responsibility to different participants and stakeholders for actually implementing the various behavior influences (e.g., setting expectations, building tools, arranging consequences, delivering training, etc.) At this point, the implementation or change management project becomes like any other performance management planning effort – a matter of pulling together the resources to follow through on the plan.

The Performance Thinking Network offers programs that enable organizations to apply Six Boxes Performance Thinking for implementation planning and change management.

For More Information:

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