TITLE: Getting Real Change to Happen

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Why Change?
Before announcing to the team that they need to change old habits, it is imperative to understand what the driving force is behind your need to change. Do you think you need to change because the latest benchmark study is out? Is there a new practice opening up on your side of town? Are you having trouble attracting quality team members? Are you behind on the use of technology? Understanding the reasons or the forces of change can help you determine your course of action for implementing a project for change (Kinicki and Kreitner).

Internal forces are those that managers are typically aware of.
- Low productivity
- Revenue issues
- High employee turnover
- Human Resource issues
- Management decisions

External forces, although not always on a manager's radar, should not be ignored because these forces are still impacting your bottom line.
- Demographics – changes in both clients and workforce
- Technological advancements
- Customer and Market changes
- Social and Political pressures

Do you look at both internal and external forces when you evaluate the need for changes at your practice? Take the time to conduct a thorough SWOT analysis when evaluating the forces affecting your business. Is your strength in any of those internal or external forces? Do you notice any immediate weaknesses? What about any threats? How about an opportunity for change? Remember the definition of insanity – doing the same thing over and over again, and expecting different results!

Let's say you are having a problem with low productivity numbers. Maybe the number of exams per day has dropped down, perhaps you are not doing as many laboratory procedures in-house as you would like or revenue this year has not improved over last year. You demand a change in those numbers for next month… but you do not 'change' anything. Your scheduling stays the same, your website still shows the same services, and your team still goes through the same steps and checklist. Insanity has arrived! You keep doing the same thing and by the end of the month, you are upset that nothing has changed in the numbers.

Everyone knows that change is difficult, but it is also a necessity for business success. The take-home message is simply this –forces bringing about change are coming at you from all different angles, are you cognizant of the angles? Can you respond to the forces of change? How long will it take you to respond? How do you respond?

Model Change Processes
There are many models available to explain the change process. Kurt Lewin's three-stage model, a systems model of change, the ADKAR model, and John Kotter's eight-steps for leading change (remember the book "Our Iceberg is Melting") are all models to explain the change process and offer steps for you to follow to make implementing change easier. Spending some time to acquaint oneself with these models will help when setting up the change process needed for your veterinary practice. The systems model of change is a helpful diagnostic tool for the strategic planning phase of change and relies on conducting a SWOT analysis of the

business. Kotter's eight-step model, although not diagnostic, is extremely helpful with the process of how to lead to change in your team (Kinicki).

The three-stage change management model by Kurt Lewin is: Unfreeze, Change, And Refreeze. Unfreezing the current condition means, you are getting ready to get out of the comfort zone, leave the insanity, and make a change. The next phase, the change phase, is really about transitioning to a new way of doing things. This is the stage where resistance to change kicks in and can stop the change process in its tracks. Support is vitally important during this phase – communication, training, coaching, reviewing, feedback, and monitoring are all a part of providing support to the team and the business during the transition. Finally, refreezing – in other words, making certain the change 'sticks' and becomes an established routine. How long you stay frozen in this new process depends on the forces (both internal and external forces) that constantly affect your business.

The systems model of change is based on four components: inputs, strategic plans, targets, and outputs. Inputs are your SWOT analysis, mission statement, and vision for the business – why you are in business, what you hope to become, and what your strengths/weaknesses/opportunities/threats are at this time. From this information, you state the goals and formulate a strategic plan to achieve the goal(s). Now you have a clear picture of what your targets are. Targets are the factors that you will take action on because they need to be changed, such as, policies and procedures, knowledge and abilities of team members, workflow and job designs, leadership and communication, physical aspects of the building and culture of the business. Outputs are your end-results. If you determine there are things that need to be changed and you are going to take action on certain factors then it would behoove you to have some idea of what the end result will be so you can recognize when you have successfully changed things.

The ADKAR model has five elements: Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, and Reinforcement. Your team needs to have an awareness, or reasons why there needs to be change. The team must have a desire to make change happen and you can list consequences and rewards that will be seen if you do not change versus if you do change. Everyone must have training on the knowledge, skills, and tools they will need to support the change process. Ability to implement what they have learned – perform new skills, act on new knowledge, use new tools, and demonstrate a new behavior. Finally, reinforce and sustain – make the change stick.

Kotter's eight steps for leading change (notice how the models have progressed from three elements up to eight) provide more detail into a change process. As you read the eight steps, you will notice that the other models can be conveniently inserted into the different steps.

1. Urgency – establish a sense of urgency, unfreeze the way the business is doing things, and communicate a compelling awareness for why change is needed. Examine the internal and external forces affecting your business.
2. Coalition – build a diverse group of team members to lead the change process and guide the team along the way, and give them enough power to lead the effort.
3. Strategy – develop a vision and strategy to provide a map to guide the team through the process
4. Communicate – the coalition must constantly communicate (and model) the new vision and the strategic plan to the entire team. Enlist a "volunteer army" who are ready and willing to drive change.
5. Enable – eliminate barriers to change, know your target elements, change systems or structures, create a psychologically safe work environment to take risks and bring up ideas and concerns.
6. Short-term Wins – celebrate small accomplishments, correlate them to the goals, and end results your change management process is working towards. Recognize and reward.
7. Sustain – keep the momentum going to achieve change by watching systems and policies, developing team members, and reinvigorating the team for the long haul.
8. Anchor – institute change as part of the culture with new behaviors, new structures and policies.

One cannot simply shout "change" and expect it to happen. Become a student of the process and work to build your understanding of the change process so you can use one of the models to help you focus your effort. Following a plan or a process will improve the chances of success and help when faced with resistance to change.

Resistance to Change

In addition to learning about change models that will help orchestrate a change process, learning about how human nature responds to change can also help. Consider these reasons for resistance by your team (Kinicki):

- It is an ingrained predisposition a person learned from childhood
- They fear the unknown or fear failing at the new changes
- They do not trust the organization or people leading change
- They fear a loss of job security
- They do not see anything positive coming out of the change
- Traditions and relationships are being broken
- They do not see the need to change because they have been so successful in the past
- "The way we do things around here" is ingrained in the culture of your organization

In their book, *Switch,* Chip and Dan Heath use a metaphor to explain a person's resistance to change – the rider, the elephant, and the path. Your brain is like the rider on an elephant. The rider plans and analyzes. The elephant is the energy to move. The path is the environment they are working in. Chip and Dan Health suggest that you direct the rider, motivate the elephant, and shape the path to make the change process successful in your business.

The rider is a person's rational side. Direct your team members. To overcome resistance, speak to the rational side, communicate a crystal-clear destination, identify little wins along the way, be focused on solutions and not problems, identify specific behaviors, and script critical moves. The rider is trying to change engrained behaviors and, therefore, must have enough self-control to move forward and not slip back into old habits (i.e. talking themselves out of the change).

The elephant is the emotional side. Motivate their emotions. For a person to make progress toward a goal, it requires energy, emotion, and drive. A person must feel the need for change and it must be about something they care about. Overcoming the exhaustion often experienced with change initiatives will require breaking the initiative into smaller steps. A crisis may result in a quick change but will not sustain a long-haul change initiative. For the long haul project to have success (and avoid exhaustion and demoralization), those involve must feel a positive, emotional connection to the change.

The path is about the work environment, training, and SOPs. The path needs to be shaped, simplified, and made easier. This can be accomplished through support groups, training, forms, scripts, procedures, and policies. Even changes to the physical work environment can smooth the path toward change. Change the environment to change the behavior and break bad habits.

As you can see, there is not a single, simple cause for resistance. Each person has their own reason; your assuming they are all out to defy you hampers your ability to overcome the resistance. Some of your team members may need education, others want involvement, and some may need support to facilitate adjustment to the changes. All of these require communication, constant, two-way communication (not merely dictating a change, but also listening to the concerns people have about the change). Therefore, to initiate change in your organization you must pay attention to the individuals - their 'reason' for resisting, any skill or knowledge gaps they may have as related to the proposed change and your communication with the team.

How to Have Successful Change
To initiate change you must work with your organization's culture, not against it (Katzenbach). Your culture has entrenched behaviors, and each person has their own unique perspective (and their perspective IS their reality). Take, for instance, a common call for change – "Our numbers are down and we need to make some changes around here. We need to sell more diets, offer more services, and make sure we don't miss charges."

Sound familiar? How does your culture affect how your team looks at this call to action? Some may see it as a dictator telling them how to practice medicine. Some may feel it is all about money and not about patient needs (get them to buy diets, require more tests). Others may wonder what is wrong with the way things have been going (they see the nightly deposit numbers). In addition, others fear that the changes are just going to make things more difficult (how to sell more to clients who are already complaining about the cost). The communicated call to action is not really a communication for successful change at all.

Katzenbach has outlined five principles to set you up for success. Let us look at how to structure a successful call to action by using the five principles.

1. Matching Strategy and Culture
Repeat after me, "Culture trumps strategy." This means that if you execute a strategy while ignoring your culture (the way we do things around here); your business may suffer dire consequences of a misaligned culture. Does the change strategy support the mission and values of the practice? If not, there is a misalignment and the practice's culture will play a strong role in implementation of any change.

Aligning strategy and culture is imperative for the success of anything you want to accomplish in your practice. To accomplish this alignment you must work on proper hiring & training of team members, development of SOPs (policies and procedures), establishing pay practices, and rewards as related to business strategy, performance management, and communications (Stravinski).

2. Focus on Critical Behaviors
Consider this statistic – only 10% of people who have had heart bypass surgery make major changes to their diets and lifestyles (Katzenbach). Change is hard, even when presented with dire, very personal, consequences (The rational 'rider' eventually loses out to the much larger emotional 'elephant').

For change management, your goal is to keep some behaviors, stop other behaviors, and develop new behaviors that are critical to your change initiative. To help your team focus on the best behaviors, discuss these types of questions: If we excelled at _____, how would that look? How would our team act with clients? What behaviors would our clients see? What actions/behaviors would we have stopped doing?

Finding role models within your practice can help you with changing critical behaviors. Peer-to-peer behavior recognition and reinforcement is a great way to reinforce a cultural change. Even a large-scale company such a GM experienced great results when they established a custom of handing out gold star stickers to peers who emulated key behaviors. They knew which behaviors positively affected the culture and strategy for change and they recognized and encouraged those behaviors.

3. Use Your Cultural Strengths
We often find it easier to point out what is wrong in our practices and try to fix it, rather than pointing out what is good (a strength) and trying to build upon the strengths already present. How do you find cultural strengths? Listen to the stories being told about interactions with clients, and employee behaviors that resonated with others (co-workers, clients, and community).

Sharing stories gives your team the opportunity to coach others by offering support and ideas. It is much easier to take what is working well for your team and business strategy, and coach others to work with those strengths to get through the changes. This technique is called Appreciative Inquiry and involves looking at what is working well and applying it to what needs to be improved.

4. Utilize Formal and Informal Approaches
Formal techniques are rules, metrics, performance reviews, compensation and rewards, SOPs, and training. Informal are networking, peer-to-peer interactions, participating in communities of interest, storytelling, and improving the physical work environment. These techniques are directed at the emotional investment your team members have in the business and the change initiative.

Regarding some of these approaches, or interventions, it is helpful to identify key influencers to disseminate the change message. It is a known fact that people imitate the behaviors of others, key influencers (those who are already demonstrating critical behaviors and accepting the change initiative) will send social signals to the other team members. Catching critical behaviors from influencers can also work against you – so what do you want to be contagious (good behaviors from the champions of the change or bad behaviors from resistors who are negative)? Therefore, identify your influencers, publicize the key behaviors (such as storytelling and metrics), and involve them in discussions about the team culture.

5. Measure and Monitor
Any type of strategic plan, and especially a strategic plan for change, affects your bottom line. To monitor these effects, you must establish key performance indicators you are trying to improve such as business

metrics (net income, revenue production, and profit centers), client relationships (bonding, net promoters, and compliance), human resource measurements (training, engagement surveys, turnover, and career growth) – the measurements need to be unique to your strategic plan.

A call to action for change needs to have an anchor in identifiable areas needing improvement, and how any actions (and changes) affect those areas. Your mission, to decide which change model works best for your situation and then take the time set yourself up for success – even before you ask your team to take action.

Success or Failure
Change management is necessary for every business. The veterinary practice is no different. Successful change management engages your team, improves performance, and sustains the competitive edge of the business. Yet most businesses fail to develop the skills necessary to lead change. Perhaps the first step toward change is getting your leadership team trained in the skills necessary to lead change – understanding the process, learning how to communicate the change process, identifying the causes of resistance and overcoming resistance, data collection and feedback, coaching team members, and learning how to go about managing the process of change.

How many managers have been told to "make some changes" to get better numbers next month yet had no idea how to deal with the people-side of the change process? How to deal with the team, how to identify what exactly to change, or how to know when change was successful? Without having the knowledge of how to manage change, the management team is already starting out behind the eight-ball (so-to-speak) and will be more at risk to fail and making any change stick. Learning change management skills and creating tools to effectively management the process is just as important as human resource management, operations and financial oversight, and marketing. You would not want to tackle HR management without being well versed in the necessary skills and knowledge, so why would you want to tackle change management without having the necessary skills and knowledge?

Getting change to happen in your practice involves more than issuing an edict or threatening the team with consequences for not acting immediately on a change initiative. Real, lasting change is about transitioning from your current state via a strategic, planned process to a better state. It is about making your team aware of the need for change, providing your team with the necessary skills and knowledge to carry out the change project and helping the team understand their role and the benefits they will reap.

When you get right down to it, making change happen in your practice is really about helping individuals on the team change themselves. It is a process that cannot be done "on the fly" and requires an educated, professional, approach by the management team. Take the time to learn the skills and develop the tools to get real change to happen in your practice – and make it stick for lasting success.

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