

Ordinary to Extraordinary: Turning Common Practices into Best Practices

BY KELLY JONES

There are common practices ... and then there are best practices. Simply carrying out a go-to practice that's known for producing good results is not the same as executing it in a way that gets truly great results.

To transform one into the other, we must focus on the details of how we employ these practices. The following are lessons learned from hundreds of projects where we found eight common change management practices that could be elevated to best practices. We define best practices as methods or procedures that when strictly and faithfully followed, achieve consistent and predictable results.

COMMON PRACTICE #1

“Communicate, communicate, communicate ... and then communicate some more.” Sound familiar? We all know that impacted stakeholders should receive regular communications during an enterprise change effort; however, even the most well-intended communication efforts can leave some confusion in stakeholders’ minds. How can we maximize the benefits of regular communication?


✓ KEY TO MAKING THIS BEST PRACTICE #1

The average person needs to hear the same message three times, and through three different channels of communication before being able to confidently deliver the intended spirit of that message to another party. The key to making this common practice a best practice is to (1) repeat the message through multiple channels, and (2) in doing so, be consistent with the message to your defined audience.

It is appropriate to slightly adjust or modify messages in an effort to continuously improve. It is also acceptable to deliver different messages to different audiences, but the key is that repetition and consistency in delivering the message to the same audience eliminates confusion and increases the likelihood of achieving superior results.



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BE CLEAR AND DEFINITIVE
WHEN DELIVERING
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COMMON PRACTICE #2

Executive level sponsorship is a must-have during roll-outs with enterprise impacts. As a result, communication is commonly driven from the top down. Executives deliver the message to their direct reports, who in turn transmit the message to their direct reports, and so on. This common practice does not always yield superior results because — much like in the old game of “Telephone” we played as children — when a piece of information is filtered through many people, differentiation often arises between the original message and the final information received. Linear, top-down communication can lead to inconsistent, subjective messaging.

✓ KEY TO MAKING THIS BEST PRACTICE #2

The antidote to inconsistent and subjective messaging as a result of top-down communication is to include several tiers of the organization in your communication plan and create messages and materials specific to each level of the organization.

It is critical to eliminate the possibility of subjective interpretation of your messages to ensure that each level of the organization receives the intended message. Your change effort will only achieve superior results when subjectivity is minimized through consistent and level-specific messaging. Both can be done by communicating directly with multiple levels of the organization.

COMMON PRACTICE #3

A change, or champion, network is a team created at the onset of a change effort that acts as a guiding coalition in the transformation. With objectives to adopt the change first, spread the intended message, and lead by example, the network helps those leading the change to execute the effort more quickly and with higher quality. This practice increases the likelihood of successful adoption across the enterprise; however, this common practice is not always a best practice. If not far enough along the adoption curve — and fully committed to the change — a member of the guiding coalition may only represent part of the change effort, which can minimize the many benefits of an established change network and amplify the challenges associated with the effort.

✓ KEY TO MAKING THIS BEST PRACTICE #3

Transformation leaders select individuals as members of a change network because they are most likely to see the benefits of change and want to help realize those benefits. For this reason, members of the change network are potentially your greatest allies. To ensure each member remains an asset, individuals must demonstrate advancement along the adoption curve before being appointed a steward of change. Without adequate advancement, members may take liberties — usually small tweaks to a message or process — that do not align to the change effort. Heading off that risk requires regular communication with the change



network, proper training, and tracking progression along the adoption curve. By taking these measures to ensure your network is ready to commit and engage, and then tracking their ability to demonstrate their adoption of the change before making them a steward of the change, your change efforts will have superior outcomes.

COMMON PRACTICE #4

Be clear and definitive when delivering your change message ... and teach others to do the same. When people or teams do not understand the change message, the first reaction is to opt out of participating in the effort. The reason for this opt-out is generally one of two things: the assumption the effort will not work for them, or the feeling of being an exception to the rule. Both of those assumptions can arise simply because the message was unclear. Without a clear and definitive delivery, your change effort will struggle to achieve superior results.

The catch: when your message is too precise — when it does not allow for exceptions when needed — the organization will likely have no choice but to ignore the intended change.

✓ KEY TO MAKING THIS BEST PRACTICE #4

Be clear ... and be balanced. Balance is about delivering a definitive message, while proactively acknowledging exceptions.

By fully understanding the spirit of your message, you can anticipate objections and respond quickly and easily to questions about exceptions to the rule in order to limit the perception that additional exceptions exist because they were not thought of before. Being prepared to heavily question objections from those who feel they are exceptions to the rule while maintaining balance and recognizing rational exceptions allows the effort to realize superior results.

COMMON PRACTICE #5

Engage and empower stakeholders to participate in the change to ensure adoption of the change. When change comes from the top down, as it often does in an enterprise change effort, there are several responses stakeholders may choose from. It is easier for people to respond negatively, and build walls that will make

implementing the change effort difficult, if they are not engaged or empowered to adopt the change. Additionally, the further an organizational level is removed from the top of the organization, the easier it can be for those leading the change to forget to engage that level.

✓ KEY TO MAKING THIS BEST PRACTICE #5

To increase the likelihood that all layers of the organization, especially the middle layers, choose to respond positively to the transformation, you must proactively engage the middle levels of the organization on a regular basis. Engaging levels of the organization includes reaching out to them for input, thoughts, and feedback; it also includes celebrating and recognizing people that adopt the change and the results that come from engagement. This serves two purposes: it builds the confidence of people that have not attempted adoption to try it, and it positively reinforces those that have tried it and encourages them to do it again, thus enhancing your change effort's ability to achieve superior results.

COMMON PRACTICE #6

Great change leaders build in processes for continuous improvement in transformation plans by soliciting feedback on what is going well, what could be going better, and then making related modifications to the change effort based on those responses. The problem is that this common practice often delivers mixed results.

✓ KEY TO MAKING THIS BEST PRACTICE #6

Change leaders experience constructive and negative feedback. To improve the probability of receiving constructive feedback, ask for feedback in small groups or in one-on-one conversations. In large group settings, negative comments often instigate generalizations, which provoke discontent in others.

In small group settings where participants feel free to identify an issue and brainstorm solutions, constructive conversation prevails. Soliciting feedback in smaller and more personal groups, and showing appreciation for and acting upon meaningful feedback, encourages continuous improvement, engages and pleases employees, and therefore yields superior outcomes.

COMMON PRACTICE #7

Offer support for the change. Ensure employees that help is available and that someone is willing to demonstrate how to implement the change effort, rather than simply providing rhetoric. This well-known practice is not always put into action.

KEY TO MAKING THIS BEST PRACTICE #7

This one is simple: take action. Show, don't just tell. Lend the helping hand, or find the resources that can help to support the change. It is easy to say, "Sure, I'll help if needed," but you send a different message when you take action to demonstrate the intended behavior when needed. Leading by example reveals that you are willing to take the time to support overall success and encourages members to attempt to adopt the change, rather than allowing skepticism over the unknown to prevail. Take action to support the change and your transformation effort will have superior results.

COMMON PRACTICE #8

Leave nothing to chance in a transformation plan. The attempt to plan for adequate resources throughout the execution of the transformation effort always occurs. However, the plan often overlooks two key pieces in the change effort: delivery of communications and training.

At the onset of a change effort, it is common for leaders to acknowledge communication and training needs, but rare that the time and resources needed to execute these aspects are available when needed.

KEY TO MAKING THIS BEST PRACTICE #8

When scoping the work that encompasses the change effort, clarify the training and communication delivery needs — amount and level of detail — expected throughout the implementation. Estimate the number of people and number of hours required to plan and deliver training and communications. Include these execution steps in your transformation plan. Doing so forces you to assign resources to those commonly overlooked tasks, which when ignored, result in a gap in execution.

The importance of estimating training and communication needs prior to beginning execution is paramount. It can be a challenge to request additional funds in these two areas because many assume these needs can be absorbed by existing resources who may or may not have the bandwidth to accommodate them. To avoid this less-than-superior outcome, be sure to plan for resources to execute the planning and delivery on the new process or tool.

SUMMARY

An important lesson to take away from these collective practices is that soft skills count when leading a transformation effort. What, how, when, and with whom you communicate have the potential to significantly increase your chances of success — or severely hinder the process — when implementing the desired change. And remember: The larger the transformation effort, the more influence these practices have.

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