

How to Avoid the Bumps in the Road When Great Ideas Are Not Enough

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When a well-established organization finally decides to make a major change in its management system, the battle has just begun. Even if everyone agrees the change is a great idea, and optimism surges in hope that it will be a winner, leaders must realize the implementation challenge that lies ahead. Coast Guard leaders involved in a major organizational change recently experienced this reality. The lessons they learned apply to any organization contemplating a major change in internal business practices. Their story provides insight on how to avoid the bumps in the road that accompany any change initiative.

This year the Coast Guard decided to empower its lower levels with greater human resource management authority. No longer would one central headquarters office, far removed from the field, decide the right number and qualifications of 36,000 employees. Instead, field units would be permitted to trade individual job positions with other units, downgrade, upgrade, eliminate or request new positions, and revise job descriptions. Headquarter leaders envisioned that stripping bureaucratic layers would make the Coast Guard's human resource system more responsive to the front line.

Along with this authority came the responsibility to follow certain policies and procedures. One policy was that field units needed approval from one of the two newly formed resource management offices. The new West and East Coast offices were tasked with supporting field units in their human resource deliberations, insuring policies and procedures were followed and resolving higher-level resource issues and problems. Prior to this, human resource decision-making authority resided exclusively at the headquarters office.

In implementing this change effort, Coast Guard leaders learned several lessons: 1) timing and patience need to work hand-in-hand, 2) alignment is critical, and 3) internal communications are never enough. Pressures to get the show on the road forced the headquarters office to announce the change initiative throughout the organization before the West and East Coast resource management offices were ready. Consequently, requests from field units overwhelmed the newly formed resource staffs, who were still moving into their offices. With the announcement hitting them like a bomb, the new staff could only wonder, "Why didn't headquarters ask us first?"

As highly accomplished mid-grade officers from diverse mission backgrounds, the staff members felt incompetent and frustrated by suddenly being responsible for a baffling system they knew almost nothing about, and for which there was little written guidance. For example, on the 10-member West Coast staff, only the two most senior leaders understood the complexities of the system. Under the gun to meet organizational deadlines, the staffs pulled together, focused their efforts while setting aside other important functions, and worked diligently to reduce the backlog.

Meanwhile, the headquarters leaders who chose to make the early announcement never realized that their impatience and poor timing created a bad situation for the newly formed offices. They never intended to cause excessive work hours, anxiety, stress, and confusion. Nor did they intend for this major organizational change to start out by disappointing the very units it was designed to support.

The first lesson here is that hitting the "go" switch too early can be disastrous. It's not enough to come up with a great idea that everyone agrees with. Change leaders must demonstrate patience and understanding because people simply need time to plan, prepare and coordinate. The hardest work comes in setting up all of the elements that need to be in place for a painless transition to occur. Leaders with "great ideas" need to realize that organizational alignment does not occur overnight.

Waiting several weeks longer to make the announcement would have made a tremendous difference, according to resource staff members who recall their frustrations in being unprepared to implement this change. The best change leaders learn to trust and support others enough to hand over the controls and the timing, no matter what pressures they feel to act immediately.

Leaders must stay engaged by communicating the change throughout implementation. This does not mean micromanaging or calling all the shots. Rather, it means nurturing the concept of the change with stakeholders, fostering collaboration between separate organizational entities, and "greasing the skids" so that implementation can occur in a smooth and timely manner.

The Coast Guard's story ends happily, as the resource staffs are becoming competent in handling resource change requests from field units. Field units are realizing the positive benefits as they get the right mix of skilled people in positions that best fit their missions. Once again, sheer determination and persistence has won the implementation battle, leaving members a little war-torn and weary. It's no wonder members will want to run and hide the next time their leaders come up with a "great idea."