

From Roo to You



September, 2011

The Business Barnyard: Sacred Cows, Sacrificial Lambs and Turkey Programs

How to Sabotage Your Change Efforts Every Time

Change efforts usually start out with the best of intentions. We want to enter new markets, improve productivity or increase employee engagement. These are worthy efforts. What organization doesn't want to grow revenues, improve margins and enjoy a happy and productive workforce? Unfortunately, our best intentions frequently encounter apathy at best and outright sabotage at worst. More often than not, we are our own worst enemy.

We hope this month's newsletter will help you identify and mitigate the barnyard sabotage taking place in your organization. As always we welcome your feedback and insights.

Barnyard Barriers

You are likely aware of the "above the line" change barriers in your organization – financial and human resource constraints, organizational inertia, or perhaps lack of focus. Hopefully you have dedicated the time to clarify the scope of your change effort, committed resources to the change, and communicated the need for change consistently and repeatedly to the workforce. When your efforts begin to stall out, (or ideally before you launch the effort), take time to identify some of the barnyard barriers that may be getting in your way:

The Sacred Cows

Sacred cows are the protected people or practices in your organization. Perhaps it is Joe in the shop, who has worked for the company for 25 years and whose skills are outdated. "We can't make Joe change – he was the first employee ever hired." Perhaps it is the overly tolerant company culture that stymies progress and avoids conflict. Perhaps your organization prides itself on success in a given market that is dying. During change leaders talk a good game, but when it is time for the difficult decisions, we tend to avoid tough topics or back pedal. We can't just change "x" – it is part of who we are", or "What would people say if we actually stopped 100% inspection?" or "Our customers expect us to do all of our machining in house." If you find yourself saying "can't", "we never" or "What would people say?" you are likely uncovering a sacred cow.

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The Sacrificial Lamb

Sacrificial lambs are offered up as examples to the organization. Perhaps you are launching a new product and the development team is well behind schedule. You can choose to sacrifice quality or features to meet the launch date, or perhaps you offer up the project manager as the “sacrificial lamb” – demoting her or publicly chastising him. After all, somebody has to be responsible for this failure. “Now the staff will know we are serious.” The problem is, the more often you blame individuals for team missteps, the less likely people are to take a risk or assume a leadership role in the future. You will be left with an organization of people afraid to act.

Perhaps the offering is simply symbolic, with no actual change or sacrifice made. For example, you install a new CRM (customer relationship management) system, but you tolerate the sales force using the old system of paper tracking, and not entering leads into the system. You are sacrificing the quality of your customer management information for the happy factor of the sales force.

Turkey Programs

Stability leads to expectation. Expectation leads to entitlement. Once employees receive a turkey at Thanksgiving for a couple of years, it becomes an expectation, and eventually an entitlement. “What do you mean we don’t get a turkey this year?” “Last year’s turkey was at least 15 pounds – which cheapskate decided we only deserve a 10 pound bird?” “When Tim was running the company, we always got our turkey the Tuesday before Thanksgiving.” Be mindful of the expectations that have become hidden entitlements and create a strategy to address them.

We wish you success in identifying and addressing the barnyard barriers in your organization.