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A-REIT acquires business park property in Beijing

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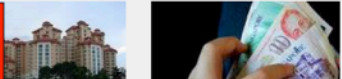
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Mike Reed

Remember this: Always be educating to your employees

The speed of change in business has accelerated tremendously over the last decade.

Epitomised by the pace at which the global financial crisis (GFC) descended on us, there's no arguing the dynamism of the current business environment, both in Singapore and worldwide. One important message to come out of the recession is that continuous improvement and the pursuit of business excellence are vital to any organization's future survival and success.

In order to achieve and maintain, competitive advantage, many organisations are increasingly turning to change programs. Any such program must of course, give due attention to business processes, tools and technology; but these alone are insufficient to secure long-term gains.

Ultimately successful and sustainable business improvement depends on behavioural change. The individual may be the smallest component in a change process, but they are also the most important.

As any manager will know, changing the behaviour of individuals is not always an easy task, and it is often this, which presents the greatest barrier to change.

This change, however, is fundamental. Put simply: if an individual won't change, the organization can't.

How, then, do we get people to change; to integrate with new process and tools?

The answer is simple: education.

But whilst the answer may be straightforward, education presents a significant challenge to organisations and few do it well. This is where external consultancies can play a role. They have knowledge and experience, which can help change attitudes and inspire people to buy into the new way of working.

However, you cannot rely on external consultancies to make the change for you; sustainable improvement needs to come from within - lead from the top and cascaded down through the organization by internal change agents; the key people at each level of the organisation.

Successful education therefore requires that the consultancy firm transfers its knowledge to the client organisation, so that change becomes part of the culture of the company and not just a short term program.

Fundamental change in processes and systems must be communicated to, and understood, by the critical mass of employees, because it is they who will be asked to use them, and it is they on whom success depends.

Understanding however is only the first step. To fully integrate people, processes and tools and realise maximum benefits, an organisation has to secure their acceptance and ownership of the new ways of working. Moreover, by involving more internal people in the change process, the benefits can be achieved earlier as the new processes and tools can be designed to better fit the organisation.

There are three principles to follow:

- 1) Get employees on board by exciting them about the business potential, which can be brought about by change. Open their eyes to best practice methodology, using cross-industry references to demonstrate where there is potential for improvement within their own organisation. This is not a criticism of the way employees have been operating, but instead a look at methods better suited to the current market environment.
- 2) Engage people – from managers to front line staff - in the process, by encouraging their participation in the process redesign. Employees often have useful views on how efficiencies and positive changes can be made, and are far more likely to embrace change if they are actively involved in the process.
- 3) Ensure individuals understand their role within the business. Providing a broad perspective allows them to see how important their role is in securing the new processes, and what difference this will make not only to their job, but also the business as a whole.

Behavioural change is a significant task, which will inevitably take time. You have to be realistic about the scope and timescale of a change project.

That is not to say deadlines shouldn't be set, but rather the project should be conducted in digestible chunks, allowing time for the implications to sink in, so people can accept and adapt to the new technology or mode of operation, and eventually take ownership.

Any business improvement, then, relies on the integration of people and behaviour, with new processes and tools. This challenge depends heavily on education.

Remember, failure to sufficiently invest in people will inevitably fatally undermine the success of any change program.


Mike Reed, Oliver Wight Partner

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