# Post-change analysis: learning from change

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## The importance of learning from change

Organizational learning can be described as the practice of continually generating, sharing and leveraging individual and collective learning experiences to improve organizational performance (Drew and Smith, 1995). The lesson here is a simple one: leaders and their organizations must not only constantly do, but they must also take time to reflect and learn from what they have done on an ongoing basis.

This important and often overlooked practice can help fuel future success for both individual leaders and their enterprises. The military is known for its great proficiency, discipline and thoroughness in conducting "post-action reports" and "mission debriefs" so that leaders and their people are forced to reflect, document and share what they learned from a given experience Military leaders know this practice can enhance future mission performance, save lives and that the cost of not learning is significant. But if you are not careful, as a business leader, these learning opportunities can easily be lost in the heat of battle.

In research chronicled in our book *The Two-minute Drill* (Longenecker *et al.*, 2007), we have observed several tendencies that can short-circuit true organizational learning that include:

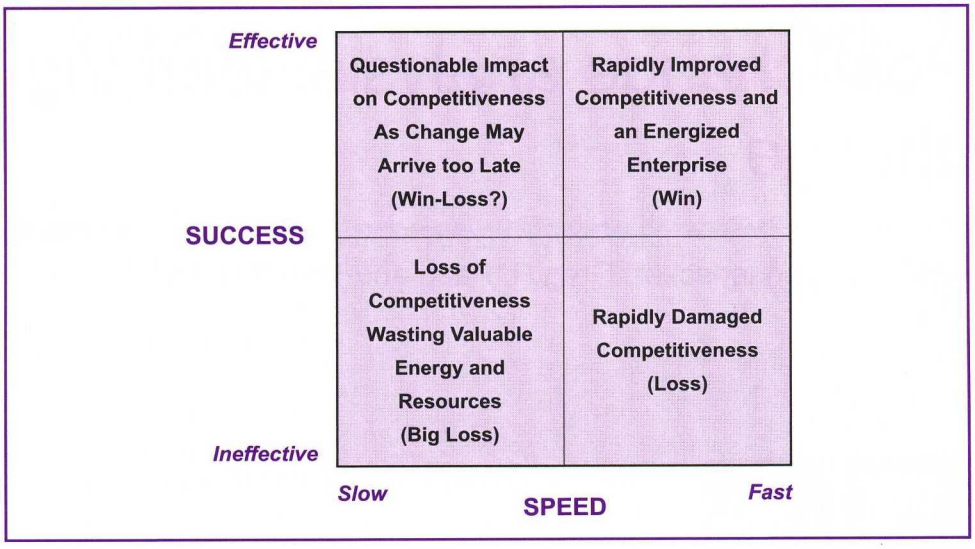
- *When change initiatives are successful, there is very little analysis of the cause.* The win is "chalked up" and the team moves on without fully understanding the root causes of success and, equally as important, what could have been done to accelerate or improve the effort.
- *When change initiatives are unsuccessful, people are quick to point out that the effort was not a complete failure because of what was learned.* Yet, all too often there is virtually no serious analysis to understand why the effort failed and thus real learning from the experience is neutralized.

## The importance of assessing success and speed

From our experience, we have learned that there are two critical, bottom-line outcomes that must be appraised in a post-change analysis: success and speed. A successful change is one that is effective in producing a desired, sustainable outcome. The speed of the change relates to whether the actual change is carried out in a timely fashion to help create or maintain competitiveness.

Figure 1 is a post-change outcome matrix that identifies the potential outcomes of the combination of these two critical factors. A worst-case scenario for any change effort is a slow and drawn out initiative that is ineffective in producing real improvement for an organization. In this situation, change efforts consume valuable resources and energy with no positive outcomes, resulting in a net loss of competitiveness. At the same time, change

**Figure 1** Post-change game outcome matrix




that happens fast but is ineffective represents a loss or defeat for the organization. In this scenario, resources have been expended with no tangible positive outcome(s). If there is any good news in this scenario, it is that the failure took place quickly so that losses could be minimized and action could be taken to right the wrong.

In our next scenario, change initiatives are successful in producing desired results but they are too slow in doing so. In today's global market place slowness spells big trouble. This slowness means that the effectiveness of the change or improvement is called to question because of the time it took for the change to take place. In an optimal change scenario, success is achieved quickly to improve an organization's competitiveness and to conserve scarce organizational resources. This outcome is a win for the organization, which improves competitiveness and has an energizing effect on the people engaged in the process.

A post-change analysis can go a long way in helping leaders learn from the experience that has just taken place. While the subject of learning can be very complex two practices can greatly serve business leaders in this regard.

### *Lesson no. 1: learn what went right and what could have been done better*

Why do sports teams spend so much time trying to learn from past performance? The answer is easy. Teams and individuals hate to lose and understanding past performance is the key to improving future performance. In the modern workplace, it is easy to find busy business leaders who don't spend 15 minutes of post-change analysis on an initiative that consumed 600 hours! We would like to challenge you to improve your proficiency at learning from post-change analysis.

Table I is a post-change analysis matrix that we have developed to help business leaders assess the factors that have had a significant impact on both the speed and success of their

**Table I** Post-change analysis matrix

| *Factors affecting outcome* | *What went right* | *What could have been done better* | *Lessons learned* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Yourself | | | |
| Team | | | |
| Individuals | | | |
| Your organization | | | |

> **"From our experience, we have learned that there are two critical, bottom-line outcomes that must be appraised in a post-change analysis: success and speed."**

change efforts. This matrix can be used as a tool for conducting your post-change analysis assessing what went right, what could have been done better and what lessons were learned during the change process. As a business leader, start by grading yourself on your personal effectiveness in leading your team. Second, grade the overall performance of your team in executing the change from start to finish.

Third, the performance of individuals on your team should be graded for their effectiveness and how well they performed individual assignments. It is important to note that in many organizations individuals assigned to change initiatives operate in both obscurity and anonymity despite the importance of their assignments. Remember that people perform differently when they know that they will receive an individual grade for their performance. Finally, it is important to evaluate your organization and how your organization helped support or hinder your efforts. Much can be learned about your own enterprise and fellow leaders in this critique as some organizations help accelerate change and others create inordinate drag on change efforts.

In summary, when completing a change initiative, always ask the question, "What have I/we really learned through this experience?" and be brave enough to seek out real answers.

### *Learning lesson no. 2: share the lessons*

Based on our experience, organizations and leaders need to create more of a "press conference mentality" to share what changes people are working on, the processes they are using to get there and the lessons learned along the way. This practice can be informal or formalized but addresses the straightforward question, "How do we go about sharing what we learn from what we are doing to help others in our organization?"

Having said all of this, here are three things you should consider in developing your own post-game press conference mentality:

1. When you have completed a change effort and conducted your post-change analysis, have a "press conference" for your team and share with them what you learned in your analysis. This allows them an opportunity for additional learning and it can help strengthen your credibility, as your team will know that you really know and understand what really went on during the change process.

2. Hold a "press conference" and let other people in your organization know the basics of the change effort that you have just completed and the outcome. This allows other people working on parallel or similar initiatives to know that they are not alone and can help prevent "reinventing the wheel". It is comforting to know they can learn from the experience of other people.

3. Provide access to information to interested parties in your organization. Press conferences inevitably lead to people seeking more detailed information about the nature of your change efforts. You should be willing to share both your change game plan and materials with other people in your organization who are serious about getting better.

While these practices might seem simple-minded, they work and they do not require a formal organizational edict or significant resources to be implemented.

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Learning,
Change management,
Organizational change,
Strategic change,
Continuous improvement

## In closing

The words of one manager summarize this lesson:

> While reflection and introspection take time, and we don't always like what we see, they almost always cause people to learn which can help us all improve.

## References

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