Why is Change
SO Hard?

Companies make difficult decisions every day relative to launching new products or services, discontinuing products or services, merger and acquisition strategies, going public, remaining private and the list goes on. Yet, when it comes to decisions regarding organizational or process transformation, that involves changes to the organization and the mechanics of how business gets done, "analysis paralysis" seems to kick in. Why is change in these areas SO hard?

Short answer….human beings are involved. What happens when individuals have too many major balls in the air at once within their personal lives…they freeze. The same thing happens in organizations when they become overwhelmed by the prospect of change.

William Bridges, in his 1991 book "Managing Transitions" highlights three stages of transition that people go through when they experience change. These stages are: 1) Ending, Losing, and Letting Go; 2) The Neutral Zone; and 3) The New Beginning.   While many books have been written on this topic, since Bridges', the core concepts within all of them revolve around these same principles.

This first stage results in the same emotional responses from the individuals within the organization that would be experienced if they were ending or losing something within their

Three Stages of Transition:

1. Ending, Losing and Letting Go

2. The Neutral Zone

3. The New Beginning

lives outside of work. Those initial emotions are normally – fear, uncertainty, disorientation and perhaps even anger. Bridges says that people will go through each stage at their own pace. Some who are more comfortable with change in general will move through the stages very quickly. Others may linger longer in stage one and two.

Managing through these emotional responses by providing more communication, clearer direction and more control during the time of change is one of the paradoxes of change leadership.

Research has shown that organizations, and the people within them, need more control when a change in direction is required and more empowerment once the new business strategy has been defined. While is seems counterintuitive to stimulate change by grounding it with resources who can reassure stability and set boundaries and control when the company wants to stir up new ideas - these are exactly the steps that are necessary. Emotional responses within the organization have to be battled to move individuals through the stages of transition.

Instead how do most organizations respond? Leadership, either from enforcement of a top-down control structure or fear of the organization's response (perhaps due to a failed change initiative in the past) takes a "closed door" approach to the change. They are overly cautious about what they communicate and when they begin communication in an attempt to avoid employee and business disruption. They worry about having the strategy "correct" without realizing that no strategy can ever be correct without understanding the details within the processes. Rather than engaging the team in defining the problem and being a part of developing the strategy for solving the problem, they embark on the effort of devising the master plan for the "future state" without any in-depth input or knowledge of the "current state". But leaders don't have to be the heroes, and change doesn't have to be SO hard!

Managing change effectively starts with a few simple steps: 1) Engage the team early on in the process, so that they feel like they are a part of the change effort not that it is being "forced upon them"; 2) Understand the key behavioral characteristics of each team member; 3) Leverage their knowledge of the processes, the current problems and the needed improvements to frame the go forward strategy; 4) Assess how they best align and contribute to the achievement of that strategy; 5) communicate, communicate, communicate; and 6) when you think you're done, keep going - because there are most likely still some individuals within the organization working through the transition stages.

If resources aren't available internally to support the effort, then find external resources that can help. This is one of the most important investments you can make to ensure your organization's success. If the alternative is a total "miss" in terms of your business goals or the best case is that you sub-optimize results, it's a pretty easy business decision as to where to make the investment.