Why Arenâ??t We Meeting Our Goals? Five Reasons Initiatives Fail or Underperform

Description

Why do initiatives and/or programs fail? Or, if they donâ??t completely fail, why do they fall short of achieving their desired goals?

I recently had the privilege to present to leaders at a health system. It is always nice to see old friends and make new ones. Prior to my talk, a person asked me the above questions. The sad reality is that initiatives do fail. In his work, John Kotter has stated that there is a 70 percent failure rate. Chip and Dan Heath say the same thing.

I am fortunate in that most leaders who call me are already doing quite well. They want to be the best, and for the right reasons. These leaders want to ensure that the services they provide are excellent and that they can recruit and retain good talent. They know that a great, service-oriented workforce delivering a quality product at the right price leads to good financial performance most of the time.

When people ask why so many initiatives fail or underperform, my response is itâ??s not a lack of will. Leaders invest resources, both dollars and people, in improving their organizational outcomes. Most have excellence as a company value. No leader wants to *not* achieve the organizational goals. So why does it happen? This could be a book versus a column, so here is a quick summary of my perception of why so many initiatives fail or underperform:

1. **Excellence as a â??programâ?• rather than a way of life.**Often, we roll out an initiative and give it a name. Once this happens, the workforce thinks, *Here we go again. Give me the T-shirt, a slice of pizza, a big announcement, and call me in three years for the next one*. This could be called the â??sizzle to fizzleâ?• syndrome.

When I was president of Baptist Hospital in Pensacola, Florida, town halls were invaluable. They allowed me to meet with the workforce and share our current results and the need to improve. Our values said â??excellent,â?• yet the results of employee engagement, clinical quality, patient experience, and financial performance were not excellent. It was not for a lack of trying. A frequent question I received was, â??What are we going to call this program?â?• I answered, â??It is not a program; it is a way of life. Initiatives and programs usually have a start and finish. This does not.â?• People got it.

2. **Unclear goals.**In their work, Chip and Dan Heath show that the number-one item that causes failure is the lack of clear goals. The more objective a goal, the better. Each leader must know how their performance is being measured, as well as their priorities. For example, if employee engagement is important, then the leader of each area must know how engagement is being measured as well as how itâ??s weighted in their evaluation.
3. **Lack of skill-building.**Leaders want to be successful. They donâ??t come to work saying, â??I hope we have unhappy customers and staff today,â?• or, â??It is a good day to underperform.â?• To me, the biggest impact on achieving the goals after clarification is the investment in building skills. This means providing people with the opportunity to build their skill set and the time to do it.
4. **Issues with scope and sequencing.**Itâ??s important not to try to do too much or move too quickly. New skills take time to master. Two changes are the most a person can handle successfully at one time. A suggestion I frequently make to organizations is to reduce the scope of actions. Itâ??s better to do a few things very well than lots of things not so well.
5. **Not explaining the *why*.**When actions are not connected to the *why*, they become optional. A culture of optionality is not a culture of excellence. Once people see how the action theyâ??re being asked to take makes a difference, it moves from a *sometimes*or a *usually* action to an *always* action. When actions are connected to the organizational values, one cannot *not* do the action. It goes deeper than â??We are not meeting the goalâ?•; it is â??We are not living our values.â?•

Most organizational dashboards color-code their outcomes. *Green* is achieving, *yellow* is good progress toward achieving the goal, *red* is not achieving and lack of good progress. The above recommendations help create green dashboards. That means the organization is living its values.

When you correct the above issues, youâ??ll start consistently achieving your goals and living your values. From there, all sorts of great things happen. Employees are engaged and inspired. Morale improves. Customers have better experiences.

All of this lays the foundation for setting and achieving higher and higher goals as time goes by. Little by little, you build the kind of culture that attracts and retains the best talent. Before you know it, youâ??re a consistently high-performing organizationâ?¦and thatâ??s where we all want to be.

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