

The Maze of Change

Taking a life-cycle approach can map positive initiatives.
BY DAVID HUMENANSKY

Recent world and national events have put pressure on the federal government to transform itself in many areas—military operations, homeland security, intelligence analysis, airport security, immigration, and disaster preparedness—to name a few. More than 80 percent of agencies describe major strategic changes for themselves this year, many not even related to defense and security. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the war in Iraq, performance expectations across the board are higher than ever, and tolerance for “transformation as usual” is lower.

It’s no wonder so many groups are positioning themselves for change. In addition to managing well, organizations must be able to adapt to evolving political conditions and business environments. Federal officials say pressures on resources have never been greater and will continue to grow significantly. Transportation Secretary Mary E. Peters, for example, suggests a fresh look at how to best respond to today’s challenges. “Traditional problem-solving approaches may no longer be effective . . . the decades-old solutions aren’t working anymore,” she says. One way to develop new approaches to change is to examine past efforts—both successful and unsuccessful.

Why do some change initiatives thrive while others falter? The government has been studying and publishing best practices in the public and private sector for more than 15 years. These practices have generated many appropriate recommendations. *Despite a desire to improve, however, change efforts often achieve lackluster results.* The Government Accountability Office agrees that simply inserting a few best practices will not achieve enduring results. What’s missing in most cases is an understanding of how to apply life-cycle principles to each unique program or environment.

Change initiatives often fail because they focus on only one or two dimensions. Successful programs cross functional boundaries—people, processes, technology, and physical

infrastructure. Approaching the implementation of a new information system as a technology project, for example, is inadequate. Technology is an important consideration, but so are the people who operate the new system, the business processes it supports, and the work locations.

Based on years of experience with their own business transformation, Defense Department officials say, “Transformation is meant to deal with the co-evolution of concepts, processes, organizations, and technology. Change in any one of these areas necessitates change in all.” Of the four dimensions, the most critical dimension for achieving enduring results is generally the last addressed or overlooked: people.

Another key to complex change is a life-cycle approach. Initiatives in each dimension progress in stages. Integration is vital because each dimension affects another, but each has its own requirements and timing. Consider all the activities needed to stand up a new organization. Work should address people, processes, technology, and infrastructure.

A group should not design its business processes without taking into account available technology, organizational structure, and work locations—and vice versa. It is not enough to proceed along each dimension at the same time and at the same pace. They have to be combined to produce a business and technical solution that can be implemented with effective program management and ownership, so employees will accept and adopt the changes.

No single set of instructions can produce enduring transformation in all instances, but with a life-cycle approach, any organization can develop a roadmap for its unique situation. Whether the transformation is large scale or applies to one particular organization or work group, the same universal precepts apply. **GE**

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