

# 100-Day CEO Toolkit Change That Sticks

By Boe Young



**C**hange is hard and it's even harder to make change stick. Many organizations are full of well-intentioned initiatives that seem to work fine during the first few months of implementation but frequently lose their momentum and begin to drift back to the status quo. There are plenty of reasons this occurs when viewed from an organizational perspective: Overtaxed management bandwidth; uncoordinated functional initiatives; flavor of the month mentality; the human desire to relax immediately following the hard work of a new initiatives, to name a few..

More tactically — at the job or departmental level – other factors play a role:

- Work is designed to be too broad – and thus a level of accountability is hard to pinpoint – or more likely the work is designed too narrowly, limiting flexibility and creating an overspecialization that creates gaps when a single team member is absent. These gaps create inconsistency.
- Documentation of agreed upon standards is sporadic or inconsistent and the follow up measurement is likewise uneven.
- A performance mindset might exist, but it is founded on personal technique rather than being based on well understood and consistent standards. "The way she has always done it" is seen as a viable and appropriate substitute for institutional based standards.
- Turnover can exacerbate this problem - retail, food and beverage, academic medical centers, and technology companies can be particularly prone to this problem and organizational drift.

## Turnover Is a Crutch

Turnover is often used as a crutch. In fact, there are many organizations that deal with turnover in a positive fashion. Not everyone may enjoy McDonald's food (or recent same store sales performance) – but one has to appreciate their general consistency in execution. Google and Amazon are frequently cited as high-performing organizations although they have considerable employee churn. Military units, such as an aircraft carrier or tank battalion, can routinely face 40% annual turnover. In all these cases, performance remains consistent, predictable and superior. There is a reason it happens.

These key tenants, found in most successful military units, likely have some level of applicability for organizations that experience a drift away from standards:

- **Work Design:** While mid to senior management are expected to be generalists, at the "user" level, the work is specialized and relatively narrow in scope. However, crew level cross training ensures that teams can benefit from focused technical expertise as well as the increased productivity that comes from being able to flexibly switch roles when needed.
- **Documented, Standards Based Work:** In the military, there is a documented standard for everything – from the most basic such as how to wear your hair to the most sophisticated and difficult. The fusion of all the individual standards executed in harmony creates the consistent operation.
- **Standards Based Performance Mindset:** A corollary to documented/standards based work, this thought process permeates the culture of these organization; it is common to hear mid-level managers, when describing performance, talk of the "standard" involved – what it is and how to achieve or exceed it.

- Audited, Measured Performance: These organizations are data-driven and use the information to drive performance. Furthermore, the use of analytics, focused on performance, measuring outcomes, comparing organizations at the macro and micro level, drives a culture to achieve.
- Focused Training: While the military's incredible corporate training infrastructure is economically unsustainable in the private sector, its mid-level/operational unit focus on training is its real "money-maker". We have seen training budgets evaporate over time in many organizations, who will at the same time spend millions on consultants for other performance improvement projects. Comprehensive training and employee development programs are a small price compared to the enormous bills associated with replacing workers in high-turnover industries.
- Culture of Performance Improvement: These organizations are able to nest a performance mindset inside of a teamwork and crew construct and use data to drive competitive teamwork in an industrious way.
- Engaged Leadership and Accountable Mid-Managers: These key leaders, the ones who really get the work done, are cultivated, mentored, recognized and rewarded for their important work.
- Culture of Standards: It overcomes individuals' potential intimidation with rank and status; it allows a nurse to speak up when a physician does not follow hand washing protocol, or a sergeant to professionally correct a Colonel that is doing something doctrinally wrong.

## Senior Manager Reinforcement

We've talked about standards a lot so far but standards do not imply a rigorous, robotic inflexibility sometimes stereotypically ascribed to military management. Standards do not eliminate judgment. Judgment involves thoughtful decisions made in accomplishing the standard processes.

Senior management must reinforce the standards and focused tenants above with their own actions. Four key concepts are:

- Intent and Empowerment: Successful general managers and staff leaders must become experts at operating within two broad constructs – first, being able to articulate the desired intent/end state of a vision or project and second, creating the empowered conditions that allow for it to happen. These two ideas mutually reinforce each other. A well-articulated intent establishes a direction and conveys a clear image of the desired outcome. Intent can be confusing if articulated in a fuzzy manner but can be a powerful enabler if clearly communicated as it improves the speed in decision making and the overall volume of work.
- Discussion without Accountability: Managers cannot allow meetings to be a collection of reporting on activities rather than outcomes. Leaders must measure progress through achieved output, not input. Capture and publically share those things that the organization is accountable to achieve; by allowing individuals to be accountable to their peers as well as their supervisors, productivity will improve.
- Transparency: Nothing will speed trust like transparency. While, there are few shortcuts to gaining the trust of others, transparency – if genuine – can build it faster than almost anything. As Stephen Covey reminds us the primary job of a leader is to inspire trust. Transparency will create a shared confidence among leaders and improve common understanding or what E.C. Adams defined as "situational awareness".
- Dealing with Non-Believers: Average organizations, stuck in neutral, will sometimes tolerate recalcitrant employees because the pain level they create is not quite high enough; they exist in an annoying but non-threatening status – until you need to shift your organization. As my colleague Dr. Robert Miles says, "...you cannot allow them to cast a shadow across the part of the organization

under their control. Three or four people working subversively can kill 50% of the effort." If they cannot adapt to the new agenda and standards approach, they must be dealt with.

Colleagues might argue that leadership is in the center and everything permeates from that – in fact, that might be the “book answer”. But there are various styles and theories of leadership – most correct to a large degree – and the question at hand is not which leadership style or attribute is the best, but how do we achieve sustained performance? To that extent, leadership becomes an enabler with a standards-based focus at its core.

## Meet Our Expert

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