

Mistakes Leaders Keep Making

By Robert H Schaffer, Harvard Business Review, September 2010

Four basic behavioural traps impede organizational change.

Failing to set proper expectations: Leaders often announce major initiatives without laying down credible plans to achieve them or pinpointing accountability. According to the author, setting clear expectations that evoke high performance is the single weakest skill of top executives. The failure to define clear expectations may be due to various reasons. They may be worried that if they set specific targets people cannot achieve, they will also look like failures. Some leaders also want to avoid creating the perception that they are unreasonable.

Excusing subordinates from the pursuit of overall goals: In general, managers tend to be busy with the performance of their own unit. So they tend to pass on the responsibility for any major change initiative upwards. It is amazing how senior people easily excuse managers when they claim they are busy fighting fires.

Colluding with staff experts and consultants: Consultants are good at giving advice but they do not usually assume responsibility for tangible outcomes. Unfortunately, senior executives find it more convenient to leave it to the consultants than taking the responsibility themselves.

Waiting while associates prepare, prepare, prepare: Endless preparation gives the illusion of progress but ultimately fails to achieve the desired outcome. For example, many managers will say that a new system is required before the change can be implemented but will not try to achieve an improvement with the existing system.

Managers can avoid these traps through small experiments that minimize risk and offer quick returns.