How to resist change and slow down execution in any organization, for personal gain without personal blame.

Observations from the field, by Andrew Bass, Ph.D, BassClusker Consulting

Introduction

There are many reasons for mastering the skills of slowing down an organization. The benefits can be personal - for example in terms of reduced stress and hassle, or protecting a comfortable status quo, or they can be political, for example in ensuring that rivals fail to succeed over you because their initiatives or business units are bogged down or starved of support or critical resources.

Look, all the stuff pumped out by leaders, consultants and business schools about the magic of teams, being a good corporate citizen, and achieving alignment between individual and corporate goals sounds fine, but what is the cost to you? You are the agent, not the principal, after all. Never mind the principal's problems, what about yours? It is hardly wise to fail to look after your own interests.

Even if you receive assurances and are offered incentives that are claimed to align goals, why take the chance? Assurances are usually worth nothing (what if your manager moves on?), and also, you really ought to be able to do better by gaming the incentives than working within their bounds – look how well those NHS managers and bankers have done if you want recent examples.

By mastering the skills discussed here, you can protect yourself and your interests without attracting blame (or at least without an intolerable amount - no gain without a bit of pain!). But don't think it will involve you in less work than being a team player or good corporate citizen, necessarily. You may be a natural – some people do this without even being aware of it – but the true masters have put plenty of time into cultivating their skills.

The Big Picture

At the strategic level, you need to ensure that you are prevented from moving as quickly as you will *claim* to wish, because of 'Them'. For example, you want to be legitimately able to claim that you are waiting for others, while at the same time ensuring that those people won't be able to come back to you any time soon. You must become adept at putting the ball in other people's court – but making sure they can't do much with it when it lands there.

Mindset really matters. Whether you believe it or not (and ideally you will *make* yourself believe it, to avoid any inconvenient or uncomfortable cognitive dissonance) your knee-jerk reaction to any proposal must be that it will be hard and take a long time, and is probably too risky to be worthwhile.

Those who truly aspire to master the mindset must be able congruently to commit themselves to a shared course of action while simultaneously feeling sure it will never happen, or not for a long time anyway.

Even if you don't have a particular reason for slowing things down just at the moment, the vicissitudes of organizational life mean that it's only a matter of time, so the real hardball players practice these skills consistently even when they are not needed. That way, when a threatening-looking initiative comes along it will be harder for it to take root. The ability to forestall it will be second nature.

Now that you've got the overall outlook, let's get into some of the rich variety of specific approaches.

Tactics

1) Use narrow bandwidth and ambiguous communication

Always try to use the narrowest bandwidth communication method available to you. That way there will often be insufficient context for unambiguous coordination, meaning that you can be seen to communicate while not providing adequate information for the other party to proceed. And conversely, it will also afford you the opportunity to reply to requests with questions of clarification, allowing you to delay any real progress further.

Narrow bandwidth media - email is the classic - also have the advantage that objectively innocuous messages can come across as faintly, though *deniably*, rude, meaning the other party will be even slower to respond to requests, or ideally won't come back to you at all. And it will appear that they are the cause of the delay.

Whatever you do, try to avoid talking informally to people – it makes it much harder to create the Them and Us dynamics you are looking to cultivate. Informal chats break down barriers, and might mean that you reach agreement quickly during a chance meeting in a corridor or over lunch (The more subtle and insidious danger is that you stop seeing them as 'them' altogether...). Stay in your office and stick to email. John le Carré famously wrote that "A desk is a dangerous place from which to view the world." Maybe so, but it's a very safe place from which to slow down an organization.

If you want to mix things up, a nice technique is to phone someone, but at a time they are unlikely to respond, and leave a voicemail. This will make you seem a friendly, proactive, get-things-done type. Then, having left the evidence of your virtue on their voicemail, follow up with an email – a verbose but equivocal one works well, as does a short one which omits a vital detail (you will develop your own style over time). The ball is now firmly in their court, has to fight for space on their to-do list, and consequently it's likely to be a while before you get a response.

Oh, and never use a signature file in an email. That way, they have to look you up if they want to call you to for a higher bandwidth discussion – it's just another subtle way to create a bit more drag and friction in the process.

2) Capitalise on 'the diffusion of responsibility"

Diffusion of responsibility is your friend. It breeds naturally in groups where no one person has clear accountability (the classic research on this came after the notorious murder of Kitty Genovese on a busy New York street in the 1964. Bystanders thought that as no one else was doing anything to intervene, they needn't either. The subsequent research showed clearly than in a wide variety of situations, decisive action is far more likely it is clearly down to an individual).

Building on this idea, a good device when a new issue comes up is to form a working group. You can assertively suggest one, making you look proactive, and then let the diffusion effect reign.

In all meetings, create ambiguity when discussing implementation plans, especially when the question of accountabilities comes up. Suggest that a few people 'put their heads together' before the next meeting - that's nice and vague and allows for further diffusion. Leave wiggle room. And don't worry about being called on this tactic. You will find that a busy group of people will collude with you quite readily.

3) Give initiatives enthusiastic lip service

One of the best, most time-honoured ways to delay a rival's project is to promise it unequivocal support in the meeting, then do nothing. When challenged, cite urgent client requests, or temporary resource issues, say a few *mea culpas*, and reiterate your enthusiastic support and promise more of it 'going forward'. You can easily keep this going for a few months, by which time there is a good chance that priorities will have shifted.

4) Employ the amplifying effect of small precisely timed delays.

Weekends and other cut-off points provide the ideal opportunity. If you can engineer it so that a client issue unavoidably and justifiably means that you are prevented from making a Friday pm deadline, the person who was relying on you is helpless, and if their following week is over-scheduled (very likely – most people over-schedule) they may not be able to pick up your shared project for another week. Can you see how beautiful this is? You were only a few minutes late, but they end up being a week behind. Where will the blame attach?

5) Suggest a department, team or unit for things that really ought to be everyone's job

This is another pass-the-accountability play. Manufacturers found historically that if you have a quality department, defects often go up – because everyone now knows that quality is someone else's job. This dynamic has considerable generality beyond the factory floor. From the company's

point of view, the fastest and most effective culture would be one in which everyone should sell, care for customers, respond to complaints, keep things tidy, respond intelligently to enquiries and so on. To slow things down, propose dedicated teams to handle these cross-cutting themes. Be wary of running one yourself, however, unless doing so gives you control to a particularly valuable and a scarce resource.

6) Game the metrics and incentives

It should go without saying that you should optimise your performance to meet your local incentives, without regard for the wider picture. Most people do this instinctively.

7) Practice pathological perfectionism

Some things really must be perfect: brain surgery for example, or the observation of many manufacturing tolerances. But a lot of things in business can be just 'good enough'. Ignore this. Never move until you are 110% ready, and only then with great caution. Run endless pilots, and sleep on everything.

What do you do if you run into an assertive colleague who starts talking about the 80:20 Principle, or 'the paralysis of analysis', or 'satisficing'? It can be tough, but you can always try the next tactic.

8) Invoke 'standards'

You can usually quash anything which sounds too innovative by invoking regulations, higher authority, professional standards, or "them". You can use similar justifications to introduce all manner of extra process steps that both slow down the organization and, as a nice ego-boosting bonus, require that you have a bigger staff. If you want to play hardball, remember that establishing yourself as the Custodian of Standards will intimidate some rivals, and give you the surge of self-righteousness needed to resist when you come under pressure.

9) Prepare the ground too thoroughly: emphasise the 'getting ready to change'

Usually the most efficient way to plan is to work backwards from the desired goal, because that often finds the shortest path. You should therefore be wary if someone proposes the approach. But there's a nuance which can turn this into a hugely effective delaying tactic. In the approved version, you start with a specification of the desired result, and then figure out the preconditions - these become sub-goals. You then establish the preconditions of the preconditions and reverse your way into the present. This is held to be faster and less assumption-bound that working forwards, and it is, *unless* you take advantage of the potential to create an almost infinite regress: because you can

always go back to establish another layer of preconditions! You can use this strategy to create hugely time-consuming arrays of workshops, surveys, studies, consultations, analyses and training programmes to get everyone fully (and time-consumingly) prepared before actually doing anything that will have an effect.

10) Conduct endless data gathering

One of the easiest ways to delay a decision is to seek more information first. Armies of consultants, analysts and business school professors – aided and abetted by the spreadsheet – have created the idea that business is an essentially analytical discipline, and as a corollary, the assumption that more data is the same as better information. This serves them nicely. It also serves managers who want to delay things nicely. See the neat symbiosis?

11) Don't close feedback loops

Ideally you should never feed back the results of information gathering, because to do so might lead to inconvenient change, or cause you to face unpleasant messages from customers or employees. You have attained real mastery when you can delay so long that the data goes out of date, meaning you have no choice but to start a new round of research.

12) Faced with enthusiasts of process improvement and lean management, use their strength against them!

There is no need to fear those 'lean management black belts', because for all their invocation of Japanese philosophy and martial arts metaphors, they have fallen foul of a fundamental principle of those arts: they have revealed their strategy! Therefore you can use it against them. One of their favourite incantations is the Seven Wastes: Transport, Inventory, Motion, Waiting, Over-processing, Over-production and Defects. It's a great prescription for slowing things down - by definition.

Concluding remarks

You won't be able to use all these techniques all the time. In some situations you may not have the influence to set up the structures. More dangerously, a technique will sometimes be too obvious a gambit. Remember: blame for lack of progress must attach to someone else.

Everything you are seen to do has to accord with the orthodoxy of corporate-speak. While ensuring the limited progress of any initiatives which might threaten your position, or enhance the progress of your rivals, you must seem like the person described in the job advertisements: i.e. a proactive, results-oriented team-player. Assuming your boss is insecure, they will probably help you in all of this, since the last thing they will want is someone who genuinely is proactive and results-oriented

showing them up. And if, as is not unlikely, they are playing the same game, they will understand on those occasions where your gambits are a bit too obvious.

Good luck!

CAVEAT

Amazingly, there are some organisations that don't tolerate game-playing! They are genuinely interested in results, and in benefiting their customers, owners and employees. Watch out for places where they *don't* talk a lot of corporate-speak – they may actually simply be getting on with producing results. Such organizations and bosses quickly spot and eject people who use the kind of manoeuvres described in this guide. Be very careful, therefore, before you try them in an entrepreneurial meritocracy or with a straight-shooting boss.

And now for the serious bit

I hope this article has caused you some – perhaps wry – amusement, but beyond that, there is a serious point, too.

The article is written in the tradition of 'prescribing the symptom', an approach to intervention pioneered by the Palo Alto Group of communication and systems researchers in the 1960s and 70s, as well as the work of Frank Farrelly on 'provocative therapy' during the same period. The idea is that if you encourage pathological behaviours – generally with tongue-firmly-in-cheek – they paradoxically become less likely.

And the behaviours 'recommended' in the guide are both pathological and serious in their effects. Speed is, of course, vital to an organization's return on investment as it results in important benefits such as:

- Lower cost of acquisition of business
- Faster time to market
- Faster breakeven from new initiatives
- Reduced working capital requirements
- Faster feedback from the marketplace
- Earlier opportunities to fix mistakes and iron out wrinkles in new ideas
- Fewer opportunities for competitors to break in to your valued relationships or get ahead of you in new product and service innovation.

Less politics also mean less stress, and more attention where it matters: on serving clients and customers and better understanding their current and future needs.

Game-playing of the sort described above is the enemy of all of this.

Below is a checklist for you to assess sources of drag in your organization:

		Agree	Disagree
1.	People have protracted email conversations when they could pop their heads in next door or get on the phone and sort things out quickly.	☐	☐
2.	We come out of meetings without nailing down exactly who will do what, by when, with what resources. The assumption is too often that things will happen 'somehow'.	☐	☐
3.	We agree things at meetings but they then don't then happen – and although the explanations for why sound plausible enough, we really need to make faster progress.	☐	☐
4.	Small deadline misses get amplified into long delays.	☐	☐
5.	Responses to customers (both internal and external) are delayed because people say 'it's not my job', and the team who are nominally responsible are themselves slow, usually citing insufficient resources.	☐	☐
6.	People fight tooth-and-nail to maximise their local incentives and bonuses even at the expense of key organisation-wide KPIs.	☐	☐
7.	Staff endlessly polish documents rather than getting tests out into the world to find out what the real response will be.	☐	☐
8.	There seems to be a rule, standard, code or 'custodian' that forestalls almost every good idea or creates organization-paralysing bottlenecks.	☐	☐
9.	We have huge change initiatives, with loads of up-front communication, kick-off meetings, trainings and certifications, but actual results are slow to show up, and it can be hard to attribute them to the initiatives themselves.	☐	☐
10.	People prefer gathering and analysing data over making decisions and taking actions which will yield real-world feedback.	☐	☐
11.	We conduct surveys (of employees, customers, clients etc) but the world has usually moved on by the time the results are made generally available.	☐	☐
12.	People are always being trained up in some new methodologies, with new jargon and tools, but despite the time taken on doing this, we don't seem to see dramatic improvements.	☐	☐

Scoring

0 – 1 'Agrees'	You have something very special: a fast and straightforward environment and culture. It should be prized and protected. Study the causes of your success and nurture them. Be vigilant: a few key appointments of the wrong managers can quickly undermine even the most agile and responsive organization. And do something about that one item! Quickly.
2 - 4 'Agrees'	For a large organization, this score is not surprising, but is not good news, and it requires immediate attention: you could be on the cusp of total stagnation. And if you are running an organization or business unit small enough to know everyone personally, you are in big trouble if you have this level of shenanigans. Decisive and urgent remedial action is required.
5 or more 'Agrees'	Uh Oh. This is a highly political organization which might manage to lumber along like a Brontosaurus as long as your business environment doesn't change (and what are the chances of that?). Expect major failures, cock-ups and competitive challenges to the organization's survival.
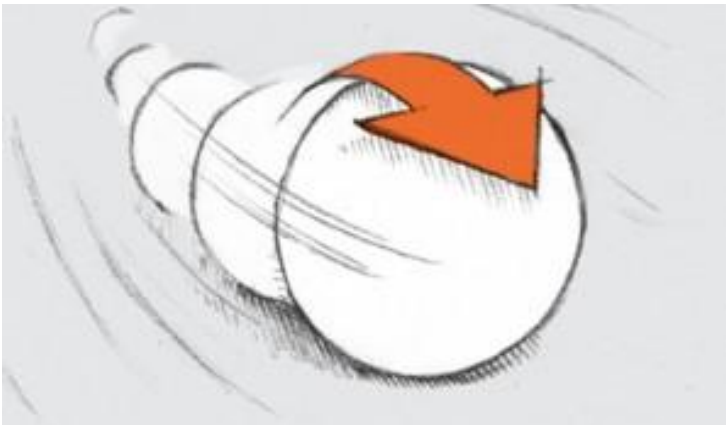
Human nature is such that it can create forces powerful enough to drag almost any organization down the table. To talk about how to engage people so that you move up, stay up, and accelerate your performance c*ontact Andrew Bass for more information and resources.*

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