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The Importance of Program Maintenance In Large Scale Programs

A white paper by
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The Importance of Program Maintenance in Large Scale Programs

If you review why large scale Human Resources (HR) programs fail, you will find a number of valid reasons. Some of these reasons are: lack of management support for the program, exclusion of the impacted group in planning which results in resistance, poor implementation of change management processes, and poor program design. Undoubtedly, each of these reasons may be enough to cause programs to fail on their own. However, there is a more fundamental reason that does not receive the same level of attention: program maintenance. This article will discuss the characteristics of large scale programs, why program maintenance is often overlooked, and what organizations can do to improve focus in this area.

Characteristics of Large Scale Programs

Examples of large scale HR programs include performance management, talent management, and succession planning and management. These types of programs generally have the following characteristics:

- **Impact on a significant number of employees.** For example, a performance management program the entire company is required to follow.

- **Focus on long-term outcomes/solutions.** Large scale programs are typically not designed to be quick fixes. Rather, they are meant to be used strategically and produce long-term value to the company.

- **Composed of multiple phases or steps.** Large scale programs contain multiple phases or steps. For example, a succession planning and management program might have separate phases for nomination, assessment, review, development, and evaluation. A performance management program may be comprised of phases for expectation setting, check-in, assessment, feedback, and development. The consistent facet of large scale programs is that they are interdependent on a number of smaller phases or steps.

■ Require significant partnership between business units and Human Resources. The activities that must take place to effectively execute a program require specific roles and responsibilities for both the business unit and HR. For example, when executing a performance management system, both HR and the business unit client must work together as partners to ensure the successful execution of the program. HR is responsible for alerting the business unit client to when feedback should occur and ensuring the business unit client is prepared to have the feedback conversations, and the business unit client is responsible for delivering the feedback to employees. .

■ Require on-going maintenance. Due to the multiple steps or phases and the strong impact of the program on the organization, large scale programs require regular maintenance or process management. For example, in the case of a succession planning and management program, a group of internal HR consultants may be responsible for overseeing the timely documentation of development plans or for monitoring the execution of development activities. Although there may be other characteristics of large scale programs, those described above are the most common. However, the characteristic that has one of the greatest impacts on program success but is often overlooked or ignored is the need for on-going maintenance.

Why Program Maintenance is Often Overlooked

The following is a common scenario for a large scale program. A program is launched into a particular business unit with some fanfare; this might include communication from the president of the company or the most senior person in the impacted business unit. There may be marketing or collateral materials created to launch the program and add legitimacy to it. The initial launch of the program usually goes well, a few minor hiccups, but nothing serious. As the program continues to roll out, and subsequent phases are launched, it begins to lose momentum. The impacted business unit is still excited about the program, but day-to-day business challenges impede the ability to offer the same level of diligent attention that was applied during the launch. At about the same time, HR begins to focus on

other programs and business challenges, and slowly the program that launched with much fanfare has disappeared or lost all momentum. At some time later, questions are asked about the program and how it is progressing, but nobody can accurately state what is happening with it. Thus, the program is deemed a "failure" or at the very least, unsuccessful.

Usually, the process of a program gradually dissolving happens over the course of several months, it is very insidious. In many cases the blame falls on the shoulders of HR, not the business unit client. HR is responsible for supporting its clients and program maintenance is a part of that support. Program maintenance is overlooked because it is not exciting and it is viewed as an administrative task. Maintaining a program is repetitive, requiring discipline and attention to detail. Most of the innovative work is completed during the design of the program while the maintenance strategy is viewed as an uncreative, arduous process.

Another reason maintenance is often overlooked is lack of planning for it. Because many of the maintenance tasks are mundane, administrative in nature, and require great attention to detail, it is easy for program maintenance plans to be put in place that lack the specificity and task detail required to support the program on an on-going basis . For example, if a succession planning program contains a quarterly meeting of executives to discuss development for replacement candidates, it is necessary for someone to coordinate those meetings. Somebody must be responsible for communicating with all the executive assistants to find an appropriate date, find a location, arrange for food, coordinate material preparation, etc. Though these tasks are not complex, they can be time-consuming.

The time-consuming nature of maintenance activities leads to an additional reason that maintenance tasks get overlooked. Sometimes, even when program maintenance has been considered, the individuals charged with this responsibility may be overworked and lack the time necessary to adequately maintain the program. This is becoming a greater issue as organizations try to do more with less. The combination of a lack of emphasis on program maintenance, lack of attention to detail, and overworked staff leads to programs that are not adequately maintained. This poor maintenance results in otherwise good programs losing momentum or failing outright.

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What Can Organizations Do to Avoid These Problems?

With proper planning, HR departments can more effectively maintain programs. To begin, an HR department should audit all its current programs, and any scheduled to begin in the future. Once a list of programs is complete, HR should estimate the time it will take to build and maintain the programs. HR should then identify employees within the department that demonstrate the aptitude or skills required to be part of a program maintenance team. The types of people best suited to maintain a program are detailed oriented, not easily bored by repetitive tasks, and are diligent in following up. Next, the number of department employees that fit the criteria and their availability to support a program should be identified. Their availability and the time required to maintain the program should be compared. Matching available resources to time required to maintain the programs gives a reality check on what can reasonably be accomplished. If more resources are needed to maintain the program, there are three options:

1) Hire more individuals to handle program maintenance;
2) Outsource program maintenance to a reputable vendor; or
3) Cancel or postpone the program.

Maintenance is the engine that makes a program successful. A program can have management support, excellent content and great tools, but without a solid strategy to maintain it once it is launched, it will break down. Over time, these breakdowns in maintenance and support will damage the credibility of the HR department and its ability to execute for business unit clients. Therefore, it is better to have a few programs that are exceptionally well maintained than a large number of programs that are poorly maintained.