Sustaining Behavior Change and Business Results: Lessons from the Leaders

To compete in today’s business environment, companies must be agile—constantly scanning the environment for threats and opportunities, and taking action to drive business results. However, organizations often struggle with agility. Their main challenge goes beyond making good decisions about how to deploy capital and resources. Often the key challenge is in successfully executing strategies that require people to change their behavior.

For example, a new strategy may require salespeople to call at higher levels in their client organizations and to take a more consultative approach. Or people may need to collaborate across geographic and functional lines in developing and marketing a new capability. Or managers must increase the innovation and productivity of their teams by creating an engaging environment. These “soft skills” may not seem essential to delivering bottom-line business results. On the contrary, over 20 years of business research has found that about 70% of strategic initiatives fail to deliver the expected results—and the main reason for failure is “people issues.”

Since creating and sustaining behavior change is a critical strategic issue for most companies, Forum set out to learn from HR professionals and business leaders about their experience in fostering behavior change in their companies and to identify factors that facilitate sustained behavior change and results.

About the Survey

Forum conducted an electronic survey of a global sample of businesspeople. Of the 223 respondents, 101 (45%) had Human Resources, Organizational Development, or Learning and Development job titles, and 122 (55%) were primarily middle managers or executives. The sample represented three global regions: Americas (44%), Asia Pacific (37%), and Europe/Middle East/Africa (19%).
The Findings

Strategy execution requires behavior change.

All respondents identified at least one behavior change that was required for their business strategy to succeed (see Figure 1). The behavior changes cited most commonly were managing/leading change (52%), followed by employee engagement (48%), gaining strategic alignment (43%), customer focus (40%), collaboration (38%), and sales skills (28%).

Figure 1

What primary behavioral changes are required to execute your 2012-2013 strategy?
Companies have difficulty sustaining behavior change.

Almost two-thirds (63%) of respondents rated their organization as “not at all effective” or “somewhat effective” in sustaining change. Only 14% rated their organization as “effective” or “highly effective” (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Rate your organization's effectiveness at sustaining behavior change.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effectiveness Level</th>
<th>Percent of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not at all effective</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat effective</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately effective</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highly effective</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lack of management commitment and measurement were cited as main reasons change initiatives fail.

Respondents cited lack of management commitment (62%) and insufficient measurement (58%) as the most common reasons that their change efforts failed. About a third cited lack of employee commitment (36%), poor communication (36%), or lack of integration with the work (29%) as the cause (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3**

![Main Reasons for Lack of Sustainment](chart.png)
Only 20% of organizations are able to demonstrate results to management.

As noted above, most respondents cited lack of management commitment and insufficient measurement as main reasons their sustainment efforts fail. We expect there is a relationship between these two variables. That is, managers may become less committed to a change effort if they have insufficient data that show a payoff. We asked a follow-up question about the status of measurement efforts and found that only one in five respondents rated their organizations as “effective” or “highly effective” in demonstrating results, while about half (47%) rated their organizations as “not at all effective” or “somewhat effective” (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

To what extent are you able to demonstrate the impact of behavior change on your business results?
Organizations hold learners and managers accountable for sustaining behavior change.

When we asked which groups were held accountable for sustaining behavior change after learning, most respondents said the learner (45%) or manager (43%) were primarily held accountable, while a minority (12%) said the Learning and Development organization was held most accountable (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5**

In your organization who has main accountability for sustaining behavior change after training?

- Learner: 100, 45%
- Manager: 96, 43%
- L&D Organization: 27, 12%
Organizations deploy a range of sustainment activities.

Respondents cited a range of sustainment activities that their companies deploy in order to sustain change. The activities cited most often were ongoing communication (63%) and formal coaching by external parties (47%). More than a third provided learners with personal support, such as a buddy system (43%) or technology (43%) to facilitate behavior change, as well as action learning projects (39%), senior leader involvement (38%), or a reconnect session (35%). Cited less often were measurement activities (32%), reward and recognition programs (30%), or having a workshop in advance of training that focuses on sustainment (21%) (see Figure 6).

Figure 6
Respondents rated the Sustaining phase as the most important phase in creating lasting impact.

We asked respondents to consider three phases of a behavior change initiative and to identify the one that created the most impact on behavior change in their organization. The phases are: Aligning, Equipping, and Sustaining (see box for definitions). Almost half (49%) of respondents rated Sustaining as most important, followed by Aligning (28%) and Equipping (23%) (see Figure 7).

Three phases of creating lasting behavior change are:
- **Aligning**: Setting a common direction
- **Equipping**: Providing people with tools and training
- **Sustaining**: Providing ongoing support and reinforcement

Figure 7

Which learning phase provides the most impact on behavior change in your organization?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of Respondents</th>
<th>Align</th>
<th>Equip</th>
<th>Sustain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
However, organizations invest relatively little time and resources on sustaining change.

We also asked respondents to estimate how much of their time and resources they invest in the three phases of driving change: Aligning, Equipping, and Sustaining. The most common pattern (49% of respondents) was 20% Aligning, 60% Equipping, and 20% Sustaining (20/60/20). Only 16% of respondents divided their time evenly among these three phases (see Figure 8).

**Figure 8**

| What percent of your L&D time and resources is dedicated to aligning/equipping/sustaining learners? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Percent of Respondents | 60% | 50% | 40% | 30% | 20% |
| Percent of Respondents | 49% | 16% | 13% | 12% | 9% |
| Time Distribution | 20/60/20 | 33/33/33 | 50/25/25 | 40/20/40 | 25/25/50 |

**Follow the Leaders**

In order to identify practices that facilitate sustained behavior change, we compared organizations that described themselves as “effective” or “highly effective” at sustaining change with those who rated themselves as “not at all effective” or “somewhat effective.” We called the first group Sustainment Leaders and the second group Sustainment Laggards.

The three most striking differences between Leaders and Laggards were that Leaders were:

- More likely than Laggards to be able to demonstrate business results of behavior change (see Figure 9)
- More likely than Laggards to hold managers accountable for sustaining behavior change after learning (see Figure 10)
- More likely than Laggards to consider the sustainment phase as most important in creating lasting impact (see Figure 11)
- More likely than Laggards to invest time and resources in a balanced way across all three phases, while Laggards invested mostly in Equipping (see Figure 12)
- Less likely than Laggards to cite lack of management commitment as the main reason for failures in sustaining change (see Figure 13)
- More likely than Laggards to engage senior leaders and to build post-training support systems than Laggards, who focused more on communication (see Figure 14)
What lessons can organizations draw from these findings?

These preliminary findings suggest that companies can be more effective in sustaining behavior change, and ensuring successful strategy execution, by paying attention to the following conclusions:

- **Sustaining behavior change takes investment in time and resources.** While most respondents acknowledged that it is necessary to take action after training to sustain change in order to realize lasting impact, and respondents identified a range of activities for doing so, in reality most focused their energies more on training delivery (Equipping) than on the up-front and follow-up activities needed to sustain results.

- **Sustaining behavior change requires a disciplined approach to measurement.** The Sustainment Leaders were better able than Laggards to demonstrate to management that their change initiatives produced results.

- **Sustaining behavior change takes buy-in from management.** Sustainment Leaders were more likely than Laggards to hold managers accountable for behavior change after training. By being able to demonstrate results and investing time and resources in follow-up, they evidently were able to gain the commitment of managers and to enlist them in helping learners apply their training on the job in a way that generates lasting business impact.

For a deeper discussion on the implications of these findings read our point of view paper entitled “Change the Behavior, Change the Business.”
APPENDIX

Leaders versus Laggards

Figure 9

To what extent are you able to demonstrate the impact of behavior change on business results?

![Bar chart showing comparison between Leaders and Laggards on the extent they can demonstrate the impact of behavior change on business results.]

Figure 10

Who's held accountable for learning?

![Bar chart showing the distribution of accountability for learning among L&D, Managers, and Learners for Leaders and Laggards.]

Percent of respondents (22 Leaders, 136 Laggards)

Percent of respondents (22 Leaders, 136 Laggards)
Figure 11

Which phase has the greatest impact?

- Aligning: Leaders 30%, Laggards 20%
- Equipping: Leaders 40%, Laggards 60%
- Sustaining: Leaders 50%, Laggards 40%

Figure 12

How do you invest your time and resources?

- 33/33/33: Leaders 40%, Laggards 20%
- 20/60/20: Leaders 50%, Laggards 30%
- 40/20/40: Leaders 30%, Laggards 40%
- 50/25/25: Leaders 20%, Laggards 50%
- 25/25/50: Leaders 10%, Laggards 60%
Figure 13

Main reasons for lack of sustainment

(22 Leaders, 136 Laggards)

- Integrate learning
- EE commitment
- Mgt commitment
- Measurement
- Communication

Figure 14

Sustainment activities

(22 Leaders, 136 Laggards)

- Coaching
- Reconect
- Communication
- Recognition
- Support
- Systems
- Mermnt
- Workshop
- Sr. Leaders
- Action Ing
Endnotes


2 Note: The general trends reported here appeared in all three global regions; there were no statistically significant differences by region.

3 Leaders are defined as respondents rating their organization as effective or highly effective in sustaining behavior change, while Laggards are defined as those who rated their organization as not at all or somewhat effective (see Figure 2). Thirty one (14%) of the sample were designated as Leaders and 140 (63%) were Laggards.

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