

Change Makers and Hurdlers

Athletes are lucky: The hurdles appear only after the starting line, they come in defined intervals, no surprises whatsoever. With change projects it's different: the first obstacles appear before you even start, not to mention that there might not even be a clearly visible starting line, in the first place...

You have to get over at least four hurdles if you want to get anything going at all. They can be put in four questions, every one of them being a test for your corporate culture, as well, and you need four Yeses:

One: „Is there a problem?“ Have you ever tried to convince somebody of a change venture who is saying No to this question? Sounds trivial, but at least since the legendary performances of the Iraqi information minister it is clear to what extent people can close their eyes: no problem, no need to act.

Two: „is it my problem (at least partially)?“ A No to this question is especially devastating, because it leaves you having a problem, but nobody being responsible, which creates a problem of its own...“first the supply guys should...“, „well, it's not me for sure..“ are common soundtracks of these films.

Three: „Is the problem solvable?“ A No will lead to play dead reflexes, lethargy, panic – or to reconsidering saying No to question two, in hindsight...all of this not being very innovative. You need a minimum of confidence, which sometimes is easy to say.

Four: „Do I have the capabilities and resources to solve this problem?“ If you say No and you are on your own, you can easily get into fear: fear for your performance appraisal, fear for your social position in the organisation, for your career, for your job. That's why it is sometimes just not possible for individuals to say no to question four out loud.

Four Yeses before you can even walk to the starting line – compared to that, hurdlers should really stop whining about anything.

Now there are always decision makers who are especially action-oriented and storm through their organisation shooting at anything with a starting pistol – no wonder the reactions are not so orderly. This will disperse your employees in all directions, and you can't even blame them: after all, security trainings teach you that you can't argue with a person running amok; all that's left then is get yourself to safety.

Aside from the personal level, all of the crucial questions of course have a cultural level as well:

- First: Where are the blind spots and blinkers in your system? How well do unloved signals find their way to management? And will the bearer be shot, survive, or – go wild – be rewarded?
- Second: Is there a mindset of being responsible – in top management, down the ranks, in the broadness of the staff? Or is it common to delegate, even things that can't be delegated?
- Third: What are the frame conditions for confident, open, even daring quest for solutions? Where are the sacred cows grazing and standing in the way?
- Fourth: Is there a culture of acceptance and mutual support? How risky is it in your organisation to disclose one's own limits or uncertainty?

Keep your starting gun cased, for now – if you pass the hurdles between you and the starting line, you might not even have to use it, because your people will move by themselves.