Briefing Notes:
Small Wins—The Steady Application of a Small Advantage

Introduction

Imagine the following: the head of operations wants to encourage cross-divisional collaboration. She knows that for decades people in one division rarely trusted the people in another, but she now sees that this in-fighting is hurting the company. Aware that it is hard to change such a "bunker mentality" culture, she decides to start small. She asks managers from each division to come together to plan the relocation of staff from one building to the next. She reasons that if they can work on this issue the managers will build the skills and confidence they need to work together on more difficult assignments. In other words, to accomplish a big change she first wants to accomplish what Karl Weick has called a "small win." [1]

This is a problematic strategy. Small wins are small because, most of the time, people who accomplish the win do not have to confront the key constraints to big change. To illustrate, the success of the cross-divisional group in the above example may hinge on the fact that their bosses do not have real stakes in the outcome. Yet when they have real stakes, they give their subordinates much less running room to negotiate with people in other divisions. The constraint here is the level of authorization the members of the cross-divisional group actually have.

This approach to change has two consequences. First, if people on the change project such as the one described here accomplish a small win, they will paradoxically not develop the key insights they need to understand and deal with the obstacles to meaningful change. Second, the insights they do develop and the lessons they draw from their successful experience will be incomplete. This will hurt them in two ways: 1) they will design their next, more difficult change project without understanding what forces obstruct change; and 2) they will not learn as much as they can or should from their subsequent failure.

Their old "theory of the case"—their theory as to why change is difficult—based on their success will interfere with their ability to develop a new theory of the case that could explain their failure.

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[1] Weick, Karl. "Small Wins: Redefining the Scale of Social Problems," *American Psychologist*, January 1984.

The Two Meanings of "Small Wins"

If one reads Karl Weick's article carefully it becomes apparent that he is describing two different classes of small wins. One has the features described above—the small win as a quick hit or easy victory. The other, however, is based on the continuous application of a small advantage. For example, a baseball team can win the pennant not necessarily because its players hit home runs, but because the team consistently gets one more hit per inning than its competitors. The extra hit represents the continuous application of a small advantage. The small advantage steadily applied where it can have the greatest impact "improves the odds." This is the heart of the second meaning of a small win.

Return to the example described in the introduction. Looking at small wins as small advantages the manager would ask the following: "If I want to 'beat' the bunker mentality what small advantage can I consistently apply?" This question in turn may lead her to consider the currently utilized forums where managers from different divisions already meet to discuss issues or make decisions. She would then ask, "What small but consistent change can I make to these meetings so the likelihood that they will succeed will increase?" To answer this question she would then formulate her theory of the case. For example, she might say, "People are reluctant to join in on the discussion because they believe that anyone who is seen defending the status quo will be thought of as uncooperative." With this hypothesis in mind she could then introduce the following practice: When the meeting begins all participants should talk about: 1) how they think the organization benefits from the current decision making process and could be hurt by a change, and 2) how the organization would benefit from a change and is hurt by the current process. This balanced opening discussion would help meeting participants to be more forthright about how they really feel about change.

This example points to two practical guidelines:

1. When leaders at any level of the organization design a program for changing the organization's performance they need a theory of the case as to why the change is difficult. They need to identify a key constraint on change.

2. Using this theory of the case the leaders should introduce a small change that if steadily applied will relax this constraint and, therefore, improve the rate at which people are successful in achieving this new performance.

Two Examples

Strategies for influencing the thinking of others rely on these two guidelines. The "battle" in influencing other people is based on the fact that anyone who wishes to influence a group of people must compete with others for group members' scarce attention. One theory of the case would be as follows: The constraint on influencing the group stems from two sources. First, the message you wish to communicate may not address what they consider to be important. Second, you will not influence them if you communicate too many messages. Group members will not associate you with a particular idea.

The small wins strategy in this case is to first identify a theme that supports the changes you want to make while speaking to the interests of group members. Second, you must identify all the channels and forums where you can communicate this single message. Your message may be only one of a hundred group members receive, but it will be among the few messages that are communicated consistently and speak to members' interests. This is the source of your small but steadily applied advantage.

Similarly, imagine that a sales manager wants his salespeople to focus on the number of quality prospects rather than simply on the number of prospects. His theory of the case is that people take comfort in numbers, they are anxious about not following up every possible lead. The manager decides to create an algorithm based on historical yields from different customers that will help salespeople estimate the likely level of sales they will make with different types of customers. He reasons that provided with the data and the algorithm each salesperson will lower the percentage of low-quality yields they pursue simply because they can now see more clearly the advantage of focusing on the higher ones. They need less comfort in numbers because they now have a more concrete understanding of quality.

Note that in each of these cases the change agents do not have to "announce their change" or force any person to change their behavior. The steadily applied advantage *pulls* rather than pushes people to change their behavior. In the first case, group members are pulled along by the consistency and relevance of the message. In the second case, salespeople are pulled along by the data that helps them refocus their attention on quality, without unduly raising their anxiety.

Summary

There are two types of small wins, the little victory and the small but steadily applied advantage. The first creates a clear win but leads people to draw the wrong lessons about how to sustain change. The second improves the percentages of winning by helping people make small changes to a key constraint on change. Improvements are small but steady, and people draw the right lessons about why change was difficult.

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