

Directions

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Is it the right time for a redesign?

by Ellen C. Davis

On a recent CNBC broadcast, I heard that Warren Buffet said that the economy “fell off a cliff.” No kidding. And, with that fall, significant shifts have occurred in our organizations. Some people are gone; others have moved around; some work has been shelved; other work requires greater attention; climate and morale have slumped.

A typical response is to hunker down, keep using the same approaches, and wait for a better day. An alternative response might be to challenge ourselves to find creative new ways of working that just might help us get through the here-and-now more successfully as well as ensure we emerge stronger and healthier in the days to come.

Yes, the time could be very right for a redesign, whether it be redesign of some system that needs to respond better under the new economic conditions, or redesign of a system that has actually needed attention for some time.

The challenges that lead to work system redesign can vary. Perhaps it is that “we still have to get much the same work accomplished, even though our workforce has been reduced by 10% or more.” Or, “our focus has shifted, so we need to assess what our internal and external customer demands are now and organize more appropriately to meet them.” Or, “we have known for ages that our coaching process for leaders is weak, and now when we need our leaders so much, we simply have to find a better way to support them in carrying out their role through this difficult downturn.” Or, “our team needs more training than ever to remain flexible, but our training budget has shrunk and our available time to do training has shrunk as well.” Or, “the way our jobs/departments have been organized and structured in the past will never work in this new economy.”

Do those challenges feel familiar? If so, you likely have a work system redesign opportunity. Here’s what it will take:

- A. A leader who imagines and can provide at least an outline of a better way, and then inspire others to participate in planning to achieve it.
- B. At least a few people willing to work on this project who will energetically open themselves up to consider the possibilities of a brighter (though potentially different) way of working.
- C. A process to thoughtfully explore issues and alternatives, to form and communicate ideas, and to develop specific and actionable next steps.

You likely already have the challenge and can envision a better way, and you probably even have some folks willing to go to work on it. But you may be uncomfortable knowing how they should proceed. For that, you need only a simple, and preferably an already understood method. Consider this:

Step 1. Get clear about the goal(s).

The team must answer these questions: What are the desired outcomes? How will we know when we have achieved them (measures)? What will be the people-related results? Why will this be “better” for the team/organization (rationale)?

How does this support our organization's long term Vision & Culture? Now- communicate and get input from key stakeholders.

Step 2. Specify what isn't working currently.

Here the team makes a data-based and objective assessment of the current situation. They pragmatically explore the new operating environment with its requirements and constraints. They pinpoint specific problem areas or gaps that are in the way of the current design allowing the organization to achieve its desired goal(s). Time for more stakeholder communication.

Step 3. Design the system changes.

Some benchmarking calls and reading can be helpful to get the creative juices flowing (visits really are not required when funds are tight). The outcome of this step is a description of that better way and how it will work. Put meat on the bones of that Goal Statement. And communicate for stakeholder input.

Step 4. Prepare for a successful implementation.

The result is, at its most basic, an Action Plan covering (1) Detailed Steps, (2) Timeframes, and (3) Responsibilities. But frankly, that will not be enough. You also need (4) a Measurement/Audit/Review process, (5) a Communication Plan, (6) an Owner to oversee implementation, and (7) a Sponsor to support and nudge things along.

For each of these Steps, there are a myriad of tools and techniques that already exist in your organization. If you are into Six Sigma, you are likely thinking about where VOCs, KJs, RACIs, and all the rest might be employed. If you are an old fashioned Total Quality fan, you may be thinking of a problem-solving CAT team toolkit. If you prefer Lean, you may be reaching for your copy of Gemba Kaizen. Whatever tools you employ already – those are the tools to use. Employees know them and further investment is not required to utilize them.

And, no, you don't even have to have a consultant to do this (as much as we hate to admit it).

Now, you may be thinking that you haven't read anything really *new* in this article. Good for you! There isn't anything really new here – just a reminder to get going, engage people in creative, continuous improvement, and lead employees and your business to a better place. The time is *right now* to ask thoughtful questions about work system improvements. It's also time that you may not have had when the economy was booming, plants were full, and no one could hire people fast enough – was that only a year or less ago?