Professional Development for HITA Practitioners

For years now, our profession has been consumed with the notion that only 30% of change endeavors fully achieve their stated objectives. Countless books, articles, blogs, speeches, and conference sessions have been devoted to questions like: Is this really the correct portrayal of change's success rate? What are the contributing factors and corresponding solutions? Who is responsible for such dismal results and why?

The Unasked Questions

These inquiries are worth pursuing, but there are other related and, I believe, more important questions that are going largely unasked: *Why are senior officers so often peripheral players in what are supposed to be import changes? Why do change professionals seldom gain access to the C-suite level except for token executive briefings or periodic status reports? Why are so few practitioners considered High Impact resources by the most senior executives of organizations?*

Given how sparsely populated the upper tiers of most organizations are with change practitioners who are considered High Impact Trusted Advisors (HITAs), it seems odd that questions of this nature aren't being pursued more rigorously. One would think that as a professional community, we would be keenly interested in how we could become more effective at securing access to and influence with top executives.

I believe one key factor contributing to how thin the HITA ranks are within upper echelons is that we tend not to provide much formal education geared specifically toward practicing our craft at that level. Is it possible that the change profession itself, by overemphasizing methodology certification, is inadvertently undermining what it takes to build strong rapport with senior officers—and therefore, a co-conspirator in the 70% failure scenario? When most practitioners feel more prepared for tactical assignments than building viable working relationships with senior level sponsors . . . are we not part of the problem?

Unconscious Competence

Even though the majority of change professionals might feel ill-equipped to forge a deep trusting advisory partnership with C-suite leaders and other top executives, we know that some are functioning very successfully in this capacity. Maybe they had trepidations going into their first senior encounter, but eventually they were able to have a positive impact on shaping mindsets and behaviors at that level of the organization. Unfortunately, for some people, this suggests that a trial-and-error "learn as you go" approach is sufficient. And that's a big part of the problem.

Practitioners with little (if any) formal guidance in navigating the C-suite landscape from a relationship-building standpoint are at a disadvantage. Because they have had to figure it all out on their own, they tend to be overly reliant on their instinct and intuition. This kind of "unconscious competence" can produce powerful results, but it also has drawbacks.

Without a framework of replicable principles and guidelines to intentionally follow, practitioners are prone to wide variations in effectiveness when it comes to developing rapport: sometimes they are very effective and extremely influential, but other times, not so much. Also, without some sense of structure to what they are doing, it is hard for those who have learned how to develop strong senior executive relationships to teach other practitioners how to do the same. *"Watch what I do and you'll pick it up eventually"* will only take a practitioner so far.

A Critique

C-suite and other senior executives deserve more from us. They shouldn't have to hope that the practitioners they work with are having a good day and that their unconscious competence, powered by instinct and intuition alone, will be sufficient to provide the guidance needed. They should be able to count on us to provide not only practitioners who can support basic tactical change assignments lower in the organization, but also professionals trained specifically to function as advisors for top leadership initiatives. With some exceptions, this is not the range of capabilities our profession is currently offering.

I'm not placing blame on individual practitioners, but I do believe an indictment of our profession is warranted. In recent years, there has been such a focus on certifying practitioners in the basics of change facilitation that we have lost sight of what is needed to also support those who are ready to move beyond the fundamentals and pursue mastery-level development.

We are fast becoming a profession of technicians…and in the process losing the artistry that makes us highly valued advisors to senior leaders.

When CEOs, CFOs, CIOs, and CHROs turn to our profession for help, what we have to offer are mostly concepts and techniques, rather than the insight and wisdom top leaders typically seek. Technically adept practitioners can be helpful to some degree, but they are armed mostly with methodological proficiency rather than C-level relationship-building skills. This means that leaders tend not to resonate with them very deeply, and as a result, it is unlikely that any contribution they make will have much of an impact on the more central change issues and concerns at hand.

If practitioners were properly prepared for the HITA role, they would be able to bring forward three assets, uniquely tuned to create value at the upper echelon of an organization:

- Exceptional depth in the practical application of one or more change methodologies
- Ability to forge working relationships that foster deep trust and influence
- Authentic expression of their character and presence as part of the value being delivered

Our profession's lack of forums to properly prepare practitioners for senior level advisory work is a major contributing factor to our craft being viewed so often as a tactical, peripheral resource. HITAs should possess a clear sense of the principles and guidelines they need to follow in order to nurture these kinds of working relationships. They should be able to operate consistently and reliably at the top of an organization, and should be able to teach other practitioners how to replicate their success. For that to happen, we have to raise the bar on the professional development that is offered.

Unique Preparation for Unique Challenges

In order to consistently forge the kind of working relationships HITAs need to be successful, and to help other practitioners do the same, specialized training is required. As obvious as this may seem, for many in our field, the question is: Why? What is so different about working with senior officers that it requires training tailored just for this purpose? Don't the same dynamics of change apply within the senior ranks as they do elsewhere in an enterprise?

Indeed, the dynamics of change apply at all levels of an organization, as do many of the tools and techniques that might be employed lower in an organization; yet there are some challenges that only surface within the confines of the top echelon. Without specific preparation for the kinds of things that unfold in this space and how they affect relationship building, practitioners are left with little more than trial-and-error learning and instincts as coping strategies.

Here are a few examples of the many challenges unique to working at the top level:

- Chemistry—The pressure is immense for senior officers, and often they need to make quick determinations based on insufficient information. If a trusted advisor relationship between practitioner and leader is going to "click," it must do so rapidly, with a swift descent into substantive dialogue that the executive finds immediately helpful.
- Boundaries—Leaders at the top often feel vulnerable due to the exposure and scrutiny they are subject to. This can translate into an unwillingness to acknowledge, much less address, "sensitive" subjects. For instance, if the leader is part of the problem that he/she is trying to solve, the change practitioner must be able to develop a trusting relationship with that leader in order to "get inside" those boundaries and raise the matter.
- Board—C-suite players sometimes find themselves at odds with members of their boards but are unsure about turning to someone outside the "inner circle" to explore mitigation strategies. This can leave them with only an inner-circle "echo chamber" (self-reinforcing viewpoints) to think through their options.
- Stigma—Senior executives sometime subscribe to an "old school" notion that only weak leaders need the council of others (e.g.*, If you are strong enough, you shouldn't need any outside help with the really important stuff*). This mindset is typically associated with seeing change-related assistance as useful only in remedial or tactical situations.
- Self-diagnosis—Top-level executives have a tendency to assume that a trusted advisor is meant only to pursue what the executive is interested in/comfortable with exploring, instead of what needs to be addressed in order to fully realize the strategic change initiative. However, it is sometimes critical to help a leader see past his/her initial assessment or long-held biases in order to gain a more in-depth perspective.
- Candor—Many top officers are surrounded by people who have been conditioned to "modify" their viewpoints so as not to appear too inconsistent with the leader's frame of reference and preferences. Yet, delivering information, viewpoints, and recommendations that may make leaders uncomfortable is an essential part of the trusted advisor's role.

A Call to Action

Plenty of training is available for practitioners who want to focus on change-related concepts, tools, and techniques, but there is little out there that centers on leader–practitioner relationship building, and even less that addresses the unique challenges of advising C-suite and other key executives.

Conner Academy has attempted to address this shortfall by providing a curriculum explicitly designed for those on the mastery path, but the problem is greater than we or any single entity can tackle alone. The solution isn't as simple as just providing more professional development courses, even ones tailored to the unique challenges encountered by HITAs. The collective mindset of our profession needs to shift.

We must identify and begin to look more systemically at the issue of how little influence our profession exerts at the top of most organizations. In doing so, it is my hope that we will find it imperative not only to offer more formal preparation for HITA practitioners, but also to expose those in early and mid-stream training programs to the rewards of serving as HITAs.

If we, as a professional community, hold practitioners who are successfully operating at this level in higher regard, the tide will slowly turn. We will begin to see stronger interest among practitioners to serve in this capacity, which will in turn increase the demand for better preparation to be provided. With better preparation, we will be able to generate enhanced value for top executives, which, ultimately, will allow us to have greater influence where we can be the most effective: with C-suite level and other senior leaders.