

7 Critical Success Factors For All Real Time Strategic Change Work

by Robert “Jake” Jacobs

Large, complex, system-wide change is risky business. Real Time Strategic Change ups the ante even further because it will make your future happen faster. When speed increases, your margin for error decreases. This article explains seven “must have’s” to ensure you succeed in all your RTSC work. Without these Critical Success Factors in place you’re rolling the dice. When we’re talking about the future of your organization, risk mitigation should be the name of the game.

If you’re intent on betting against long odds, head to Vegas. If you are committed to succeeding in your organization’s change effort, these guidelines will serve you well.

1. Think and act as if the future were now

This is a core construct of RTSC. Instead of holding the future out in front of you as something you will eventually attain, live it today. Any aspect of your future vision you can make real right now will accelerate the pace of change.

The line between your present and future will blur. If you’re thinking and acting as if the future were now, it gets tough to say whether you’re in your “present” or your “future.” That’s the definition of a high-class problem. In the midst of a planning or decision-making meeting ask yourself, “If we were in our preferred future, who else would be in the room right now?” If other names come to mind, take a break. Get them in the room by conference call if needed or better yet, invite them into the room if they’re right down the hall. The idea is to stop talking about the future and start living it. When you talk about “Vision 2020,” it can all too often become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Why act on something today when you’ve got eleven more years to get the job done?

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2. Work in your part of the system; focus on the whole system

This “CSF” is a nod to my friend and colleague Barry Johnson. Barry has devoted his life to “enhancing our quality of life on the planet by supplementing the way we think.” Barry’s passion is to make sure that people think in “Both*And” terms when they’re not dealing with “Either/Or” problems. Where I go to dinner with my wife tonight is an “Either/Or” problem. We decide. Then we go and eat. Game over. However, many situations in life find their home in the world of “Both*And.” This Critical Success Factor is a good example. For an RTSC effort to succeed, you have to bring about effective change in whatever part of the system in which you’re working....and at the same time focus on the rest of the system and the impact of your efforts on the larger organization. If you’re working with a team, remember to focus on the department of which it is part. If you’re working with

the department, don’t forget to factor its function’s realities into your decisions. Functional work needs to account for business unit needs. Business units are impacted by and impact the total corporation. Even

the corporation has another level of system beyond it – its customers, suppliers, competitors and a whole host of other stakeholders.

3. Clear purpose and outcomes guide all work

Too much time, money and energy often are wasted on activities in search of a purpose or set of outcomes.

What do I mean? Think about the last meeting you attended or conference call you joined. Did anyone spell out in concrete terms what success would look like, when you’d know you had done a good job and it was time to move on? If discussed, were these distilled into simple statements that had broad-based acceptance?

There's no faster way to get people on the same page than having them reach agreement on what they're trying to achieve. I recently was coaching a client who had to make an important presentation at an upcoming executive team meeting. As we reviewed his materials, I noticed he had no purpose for the presentation identified anywhere in his slides. Even after listening to him describe his talk for 15 minutes, it still wasn't clear to me what he was trying to accomplish. So I asked. When there was no ready answer, the work we needed to do was clear. Twenty minutes later he had reframed his entire presentation, linked it to future work he needed to do with another division, and had identified three specific requests he had of his colleagues in order to ensure the success of his project.

4. “The many” design for “the many”

There are three reasons to follow this Critical Success Factor:

First, you'll get better answers to the challenges you're facing. More perspectives lead to better informed decisions. Better informed decisions are smarter, more strategic, and result in increased Return on Investments -- by whatever criteria you're using. I often hear leaders who are frustrated that no one else in the organization “gets it.” More times than not, the reason people aren't “getting it” is that the leader isn't fully sharing his or her perspective on the issue. Trying to solve a problem with incomplete information is an exercise in futility guaranteed to leave even your most ardent supporters throwing in the towel.

Second, people own what they help create. In getting ready for an upcoming RTSC event, a guest speaker was bargaining with my internal colleagues and me to get more time on the agenda. Part of her argument? She assured us she could “sell the audience” on the organization's new strategic direction. The Design Team and I told her that we weren't interested in anyone “buying” something they were being sold – especially from an outside

speaker. The agenda was the organization's, not this speaker's. The microcosm designing the meeting had their colleagues' interests in mind and put an end to that discussion. I don't want to be misunderstood. I am not arguing to invite everybody into every decision in a change effort. That would be as unproductive as not involving anyone. What I am taking a stand for is when the call could go either way, lean towards letting “the many design for the many.”

Third, you decrease resistance to change without losing the wisdom it contains. The problem with resistance isn't that it exists. In fact, it's a wellspring of creativity that can be tapped to improve every aspect of your organization.

The problem with resistance is that by definition it slows down your organization. Resistance acts like a friction coefficient to progress.

The higher that coefficient reaches, the slower change occurs. Include people in crafting their collective future whether they're cynics, zealots or anyone in between. When the “many design for the many,” different points of view help you see a more complete picture of

reality. Those who would otherwise be seen as troublemakers become a valuable source of insight and information.

5. The more you live the RTSC principles, the faster you'll create your preferred future and the longer you'll sustain gains you make over time.

The Six RTSC principles have been proven effective time and again in organizations ranging from New York City's government, a Hungarian medical device maker, a U.S. university, and a global energy company. There are ways both large and small everyday in organizations to put these principles into practice. Just today before polishing up this article, the Principles helped me work with others to:

- Design a yearlong “Strategic Change Mastery Program” for leaders and internal consultants in a large furniture retailer;

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- Partner with a client to explore how to best assess improvements on a set of key polarities related to implementing their Strategic Plan;
- Explore how to design a webinar focused on “Consulting in a 2.0 World”
- Prepare for a presentation to a prospective client.

Opportunities to apply the principles are all around. Here’s a six-step process you can follow to road test them for yourself.

Six Step Process to Apply the Principles

The more you live the RTSC principles, the faster you’ll create your preferred future and the longer you’ll sustain gains you make over time.

Step 1: Bring together a group of interested and affected stakeholders to a situation.

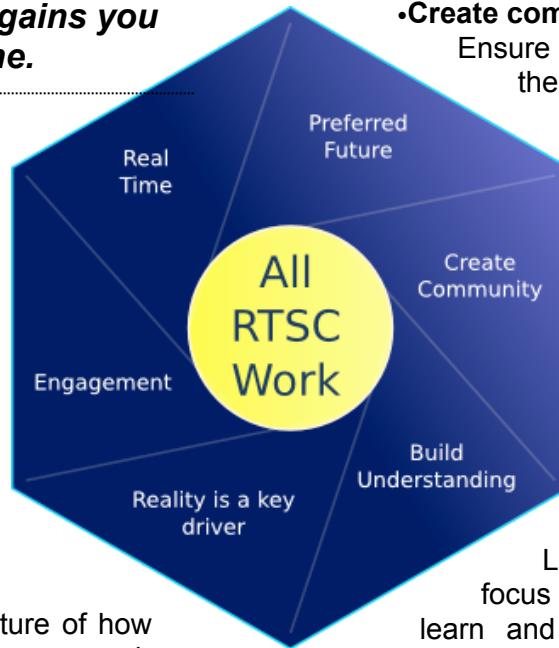
Step 2: Put the situation, decision or dilemma in the center of the principles hexagon.

Step 3: Build a common picture of how the principles, one by one and as a whole, relate to the situation.

- Which principles are most congruent (the best fit) with the current situation and how?
- Which ones appear to be least congruent?

Step 4: Reflecting on this, come up with ways to more fully apply the principles.

- “How can those least connected to the situation be leveraged?”
- “How can those that fit best be built upon?”



Step 5: Identify intended and possible unintended consequences of ideas the group agrees on.

Step 6: Agree on next steps that could include:

- Communicating findings and ideas to key stakeholders
- Making action plans
- Documenting what you’ve learned for others.

Definitions of the RTSC Principles

• Get clear on your preferred future

Combine the best of your past and present and compelling visions for your future. Build this picture and unleash the organizational energy to make it happen.

• Create community

Ensure people are committed to their part of the organization and to the larger whole.

Support both interests and people collaborate to create something larger than themselves that they have created and believe in.

• Build understanding

Stand up for what you believe in and be curious about what others think. The common base of strategic information you develop will lead to aligned action.

• Make reality a key driver

Look outside your organization and focus inside it, too. Put together what you learn and you’ll make better, more informed decisions.

• Engage and include

Provide clear direction and invite participation. Lead in both ways and you’ll create the commitment needed for fast and lasting change.

• Think and act in real time

Be in your future and plan for it at the same time. Learn to do them equally well and your desired future will happen faster.

6. Change work is real work; real work is change work. The kiss of death for any change work is

relegating it to a Tiger Team meeting on Friday afternoon or worse yet, delegating it to the “front lines” in the spirit of participation.

The more you separate “change work” from “real work,” the less it becomes part of daily business. Change-ability is the single greatest advantage any organization can enjoy. To be able to change better and faster than your competitors ensures you’ll be capable of responding to new markets, integrating new technology, and institutionalizing new business practices, all while your competitors are still trying to figure out what changes to make. Blending these two activities into one has two distinct benefits:

- Change work becomes part of everyone’s job in your business...every day. Peter Senge talks of “Sharing the Burden” as a key attribute of Learning Organizations. There are a whole lot more people in organizations than leaders alone. The more each person assumes accountability for making effective, needed changes every day, the more successful you’ll become.

- The gains you make from your change work become more sustainable. “Work” has existed, in some way, since the first form of life came into being. And it will be around until the last one leaves. In short, people will always be doing “work.” Tying change work to what people consider real work embeds it in the most basic and sustainable aspect of every organization.

7. Move what might traditionally happen downstream back upstream in the process

This is one of the easiest to implement and paradoxically the least applied of any of these Critical Success Factors. When you move things that typically happen downstream in a change effort back upstream in the process, change happens faster and lasts longer. Here’s an example. Hundreds of people need to get clear, connected, committed and achieving common goals. That’s a tall order for a meeting lasting two to three days. In fact, it’s too tall an order. Especially when you’re talking about lasting

change, not just a “feel good” experience with a half-life of 30-60 days. A client I’m working with now has this exact situation. CEO’s and key staff from 38 affiliates from around the country are gathered in San Antonio for three days. Their goals:

- I. To understand our common purpose and strategic direction, and the implications they have for the organization overall, local offices and each of us individually.
- II. To build enthusiasm and gain momentum for the new strategic direction.
- III. To leverage our collective intelligence instead of getting into “win/lose” debates.

IV. To identify how we will ensure we continue providing high-quality programs, while at the same time advancing our new strategy.

Instead of the task being to accomplish those outcomes in three days, we started next step

planning and actions typically reserved for after the meeting weeks before the event was held. The head of Strategy talked to Affiliate CEO’s for more than a month before the large group meeting about the new strategy and its implications for their operations. The head of Organization Development facilitated a half-dozen Affiliates in beginning to develop plans in line with the new strategy. At the event, we created a Change Possibilities Panel so that “early adopter” Affiliate leaders could share lessons learned and build confidence in others that the job could be done. Instead of waiting for after the meeting to start next step work, we incorporated it into all of the pre-planning for the event. The same theory holds true for:

- When to involve people in a change effort (the earlier you involve others, the more ownership they’ll develop);
- When personal development needs are addressed (the more capable people are of doing business in new ways, the more successful and confident they’ll be when it comes time to make the change); and,

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- When to decide what to do after an event (even when you can't pin down detailed outcomes and plans before a meeting, you can still develop scenarios and begin thinking about how to shorten the cycle time between planning and implementation)

There are no sure bets in the game of change played out everyday in organizations. Following these Critical Success Factors however, will stack the odds in your favor.
