

Countering Work Avoidance: A Key Tool for Executing Toward Results

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1. Organizational and systems barriers often impede progress toward results.

The primary work of Results Based Leadership is to make progress towards a desired population level result for a given group of people and/or a specific place. However, as stakeholders and partners move into execution to achieve the result, organizational and systems barriers will have to be confronted. These organizational and systems barriers might look like:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>An unwillingness to name dysfunctional behaviors or practices that are impeding the results work.</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>An over-commitment on activities that may not contribute to achieving the desired result.</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>A lack of accountability on promises and commitments that are made.</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>An ongoing and persistent gap between what is wanted and what is happening.</i> |

2. Leaders take the bold step to shake up the status quo, which can lead to “Work Avoidance”

There comes a time when results leaders have to acknowledge that “every system is designed perfectly to produce the results that are currently being produced.” With this awareness, results leaders have to take the bold step to shake up the status quo and disrupt systems by asking their stakeholders (including themselves) to do the hard work needed to see the ways they have contributed to (and perhaps benefitted from) things staying the way they are. And, in doing this, they have to be ready for the inevitable resistance to this disruption that stakeholders will feel and associated “Work Avoidance”

3. Watch for two forms of Work Avoidance¹

| <i>Diversion of Attention might look like:</i> | <i>Displacing Responsibility Might Look Like:</i> |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Defining the problem to fit current knowledge and expertise</i> <i>Denying the problem exists</i> <i>Avoiding the conflict</i> <i>Creating a proxy fight, such as a personality conflict, to avoid addressing the real problem.</i> <i>Discounting solutions that threaten legacy behaviors and relationships.</i> <i>Offering fake, pretend, or marginal solutions.</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Marginalizing or attacking the person trying to raise the difficult issues.</i> <i>Scapegoating someone or externalizing the “enemy”</i> <i>Attacking or blaming formal authority</i> <i>Delegating the hard work to those who can't do anything about it</i> |

¹Heifetz, Ronald A; Linsky, Marty (2002-08-09). “Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading.”

4. Using Data to Address Work Avoidance

Once work avoidance is identified, the best line of defense against it is to place the attention back on the work designed to produce the population level result. Bring every discussion back to the data at hand, including data that tracks the implementation of programs, achievement of performance measures, progress of strategies, meeting of targets, and changes in the population level result.

The safest place for a leader to stand is on the foundation of results - Raj Chawla

5. Countering Work Avoidance: A Framework for Leaders' Actions

| Leadership Approach | Key Questions |
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| First focus is on self | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What is my contribution to challenges of execution?</i> • <i>What is my new learning? What might I have to lose if the work is successful? How do I benefit with things remaining the way they are?</i> • <i>Are my relationships with others resilient enough to address the issues of work avoidance? If not, how do I strengthen them?</i> |
| Focus everyone on the population and program level results | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What result are we trying to accomplish?</i> • <i>Based on the data, how well are we doing in achieving the result?</i> |
| Provide regular updates on work done thus far | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What are the work groups or strategy groups doing and accomplishing?</i> • <i>Is their work robust enough to meet performance targets?</i> • <i>Were the previously agreed-upon actions taken? If so, what happened?</i> |
| Identify execution challenges and possible causes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What are "our" individual and collective contributions to challenges?</i> • <i>What are the systems conflicts or competing agendas?</i> • <i>What existing policies or procedures are inhibiting execution?</i> |
| Address the "deeper" issues | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What power dynamics are at play?</i> • <i>Who might have to confront losses if the work is successful?</i> |
| Develop and/or modify strategies | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What does the data reveal about who is succeeding and about what we are learning about what works?</i> • <i>What do we need to do differently and why?</i> • <i>Who will be aligned or not with these new efforts?</i> |
| Establish responsibility and accountability | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Who should do what by when?</i> • <i>Who is not holding responsibility for execution and why?</i> • <i>Whom should we confront for indifference, incompetence, or sabotage?</i> • <i>If needed, how do we ask these stakeholders to leave?</i> |
| Recognize accomplishment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Who deserves thanks for significant improvements?</i> • <i>What can we learn and apply from these accomplishments?</i> • <i>What bright spots can be highlighted?</i> • <i>How do we use results stories to share our work and to enroll others?</i> |

It ought to be remembered that there is nothing more difficult...than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things. Because the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions, and lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new. - Niccolò Machiavelli