This article first ran in the October 1999 issue of MT. It’s presented as this month’s Anniversary feature because clarity, consensus and commitment never go out of style.

Successful businesses have learned that maintaining long-term success requires flexibility and the ability to adjust to changing business environments. Adjusting means making organizational changes. Eventually, changes and adjustments in the way work is done, whether small or large, become imperative to business demands.

Everyone wants change to be successful and smooth when it happens. Successful change means that new processes, methods, or management techniques become the status quo and that old, less-productive behaviors are eliminated. The three conditions that are the foundation for successful and lasting change are the three Cs: clarity, consensus, and commitment.

Most often, change agents are so focused on implementing a new process that the three Cs are ignored or forgotten. They can be compared to a three-legged stool. What if the future of your organization was placed on that stool? Would you check each leg just once, twice, or would you want to monitor them constantly?

Many organizations take the sturdiness of their legs for granted—*until one is weak or missing and the organization suddenly finds itself in disaster recovery mode.*
In the business world, this could mean a failed project, huge losses, and possibly even the end of someone’s career. The challenge is to implement change while maintaining clarity, consensus, and commitment. This challenge is best met by devoting full time resources, whether internal or contracted, to monitor the legs—
that is, maintain the three Cs.

Clarity
Clarity is the starting point for successful change. It is a common understanding of where the organization is now, where the organization want to go, and the steps to get there. Having clarity means that there is a definite direction or vision for the future of the organization. The organization must have a well-formed idea of what it will look like, feel like, and sound like when it has achieved that vision.

Creating clarity is a step that most organizations ignore, forget, or skip. True clarity results when an organization is specific, inclusive, and honest with its vision and goals.

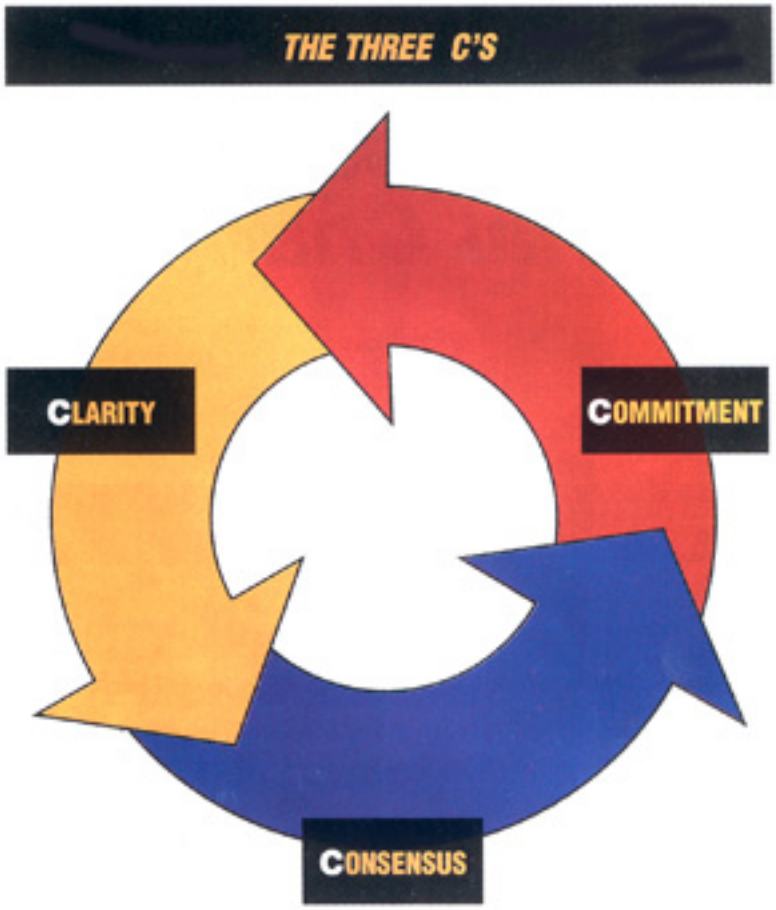
Being specific means that the organization states:

- Specific goals. What are the specific goals and milestones?
- Specific time frames. When exactly does the organization wish to accomplish key objectives, reach certain milestones, attain goals, etc.
- Specific measures. How will the organization know when it is fulfilling its mission and realizing its vision? What will better look like, sound like, and feel like? Are there some key performance measures that can be used to compare present processes to past ones?
- Specific stakeholders. Who specifically stands to benefit from the organization’s vision for the future? Are there benefactors other than suppliers, customers, and employees? Who stands to lose? Does the organization provide something to the community, government, or other groups?

Being inclusive means that the key stakeholders (e.g., customers, employees, unions, the community) have been considered and the vision for the future is truly for the benefit of the organization and its customers. Change sometimes hurts a few people for the larger good of the organization. Considering the needs of each key stakeholder can highlight ways to minimize negative impacts.

A vision based on creating win-win solutions with key stakeholders has the best chance for long-term success. Successful visions get everyone moving in the same direction and serve as a source of motivation. Most obstacles to success arise from conflicts of interest between the organization and its employees, unions, customers, suppliers, or community. Significant obstacles may arise if the best interests of any of these key stakeholder groups are in direct conflict with the organization’s vision and goals.

Being honest means saying what you mean. If any organization invests the effort to make a clear vision statement and doesn’t intend to “walk the talk,” it has wasted everyone’s time and money. Are you really after the stated vision and goals, or are they just the “flavor of the month”?



The foundation for successful and lasting change is composed of the three Cs: clarity, conser

Consensus
Now that there is clarity on the vision, consensus locks it into place. Consensus is a general agreement on the vision. The key word is general. The details of the strategies and goals will

tend to be defined by management. It is not necessary to confer and debate over the details with all key stakeholders, and still there must be agreement on the overall direction of the organization.

Once the vision has been drafted on paper, consensus means that everyone has put a signature at the bottom. Consensus is attained when everyone is willing to accept the vision. But consensus does not end with the initial agreement; it must be maintained throughout the change process.

There are several key strategies for maintaining consensus during change. It is important to note that these strategies alone cannot do the job of managing organizational change. Direct, focused attention on maintaining the three Cs will be a full time job that entails one-on-one contact with employees at all levels. Management will want to implement five strategies to assist whomever it assigns or contracts to manage the change process: communication, team building, leading by example, checking and adjusting, and flexibility/inflexibility.

The first strategy is communication. It is not possible for stakeholders to know the plan, direction, and strategy too well or understand them too much. Successful organizations have their vision and goals posted conspicuously for all to see; the vision is posted on bulletin boards, tacked up in cubicles and offices, and included as the cover page for brochures, reports, and manuals.

A second strategy is the use of team building. There are hundreds of resources available that outline ways to build teams. The idea with this strategy is to encourage employees to focus on common priorities. A sense of team is perhaps the single most effective motivator for most individuals in crew or group working environments. Positive peer pressure can be used for motivation around and focus on the vision.

Leading by example is the third strategy for maintaining consensus. Leading by example, like working as a team, tugs on individuals’ desires to be accepted and respected. One of the best strategies for maintaining consensus is making sure that the behavior of the most admired employees and leaders in the organization matches the stated vision and goals. Leaders must be visibly and sincerely committed to the stated mission and goals.

Checking and adjusting is the fourth strategy for maintaining consensus. This means that management looks for evidence that consensus is present. Consensus is most evident in the unwritten rules of the organization. A general agreement on the items of clarity will show in the behavior of employees. Specifically, the actions of the organization’s leaders, the types of peer pressure present, and the level of involvement from the average employee will give a good indication of whether there is general agreement on the direction of the organization.

Unwritten rules include such things as verbal recognition for doing a good job. They also may describe the way some employees follow the lead of a more-experienced employee. These things are not written, but they are like rules because they dictate behavior. Peer pressure, leading by example, and reward systems are effective only when they are consistent. Consistency cannot exist without a general agreement on priorities and direction.

Flexibility/inflexibility is the fifth strategy. Smart leaders know that no matter how well an organization plans, it will still encounter snags during projects. Management must be willing to change its approach along the way when snags occur. This is flexibility. In addition, when problems are encountered, leaders need to resist making changes to the vision and goals. This is inflexibility. Knowing when to bend and when to stand firm is key to maintaining control over the direction of the project. Flexibility with respect to strategies and inflexibility with respect to vision demonstrates consensus among the organization’s leaders and leads into the third C, commitment.

Commitment

When the organization has clarity and consensus, then it must have commitment to create lasting change. Commitment involves three main components: reality, priority, and perseverance.

Reality means the devotion of real dollars, real time, and quality people to change implementation. The organization must spend the right amount of dollars to do the job right, an appropriate amount of time to properly schedule the project, and quality people to implement it. The concept of reality focuses on the belief that a quality machine must be built with quality parts.

Priority means that other important tasks will be forsaken, postponed, or delegated pending the attainment of the vision. If priority cannot be placed on making the change, it is an indication that decision makers are out of sync with the organization’s vision.

Perseverance means sticking with the improvement project and overcoming resistance and roadblocks wherever they exist. Perseverance requires a sense of duty, a commitment to improving, and an understanding of how overcoming daily obstacles contributes to the greater good of the organization. A very effective strategy that encourages perseverance is an aggressive issue resolution process. This means that there is a formal method for reporting, discussing, and resolving people and process issues as they are identified.

There is no silver bullet for achieving long-term, sustainable, measurable improvements. Maintaining the three Cs minimizes the risks of project failures. Using clarity, consensus, and commitment as a starting point for management strategy builds the momentum and enthusiasm that make successful projects fun and rewarding.

At the time he wrote this article, Don Seiler was a consultant with Reliability Management Group, which is still based in Minneapolis, MN.