Countering Work Avoidance: A Key Tool for Executing Towards Results

By Raj Chawla

> *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

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:

- **An unwillingness to name dysfunctional behaviors or practices that are impeding the results work**. For example, people won't name the "undiscussibles" in a public meeting but rather discuss them in quiet corners or backrooms.
- **A lack of accountability on promises and commitments that are made**. For example, people agree to take steps to move into execution and yet there seems to be no follow-up.
- **An over-commitment on activities that may not contribute to achieving the desired result**. For example, people are very busy with competing commitments and to-do lists, and yet no progress is made towards desired result.
- **An ongoing and persistent gap between what is wanted and what is actually happening**. For example, stakeholders remain unwilling or unable to change, modify, and/or implement policies, procedures and requirements needed to meet the desired result.

"I want you to find a bold and innovative new way to do everything exactly the same way we've been doing it for 25 years."

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" and that, in fact, the current habits, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of the involved partners and stakeholders is contributing to things being—and staying—the way they are.

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.

This resistance is directly connected to the losses (for example, of power, status, relationships, or competence) that stakeholders may have to face if things change and to taking on the new learning that will be required (such as having to work towards results with less formal authority or control). The resistance to these losses and difficult learning, and a conscious or unconscious desire for a less "painful" solution or way to achieve results, can lead to "work avoidance."

Countering work avoidance is a powerful leadership skill.

Work avoidance behaviors are sometimes deliberate and protective against the forces of systems change, but sometimes they are unplanned and/or reflexive reactions**.** Keeping this in mind can help leaders identify and address work avoidance without taking a judgmental or blaming stance towards workers who are caught up in it.

To help spot work avoidance, watch for two common forms of it: **Diversion of Attention and Displacement of Responsibility.**[1]

What Diverting Attention Might Look Like:

- Defining the problem to fit current knowledge and expertise – for example, remaining blind to the new learning and practice that may be required.
- Denying the problem exists – for example, being unwilling to use or believe the data that might point the real problem
- Avoiding the conflict – for example, continuously using jokes and humor to avoid conflict or hurt feelings.
- Creating a proxy fight, such as a personality conflict, to avoid addressing the real problem.
- Discounting solutions that threaten legacy behaviors and relationships.
- Offering fake, pretend, or marginal solutions.

What Displacing Responsibility Might Look Like:

- Marginalizing or attacking the person trying to raise the difficult issues.
- Scapegoating someone or externalizing the "enemy" – placing a systems blame solely on a person or a group of people or stakeholders
- Attacking or blaming formal authority – waiting for formal authority to fix the systems problems
- Delegating the hard work to those who can't do anything about it, for example, consultants, committees, and task forces.

While achieving desired results is the primary reason for countering work avoidance, there are two other related factors that are important to consider. First, work avoidance signals

[1] Heifetz, Ronald A.; Linsky, Marty (2002-08-09). Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading. Perseus Books Group.

that a system is on the verge of learning to do something new and/or different, perhaps the very things that are needed to effect the changes required to meet population level results. Work avoidance, in this regard, signals an opportunity is at hand. Second, if work avoidance is not addressed, systems changes will almost certainly be derailed, leading to cynicism and/or hopelessness that anything could be different.

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

By putting results and data back at the heart of the work, leaders are willing to risk relationships, reframe loyalties, and confront their own losses. They are also asking their stakeholders and partners to do the same. With so much at stake, use the framework below to help develop a solid plan for countering work avoidance.

Countering Work Avoidance: A Framework for Leaders' Actions[2]

Leadership Approach	Key Questions
First focus is on self	• *What is the data telling me about achieving the result?* • *What is my contribution to challenges of execution? What are my values, beliefs, attitudes, and/or behaviors that I might have to examine?* • *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?* • *Are my relationships with others resilient enough to address the issues of work avoidance? If not, how do I strengthen them?*
Focus everyone on the population and program level results	• *What result are we trying to accomplish?* • *Based on the data, how well are we doing in achieving the result?*
Provide regular updates on work done thus far	• *What are the work groups or strategy groups doing and accomplishing?* • *Is their work robust enough to meet performance targets? How do we know? What data are we using?*
Follow up on prior commitments	• *Were the previously agreed-upon actions taken? If so, what happened? In what ways did these actions impact the result?* • *Are the actions still important?*

[2] Modified from the work of Behn, Robert D. (2014-06-18). The PerformanceStat Potential: A Leadership Strategy for Producing Results (Brookings / Ash Center Series, "Innovative Governance in the 21st Century")

Leadership Approach	Key Questions
Identify execution challenges and possible causes	• *What isn't working and why? What data are we using to make this assessment?* • *What are "our" individual and collective contributions to these execution challenges?* • *What are the systems conflicts or competing agendas that are contributing to these challenges?* • *What existing policies or procedures are inhibiting execution? What new policies or procedures might be needed to support successful execution?* • *What systems dynamics are contributing to execution challenges?*
Address the "deeper" issues	• *What power dynamics are at play?* • *Who might have to confront losses if the work is successful?* • *What kinds of losses would that be (i.e., resources, relationships, loyalties, power, etc.)?* • *What can be done to address theses losses?*
Track or re-examine population and performance targets	• *Who should achieve what result by when?* • *Are we on track to hit our performance targets?* • *Will these performance targets allow us to hit our population-level targets? If not, why?*
Develop and/or modify strategies	• *What do we need to do differently and why?* • *Who will be aligned with these new efforts and who will be adversarial towards these efforts? Why?*
Identify or re-examine resources	• *What resources do we need to implement, repurpose, or shift for these strategies to be successful?* • *Who will benefit from this? Who will lose?*
Identify what is working and what we are learning	• *What does the data reveal about who is succeeding and about what we are learning about what works?* • *How will we implement what we are learning?* • *What anecdotes can help us understand what is working?*
Establish responsibility and accountability	• *Who should do what by when?* • *Who is not holding responsibility for execution and why?*
Recognize accomplishment	• *Who deserves thanks for significant improvements?* • *What can we learn and apply from these accomplishments?*
Have difficult conversations about accountability	• *Whom should we confront for indifference, incompetence, or sabotage? What data are we using?* • *If needed, how do we ask these stakeholders to leave?* • *What will be the impact?*
Tell results stories	• *What bright spots can be highlighted?* • *How do we use results stories to share our work and to enroll others?*