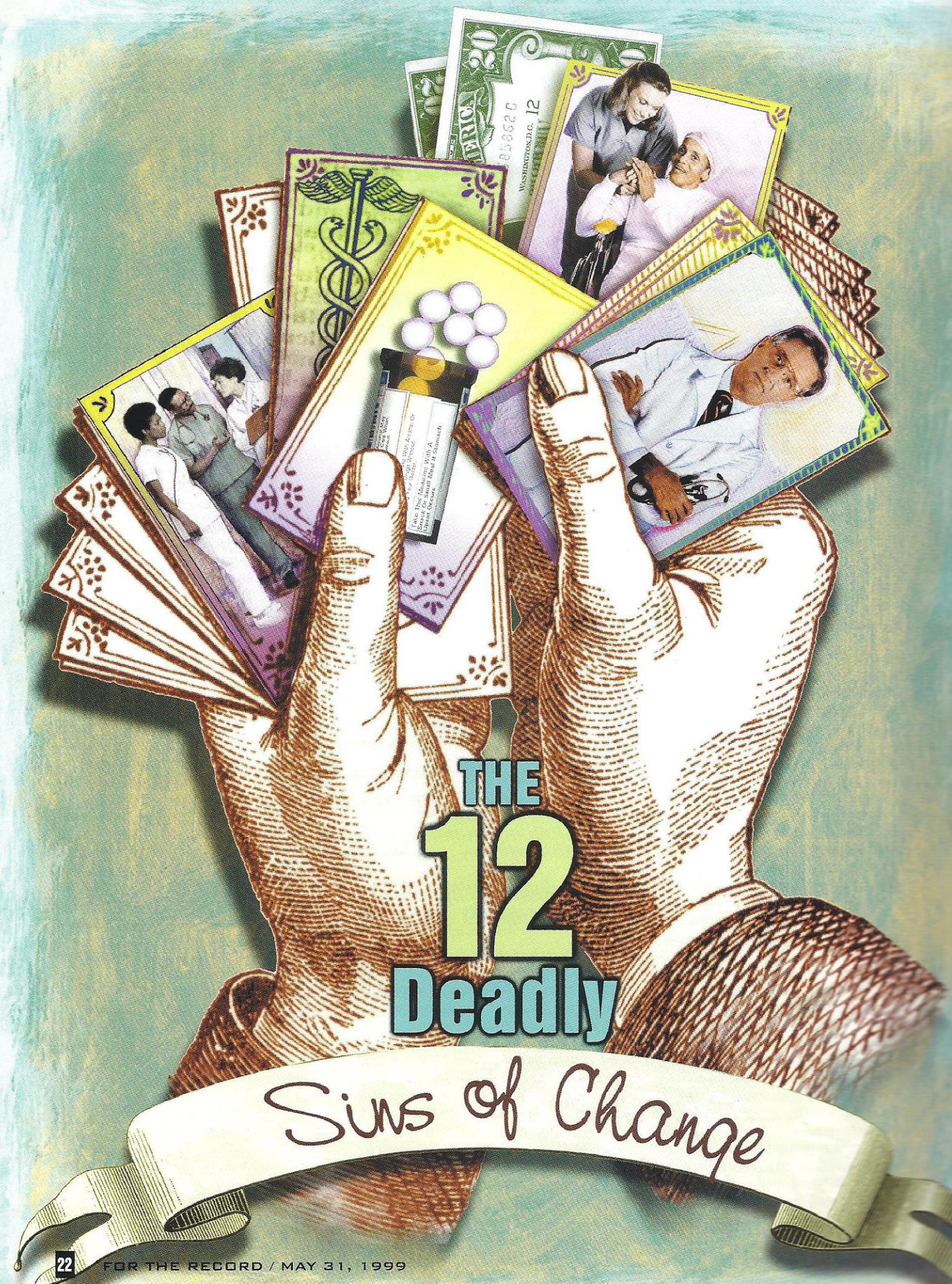

THE 12 Deadly Sins of Change

Only death and taxes, it's been said, are inevitable. As the new millennium approaches and our fast-paced personal and professional lives increase in complexity, change certainly must be added to that short list of inexorable events.

By Marianne Mallon

Despite the allure of a competitive advantage, organizations, like individuals, can become overwhelmed by change.

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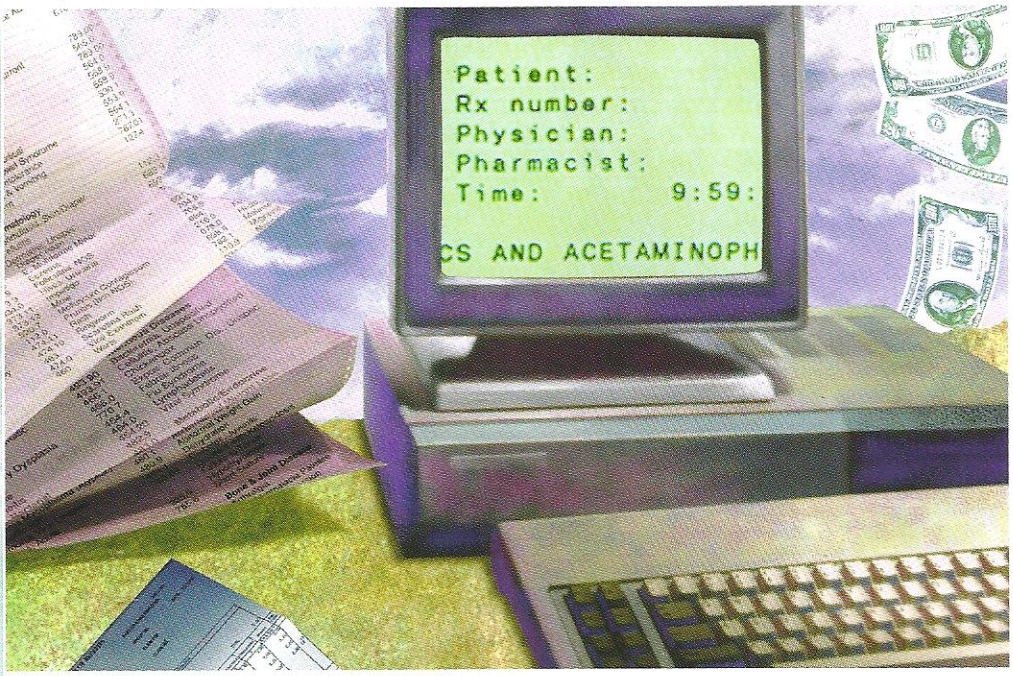
Perhaps nowhere in the corporate world is change more ubiquitous than in healthcare. Patients barely become accustomed to accessing services with their HMOs when they learn that their physician groups, clinics, or hospitals have changed hands. The business of healthcare today is a challenging arena of corporate mergers and acquisitions, new and evolving medical technologies, and mazes of managed care services where change is a constant.

According to Mary V. Gelinas, EdD, and Roger G. James, EdD, there are a dozen major reasons change initiatives fail. Awareness of these common blunders can make change initiatives less painful and improve organizational performance. The founders and principals of Gelinas◆James, Inc., an Oakland, Calif., consulting firm that specializes in customer-focused, collaborative, comprehensive, and user-friendly approaches to individual, group, and organizational change, they have consulted in all areas of business and industry

and have extensive experience in healthcare. Gelinas and James have spent the last 20 years studying, learning, trying to understand, teach, and practice organizational change and have coauthored a book, *Collaborative Change: Improving Organizational Performance*, which documents all of their knowledge on the theory and practice of successful organizational change.

Organizations that are more efficient and effective at knowing how to change, those that have change know-how, have a competitive advantage, says Gelinas.

Despite the allure of a competitive advantage, organizations, like individuals, can become overwhelmed by change. "Demands continue to change and escalate on a daily basis, particularly in healthcare," says James. He describes healthcare as an area where the multiple, immediate, and conflicting demands of patients, families, physicians, and payers can further complicate the change process.



"Healthcare needs are so immediate — you can't close a trauma unit door," cautions Gelinas. "You can't fail to respond when someone is buzzing you. A patient needs your assistance right away. What you're asking people to do is pay attention to the present and the future at the same time in an industry where the present is so compelling and where the needs of health institutions are so immediate."

According to James, through organization-wide involvement and education, organizational change can be implemented in ways that need not be overwhelming or intimidating. People must understand what needs to change, the business case for change, the process through which the change is going to take place, and how they can be involved in that process. This understanding, he explains, allows individuals to feel as if they are agents of change, rather than victims of change. "Getting people involved in a knowledgeable way and using their intelligence and their desire to do well by the organization, making an assumption that they're competent, committed, and involved, makes a tremendous difference in making change not only less frightening, but potentially, a positive."

Gelinas supports the idea of creating an environment where people feel that change is not something that is done to them, but rather with them. Making the change meaningful on an individual, personal level is another helpful tool in the change process. Citing the example of their work with an academic medical center that was implementing a change initiative, she recalls that the center made a concerted effort to help everyone understand how and why every unit of provided care cost more because it was an academic institution. "It really helped people to understand the business of running a hospital, so that they could be a partner with the CEO instead of just being a cog in a wheel," Gelinas explains. "They could look at how their work added to that cost and understand why change was important in terms of their ability to continue to provide service."

In their book, Gelinas and James offer 12 reasons organizational change initiatives often miss the mark.

1 unfocused initiative

The organization must be clear as to what it is trying to achieve. Change initiatives without clear intentions or those that are disconnected from the organization's goals and values will eventually lose the all-important attention of the organization's leaders. James cites this lack of clarity as the most common of the 12 blunders. "Senior leaders of the organization tend not to devote the time, energy, and personal investment to ensure that they are clear about why the change is required, what the focus of the change initiative is, what the goals of the initiative are, what the process is going to be to get there, and what their role is in making sure that the initiative is set up for success and shepherded throughout the effort," says James. Gelinas adds an example from another medical center in which the information systems department needed input and feedback from the physicians to select and modify new software for the implementation of an electronic patient record (EPR). The physicians were disinclined and went into a state of rebellion because the reason for the change initiative was not presented correctly. "It wasn't connected to the larger purpose of where the medical institution was going, how the new electronic records were going to save time and money, how it could potentially make the physician's job easier because they wouldn't have to wait for records across various specialty areas," concludes Gelinas. The change initiative must be connected to the larger overall direction of the organization of which the participants are a part.

2 unfocused organization

The goals of the change initiative are connected to the organization's goals. If the organization's goals lack clarity, it is more difficult for the change initiative to succeed. James reports that many of the healthcare organizations they've been associated with in the last few years have been plagued with incredible turmoil. Staying focused as an organization in today's healthcare climate is an enormous challenge. "The shape of the health system is constantly shifting as they do new mergers and acquisitions," says James. "Their strategic planning process becomes almost impossible to implement because they're reacting to such a shifting market. Particularly in healthcare right now, it's very, very difficult to have the kind of focus that allows you to know which things you need to do first, second, and third."

3 no compelling case for change

No matter how large and complex or small and simple, change initiatives are effective only when connected to a reason for change. If that reason is not explicitly tied to

the organization's goals, it is unlikely to capture people's attention and support and may fail. James recalls the example of an unfocused initiative used by Gelinas to illustrate this blunder as well. "The information systems folks didn't build a compelling case for the physicians," he says. "They didn't present the business consequences of not making the shift [to the EPR]. Gelinas and James have also consulted in the redesign of the access business process of a healthcare facility that succeeded in making a compelling case for change. The organization was having trouble attracting lucrative contracts with payers because it was too difficult to obtain the right kind of patient record that would allow appropriate billing so that the payers didn't have to jump through hoops. The payers were telling the organization it would be passed over for future contracts because of its records management system. The organization had to hear that and build that case before people were willing to look at ways to do it differently."

4 spotty or nonexistent sponsorship

Gelinas and James agree that the lack of sponsorship is the most deadly of the 12 sins. The importance of strong leaders focused on the goals of the change initiative cannot be understated as they provide the necessary personnel and resources and participate in key decision making. Gelinas explains that the leadership team must stay focused on the change initiative until completion, resisting distraction by new developments such as budget shortfalls or market shifts. She adds, "This is deadly in the sense that not only do they not accomplish their original goals, but there's also a sense of betrayal and a decrease in trust by people in the organization. It's going to be much harder the next time for people to trust them that something real is going to happen."

5 staff-driven vs. line-driven

Gelinas and James contend that allowing staff rather than leadership to spearhead a change initiative is a trap that many trainers and consultants (internal and external) fall into. They see this as an important blunder to avoid especially in records management, information systems, and transitioning to the EPR. "It would be easy for the head of information systems to assume it's his or her job to lead the charge," says Gelinas. "However, without the CEO's, the COO's, or the CIO's support, the effort will probably fail."

6 ready, fire, aim

It is critical to take the time to clearly understand the problem and the needs of the organization before undertaking a change initiative. "One of the really insidious parts of American management is that people often get rewarded and promoted because they take quick action, even if it's the wrong action, particularly in organizations where those people are highly prized," explains James. "By the time you find out that what they've done is absolutely the wrong thing, they've already been promoted to a place where they don't have to suffer the consequences. We tend not to value upfront planning as much as just taking action."

7 the allure of the quick fix

Organizations often do not take the time to clearly define the problem before applying quick fixes. These are simple solutions that appear attractive because they can be undertaken quickly and handed off to the staff so that leaders can feel satisfied that at least they've done something. Relying on quick fixes can often result in the 11th blunder — numerous competing initiatives.

8 piecemeal approaches

Because organizations are systems, all of the parts affect the other parts. Piecemeal changes may result in short-term, incremental improvement, but are ultimately ineffective in improving overall performance. Gelinas and James encourage integrated change initiatives that focus on improvement in several areas of the organization resulting in more comprehensive, transformational change. Commenting on information systems change, Gelinas adds, "If change is implemented piecemeal, not only are users driven crazy a year into the process, they might decide they need a whole new platform or a whole new way of thinking about information as opposed to Band-Aiding pieces to fix this, that, and the other thing."

9 unclear process

Only when the members of an organization clearly understand what change is needed and how it will be implemented will they support the change process and its outcomes. In their work with an academic medical center, Gelinas and James literally used a map that helped clarify the process for all involved. It helped them stay focused and allowed other stakeholder groups, particularly the physicians, to know at which junctures they would be involved, thus trusting the process more. Clear process, adds Gelinas, engenders support not only for the change initiative but also for its product.

10 too little involvement

James contends that there is a tendency among organization and technical leadership (information systems managers) to believe that it's much easier to gather a few people with the right information in a room, make a decision, and then implement it. However, if those who are asked to change are not involved in the process, they will not understand or support the initiative. Gelinas and James encourage widespread involvement in the change initiative from a broad spectrum of organization members.

11 numerous competing initiatives

In an effort to achieve or maintain a competitive edge, organizations often undertake multiple change initiatives simultaneously. Gelinas and James admit that this can work but only if the efforts are coordinated, integrated, and leveraged. It is more likely that numerous initiatives will compete for resources and the attention of the organization's leadership, ending in disappointing results. James contends that healthcare does not typically have good cross-functional collaboration. In recent work with a health system, he encountered a situation in which someone in a leadership meeting wondered aloud if anyone had bothered to write down or keep track of all the change initiatives that had been implemented as a result of their meetings. No one had, and it was eventually found that several hundred change initiatives were underway. Recalls James, "Some of them were critically important but many of them were of little or no strategic value. The projects were not prioritized, they

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varied in size and in level of the organization, and they were not tied to business outcomes."

12 little commitment or capability to change

Organizations with little or no experience with successful change initiatives may falter in future attempts if time is not taken early in the process to educate people about change and develop the commitment and capability to implement the initiative. This means making sure that key stakeholders, particularly organizational leaders, are committed to change, says Gelinas. They must explore what it will really mean on a day-to-day basis today, tomorrow, or over the next year in terms of time on their agendas or perhaps learning new skills early in the process. "Because people lead organizations already, they assume they know how to lead and create change but that is not necessarily the case," explains Gelinas. She and James work with several information systems departments to help develop capability in consulting skills because, as they explain, these departments are essentially consultants to the whole organization, not just information systems. "They already have the technical capabilities," says Gelinas. "We help develop their ability to affect user needs, help clarify where the organization is going, and determine what they can be doing in their staff function in information systems to help the organization get there."

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