

2009 ASTD BEST Awards Spotlight:

Implementing SAP Change at Barilla America

Barilla Group, the #1 provider of premium pasta products, has about 11,000 employees worldwide with the majority in Europe and especially Italy. Barilla America has 400 employees in the U.S. Even though it is small in size, the U.S. operations have accounted for over 30% of the overall growth of the company. This has resulted in a 50% increase in U.S. hiring over the last three years.

Barilla America's first steps toward an ASTD BEST Award began in 2007, when Barilla's international leadership group made the decision to implement a new SAP enterprise resource planning technology. The goal was to provide a platform to help manage all of the diverse functions throughout the company, including finance, manufacturing, purchasing, and the customer experience (order to cash). Beginning with operations in Europe, the company successfully implemented the new technology in four major markets. The U.S. market was the fifth and final unit to bring under the new system.

Laura Birk, Director of Corporate Learning and Talent Development at Barilla America, was tapped for a major role within the initiative. While Birk's normal role is focused on OD, training, and team effectiveness, she found herself with a new responsibility for overall change management, communication, and training.

Birk surprised senior leadership by suggesting that the company take a second look at the way that change management would be addressed with the U.S. implementation. Even though the company had successfully launched the new SAP software in Europe, she felt that some specific strategic changes could be made to ensure successful implementation in the U.S.

Senior leadership was skeptical. After all, the company had already successfully implemented the software in four other countries. Was it really necessary to relook at doing change management, communication, or training in a different way this time?

Birk believed so. Knowing that even under the best of circumstances an SAP implementation can be painful and difficult on an organization. Birk knew that she wanted to manage change—instead of change resistance—and so she felt it was necessary to involve employees at all levels as opposed to a more traditional top-down approach.

It would be a change approach that wouldn't require doing a lot of sophisticated things, but it would require doing some simple things really well and sticking with them.

To accomplish that, Barilla America created a change track to complement the finance track, manufacturing track, purchasing track, and customer experience track usually found in an SAP implementation. They put people resources on a change team in the same way that they would put people resources on the finance track team. That had never been done before.

Pulling people from all across the organization—including probable resisters as well as technology advocates—Birk convened a group that met every other week throughout the change initiative, just like the other tracks who were documenting the business processes.

As Birk recalls, “We sat in a room and I had a very simple agenda where I would call out, ‘What’s worked well last week?’ ‘What have we bumped up against?’ ‘What’s coming up in the next couple of weeks that we are not thinking about and how can we mitigate against any change concerns?’”

Birk recalls with a smile how people would come in every two weeks and they would look at her and ask, “Really, we’re going to talk about this again?” “And I would say, ‘Yes, let’s run through it.’ It took awhile, but in the end we got really good at it.”

The other change that Birk implemented was building a team of outside experts to complement the internal people working on the change.

For the technical training, that meant bringing in an outside resource. As Birk explains:

“In the other countries we had used internal business people to facilitate the technical training. I thought it would be better to have the technical training done by an expert who knew how to deliver from an instructional design perspective. That was met with a lot of resistance at first, but participants saw better documentation, better technical troubleshooting, and they also got a perspective from outside the walls of Barilla. We still relied on the business leaders in the room to address the business process and the rationale behind making the change, but they didn’t have to learn the intricacies of the technical training.”

For change management, Birk chose The Ken Blanchard Companies® and Root Learning to partner with. The challenge for Birk was bringing the two providers together to create a seamless experience for her customers—the employees at Barilla. Birk insisted that the providers work together to get the job done. That meant communicating clearly what a good job looked like and then making sure that each vendor lived up to those expectations. It helped with easing the transition to the new system.

As Birk describes the process, “You set high expectations for the different vendors that you bring in and then make sure that they work together effectively for the benefit of the organization. The customer doesn’t care if you’re from Blanchard, or from Root, or from wherever. All they know is that they’re being asked to take time away from what they normally do. I asked the different providers to get together. Not all suppliers can do that.”

In looking back on what made the change initiative so successful, Birk credits a couple of strategies.

Involve Everyone

The first strategy, according to Birk, is to include everyone in the process and listen to their concerns.

“Some of the people being asked to change had been with Barilla since the beginning. And they had built this business on Excel spreadsheets. So to tell them that we were going to a different way, some of them said, ‘Why are we losing some of our knowledge and some of our competence to go this global way?’ It wasn’t an easy sell.

“But I told them, ‘In order for us to be successful I need you. I know you have a day job, but everyone is contributing to this strategic priority and this is where I need your help. You know your team much better than I do and you can be their voice and make sure that corporately we are hearing people’s voices at the front line.

“I can’t think of everything and I need your help. If there is something more that we should be doing, something less than we should be doing, or something different, you guys are really the engine behind whether this thing will go well or not.”

Be Very Clear on Your Strategy

The second key, according to Birk, is to be very clear on your strategy. In Birk’s case that strategy was high touch, low technology. “Touch them” many times face-to-face with communication and with change and with training. Don’t try to do anything fancy with bells and whistles.

“I explained to people, ‘We know that the technology is going in. It’s already been put in four other places and it is going to be put it in here. But what we get on the backend is up to us. We have a voice—let’s be smart, thoughtful, and be anticipating what people are going to be thinking and feeling.’”

Stick with Your Strategy

Birk’s third piece of advice is to stick to the strategy. “Obviously, you can make adjustments, but overall it is important to stick with your plan. There were so many times we could’ve said, ‘Let’s just get it done—we are too busy to worry about change.’ I think that there would have been many times when it would have been very easy to say, ‘Forget about it, let’s just skip over this, and we’ll recover next week.’ You have to have a good plan and then you have to execute your plan.

The Power of Looking Ahead

Finally, Birk recommends being very optimistic. “You have to have somebody who knows that you’re going to come out on the other end for the better and who is constantly saying that. I think optimism goes a long way in knowing that you can get through it and really be successful.

“We had our “go-live” celebration in July and we did some recognition and reward internally for people who have been giving two years of time to this project. When it was over, it was kind of, ‘Is that it?’ There were no customer disruptions, the lights stayed on, we were still making pasta.

“My biggest challenge now is maintaining the change momentum while still allowing people to catch their breath. We spent two years documenting our business process, identifying gaps, and discussing improvements. We’ve implemented the technology, but there were so many things outside the scope of the SAP implementation that probably should be looked at. And getting people to think about continuous improvement after this big push is a challenge because people want to get back to normalcy. My hope is that normalcy is continuous improvement versus complacency.

“It’s not so much the next big initiative but it is how do we have a mind-set among all departments and functions to always be looking to make things better? If we can just keep that mind-set in place, we will be better equipped to handle the growth, the innovation, and we will be better equipped for the future.”



Global Headquarters

125 State Place

Escondido, CA 92029 USA

From anywhere: +1 760 489-5005

Within the US: 800 728-6000

Fax: 760 489-8407

For a list of our offices worldwide, visit

www.kenblanchard.com