Change Management

The Case for Change

The Challenge of Change

WHEN TO CHANGE

Basically, an organization can institute change when things are going well, when results are mixed, or when a full-fledged crisis is upon it.

An organization can anticipate pressures down the road. Considering making changes proactively can be partly a matter of foresight and preparation, but it also can entail the belief that if the organization is not routinely changing itself, it risks complacency and stagnation.

An organization can encounter a problem, not necessarily life-threatening but one deserving attention, and, thus, feel the need to introduce change. It might, for example, consider a reorganization in response to a competitor's new product introduction; it might consider creating a quality program after receiving disturbing customer feedback about its own product or service quality. Alternatively, an organization faced with a definite threat—alarmingly deteriorating results, the withdrawal of a major account—most probably will institute change, acutely recognizing the need to do so.

Given these general “times” for introducing change, one might assume that the process is easier when the organization is in crisis: The situation is clear to all, survival is on the line; everyone recognizes that the way things have been done won’t work anymore.

But the very fact of the crisis suggests that at best there has been inattentiveness to its origins; there may be deep organizational problems that deter introducing changes to confront the situation.

Thus, one might say, changes really should be made in anticipation of difficulties. But, paradoxically, making changes before “the event” is equally difficult—how can an organization be **energized** to make changes when the need for them is not universally perceived?

Some argue that one way around this paradox is to manufacture a sense of crisis, rather than wait for the real one to appear. This crafting of urgency presumably creates a responsiveness to change while not placing the organization at risk.

The danger of this approach, of course, is in crying wolf. Claim too many times that survival is at stake, and the organization will greet you with “This, too, shall pass.”

When to change, therefore, involves an exquisite sense of timing: Have we waited too long or have we started too soon? The challenge is to choose the time when the organization both should make changes and can do so. However, those two dimensions don’t always come together—hence, the challenge.

ENABLING CHANGE

Beyond the issues of what kind of change is needed and when it should be introduced, an organization needs to consider how to enable the change to be effective. This is not strictly an implementation matter; rather, it involves yet another group of strategic choices to be contemplated before actual (tactical) implementation occurs.

The first enabling issue is pace. How long will it take to design the change plan/ program? How quickly should the change unfold? How much accommodation should be made for trial-and-error learning? Is it easier for the organization if the change is introduced quickly or over a longer period? How much time does the organization have, given customer needs, competitive demands, or changes in the environment (i.e., the forces that are driving the change in the first place)?

Related to pace is scope. Obviously, this issue stems in large measure from the vision of what change is needed, but there are still choices to be made. Should the change start small and grow, or should it start big? If it is to be piloted—where and with whom? Should the pilot run in an area “loaded for success”? Where is the best climate for experimentation? Where is it more generalizable to the rest of the organization?

If the decision is to start big, issues of depth arise. How many changes can be introduced in any one area?

Remember, there is probably a limit to how much change can be absorbed before resistance is mobilized—actively or, possibly, passively and negatively.

And related to scope is publicity: How loud, how long, and to whom should the organization announce change is on the way? There is, on one hand, the hype approach. Out come the speeches, the binders, the newsletters, the banners/buttons/T-shirts. The rationale is that to enable an organization to change there must be many clear reinforcements and motivational cues: everybody has to be excited and committed at the outset.

On the other hand, of course, this approach raises expectations (which may be too high already) and makes the change highly visible and, thus, a target for snipers and naysayers (and legitimate critics as well). Little room for flexible adjustments of the change plan may be left.

Thus, there is an argument for a quiet, understated introduction, which controls resistance, allows for mistakes in learning, and moderates expectations. In either approach the issue is publicity, not communication, which is essential, although the degree of explicit information and to whom it is given may vary.

Another enabling change issue is supporting structures. What mechanisms does an organization have, or put in place, to further the change effort? Decisions here clearly are linked to pace and scope; but regardless of choices in those areas, some care and nurturing of the change will be needed. How much should be done through normal management processes and how much should be specially created?

The final enabling issue is deciding who drives the change. The classic approach has a senior staff person or a CEO develop a vision, which in turn is endorsed by top management, and then assigned to middle management to implement. Clearly, this approach depends on gaining top management commitment, but it underplays the need for middle- or bottom-level ownership.

A second classic approach is the reverse: The need for change is initiated and proposed from deep down in the organization and implemented upward and outward.

A third approach uses an outside consultant as an implementer/facilitator. Many variations and combinations of these are possible.

REACTIONS TO CHANGE

Perhaps the greatest challenge of all comes with the awareness that managing change includes managing the reactions to that change. Unfortunately, change frequently is introduced without considering its psychological effect on others in the organization—particularly those who have not been part of the decision to make the change: those who arrive on Sunday to learn "from now on, it's all different." It seems fair to state, however, that, if the reactions to change are not anticipated—and managed—the change process will be needlessly painful and perhaps unsuccessful.

Traditionally grouped under resistance to change are inertia, habit, and comfort with the known. For most people, change isn't actively sought; some level of routine is preferred. But routine is preferred because it enables some control. Given that change, at its beginnings at least, involves some ambiguity if not outright confusion, this control is threatened. That is, resistance is frequently a reaction to a loss of control, not necessarily to the change itself. The further away a person is from knowing the rationale for the change and the implications of the change and how the change is to be operationalized, the greater the threat to that person's control over his or her environment.

Other forces also may serve to dampen change. Collective interests in preserving the status quo can emerge to mobilize political roadblocks, and a conservative culture— often one built on years of success—may prevent an organization from appreciating the gravity of a problem, the up side of an opportunity, and the creative boldness of a major change.

Finally, people are simply more alert to change than they used to be. Given “stream- lining,” “downsizing,” and “restructuring”—all euphemisms for layoffs (itself a euphemism for being fired)—people are more wary of change because of its possible adverse consequences.

For all these reasons, employees at all levels in organizations psychologically defend against change, and reactions can be both more hostile and less predictable than the phrase “resistance to change” might imply.

What Are the anxieties that might come with ‘change’?

1- Fear of temporary incompetence: the conscious appreciation of one’s lack of
competence to deal with the new situation;

2- Fear of punishment for incompetence: the apprehension that we will somehow lose out or be punished when this incompetence is discovered or assessed;

3- Fear of loss of personal identity: the inner turmoil when our habitual ways of thinking and feeling are no longer required, or when our sense of self is defined
by a role or position that is no longer recognized by the organization;

4- Fear of loss of group membership: In the same way, that our identity can be defined by our role, for some it can be profoundly affected by the network of affiliations we have in the workplace. In the same way that the stable equilibrium of a team or group membership can foster states of health, instability caused by shifting team roles or the disintegration of a particular group can have an extremely disturbing effect.

What gets in the way of change is resistance to change, but leaders and managers of change actually cannot understand why individuals and groups of individuals do not wholeheartedly embrace changes that are being introduced, and often label this as ‘resistance to change’.

So how should we overcome employees resistance?

- Through healthy communication, explain to employees the reason for change.

- Clarify the implications of this change (or no change).

- Solicit questions and address all questions in order to reduce employees'' ambiguities.

- Involve employees in decision making, from the early stages in order to make them feel part of the process and not alienated.

- Train them if necessary in case they need to acquire new skills to carryout the change.

- Always keep motivating employees.