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Week 1: Assignment: My Autobiography of Organizational Change

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Kurt Lewin, by many people, is considered the father of Organizational Development. The field pioneered has grown and expanded, but at its core, it is implementing experience gained through scientific testing. The willingness to update and search for new ideas has given us OD as it stands today and will continue to improve. As I look back on my own experiences and, sadly, some failures. I have used methods inside of OD in my career and personal life to make positive changes.

It is important to identify a problem and then seek resolution. In the field that I am in, there will often be issues with paperwork or software that assists in completing paperwork. In the past, we would use carbon copies, which led to issues with research as nearly all people didn’t write hard enough to make it through all four copies. That problem, in particular, isn’t a great concern, but that we identify problems and use tools to fix them.

In this paper, I want to reflect on my experiences with organizational change and how we used Organizational Development features to correct for failures or support positive change. While I naturally do not like change, I have seen on several occasions the benefit of accepting change that is needed for organizations to have positive impacts and increase customer satisfaction. While the changes I have been part of were not company-wide changes, they still affected employees and customers.

In the aerospace industry we move so fast that most of us will be set in one mode of thinking. When it comes to OD practices, it gives us a chance to slow down and take a deep dive into what we are doing right and what we are doing wrong. We can all benefit when we know that we are not perfect but are reaching toward the goal of perfection. The way we usually understand it in my career is that we are not here for ourselves but for the pilots. Everything counts, and we can’t let our pride move between us and a product that will allow pilots to have the best training possible.

I was twenty-two when I was first introduced to what we could call OD. The problem that we were having was inefficiencies in the speed of aircraft repair. We had procedures in place for tools and equipment sign-offs, but we had nothing for administrative controls. It was around the time that the use of desktops and the internet were taking off. We knew, much like Xerox, that physical paperwork was dying and needed to be replaced. We used the current paperwork to build applications that everyone could use to create and sign off paperwork.

Controls were added to ensure supervisors had to sign off their sections, and quality control had to sign off their sections. This led to a higher quality product in that after repair, the rework times went down, meaning aircraft were in the air longer with little need for maintenance. Then, we went overboard and added too many inefficiencies. Things that looked good on paper but had no practical use, such as taping off where a keyboard and mouse should be positioned on a desk.

According to Zentis (2024), "The Action Research Model is known as OD’s change management process. It involves a systematic and cyclical approach to planned change." From this experience, I was able to understand that we can make positive changes, but there is a chance of going too far and creating problems for everyone. The latter controls were abandoned shortly after they were implemented. No one in mantenance thought putting ESD tap on the end of a cable was a good idea; it seemed like these changes were concocted without any input from experienced professionals.

In the Lewin model of unfreeze, change and refreeze you find that the “Change stage involves implementing the desired changes and transitioning from the old way of doing things to the new way.” (Fripp, n.d.) While shifting from contract to contract we found that our process needed to be updated. On one hand we had process we were not allowed to use and others that were so out of date we couldn’t use them anymore.

The first point was changing from a non-union to a union shop. Many unwritten procedures needed to be abandoned, such as performance reviews for other metrics do to the bylaws of the union contract. In the past, it was noticed that only certain people were getting promoted, and it was often thought that these people did not hold up to the standards of the position that they were given. By removing performance reviews, these promotions were forced to be more open, and more people were given a chance to apply and interview for promotions.

One thing that had to be done away with that I miss was technicians being a part of modifications. The benefit was that you would learn more as the modification went on as you had your hands all over the aircraft. The problem is that while the company gets paid for your presence, you don’t officially get paid for that work. Normally on other sites, you would need a college-educated hardware engineer; at our site, a high school-educated technician could do the same work but not be paid as an engineer. After some spots fell out, they were taken away from the technicians.

One thing we never implemented that I wish I could talk more people into doing is keeping an I love me log. You forget how much you do throughout the year, so when it comes time for promotion, it is hard to talk to your strengths. We did switch to an agile production method. In the past, we used the waterfall method, which works for rockets going into space that you will never see again and has to work the first time every time, but for our environment, it dragged down production and limited enhancements we could make.

The decision was made to switch to the agile method, which ramped up managers' monitoring to ensure we could meet customer expectations. It also gave the customer more room to pivot from one important area to another without spending money on a new crew to create a new implementation. The framework was already there and would only need to be included in the production cycle. Through this, we found a way to please the customer and maintain the budget.

My approach to organizational change is to first identify if a change needs to exist. In the past, I would rely on others heavily. Before the implementation phase, you have to bring your people on board and beat your plan to death. In the service, we would say, “Make it Marine-proof.” Everyone should understand what is going on. I admit that you can’t always make this happen, but if you are changing several people's lives, you owe it to them to have a voice in that change.

Recently, we have been dedicating some hours to creating manuals to improve our lives later on. These manuals come in handy when you are sent to Japan and have nothing but your brain and what you bring with you to rely on. After one person creates a manual, it makes its rounds to allow everyone to make changes. On occasion, we have meetings to discuss better ways to write these manuals, but in the end, one person will take the lead. I am looking forward to the next promotion, where I can finally make changes to training. I find holes in people's knowledge and want them to have an opportunity to make positive changes to their careers.

I always felt people should be proactive in their own education, but as I get older, I can see how people are left behind. You assume they know certain things, but in reality, they never had the opportunity. If I had a strength as an OD practitioner, it would be that I am open to listening to people, but I am not afraid to make a decision in certain areas. I don’t always let upper management know of these concerns, which is a failure that I need to work on.

Creating small-scale change seems easy, but when you are talking about major changes and have trouble expressing your opinions, it can be a problem. We just had an issue where two people were in violent agreement with one another. Sometimes, it can be difficult to express yourself, and that is another area I should look at improving.

I want to see people succeed, and my thoughts are that training is the way to get that. The more you know, the more choices you have to make to move forward in this world. In the world of OD you are looking at your past and using tools to make positive changes. I can’t say I have a full grasp of what OD is, as several articles have said, the field is evolving.

Growth is what I want to strive for, for myself and for others. In the Marine Corps, one leadership principle was to “Know your Marines and look out for their welfare.” We should all be looking toward the future, where we can make positive changes in our lives and the lives of others. You should continue to grow into a better version of yourself. OD can make this possible not just for your company but for yourself as well.

References:

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