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# Leading organizational change

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## Abstract

Discusses the shift in focus of change management from change itself to the people facing change and the impact on the most powerful drivers of work behaviour: purpose, identity and mastery. Observes that leaders need to align these behaviours with organizational change by explaining the who, what, where, why and how of the change. Describes the change management cycle: understand the current situation, develop a change plan, enlist others to develop critical mass and track and stabilize results. Presents the "TRY" (test, recalibrate, yes) model to help change leaders' resistance to change and lists what is needed in leaders to increase their ability to manage organizational change effectively.

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One should expect resistance with any great change. It shakes the very foundation of privilege (Lucretia Mott).

Never give up. Never, never, never, never give up (Winston Churchill).

Change management is the process of continually renewing an organization's direction, structure, and capabilities to serve the ever-changing needs of external and internal customers. Mastering strategies for managing change is more important today since the rate of change is greater than at any time in history. The marketplace is changing overnight. Organizational alliances and structures are shifting rapidly. Everything in the organization is open to scrutiny. Basic operating assumptions are questioned. Traditions are challenged. The risk of failure is greater than ever before and the tension within the workforce is great and needs constant attention.

## Change management is not about managing change!

The purpose of this article is to change your thinking about managing change, to shift your focus from change to the people facing change. Managing change is about managing people, which is fortunately something we know a great deal about (though we do not always apply what we know!). Managing change draws on our knowledge of human motivation, groups and leadership.

When thinking about managing people who are facing change, it is well to remember that change strikes at the heart of the three most powerful drivers of work behavior:

- (1) purpose;
- (2) identity; and
- (3) mastery.

Change management is really about managing (either well or poorly) the impact of some particular environmental and/or organizational change on these core activators of workplace performance.

## Purpose

People are goal-oriented. We are "pulled" along by our sense of purpose, desire, value. To the degree that change violates a person's sense of purpose, they will "resist" that change. If change is aligned with a person's sense of purpose, they will engage in a positive

fashion. When considering change in your organization, ask yourself “Why do people come here to work each day? Will this change violate or conform to that purpose(s)?” Develop a “purpose map” of your workforce; this will allow you to conduct an assessment of your employees’ major reasons for showing up every day and doing their best work. Open up a dialogue about the impact of necessary change and how to align a planned system change with the individual purpose(s) revealed in your assessment.

We have found that people want this dialogue, since they will then have an opportunity to express their fears and hopes and to put their imprint on the proposed changes. It is management that usually avoids the dialogue because they fear that they will initially encounter a hostile reaction (and they will!). Management also shuns this dialogue since they must publicly state that they are the champion of this change, are committed to making it happen, and will personally lead the change. Management fears putting itself on record as the leader of change. What if it fails? Whom will we blame?

### Identity

People need a sense of personal integrity and consistency over time. Change that strikes at the core of a person’s sense of who they are will activate powerful motivations to return things to the status quo. This demand for personal consistency is one of the major forces working against the implementation and stabilization of organization change. When facing significant internal or external pressure for change, first ask every player and group “Who are you? What are the core attributes of your professional identity here?” Open up dialogue about the impact of change on identity and means to align the two to the greatest possible degree. To effectively compete with the need for personal consistency requires management to develop a very compelling reason for change that can be understood and largely accepted throughout the organization.

### Mastery

Survival depends on one’s ability to manage oneself and the environment effectively. To the degree that change threatens a person’s sense of mastery, it will be perceived as a threat to survival and a declaration of war will be enacted in both houses of congress! We are

talking here about skills, abilities, knowledge, etc., so training and education professionals and departments should take notice. When change is on the horizon, open up dialogue about its impact on professional mastery. Analyze the skill gaps that will always be created by change, and move rapidly to create targeted learning opportunities to close them in time to prevent a sense of organizational helplessness. The organization must plan upfront to commit the needed resources to ensure that those impacted by the proposed change have a safety net of training and skills development available to them.

The following sections will offer ideas, tools and strategies for those individuals at the helm during the storms of change.

## Observations about change

From our research and experience with organizations that have launched successful change initiatives, we have made the following observations about change:

- (1) *Change is nonlinear; there is often no clearly defined beginning or end.* Change consists of a series of closer and closer approximations to increasingly ambitious goals which are embraced by more and more people in the organization. For this reason change can seem confusing and endless. Often, those involved in the change process feel as though there is no light at the end of the tunnel.
- (2) *Effective change interweaves multiple improvement efforts.* We believe organizational improvement includes: increasing the focus on the customer, improving and managing work processes, and strengthening employee involvement. Success with one type of improvement often triggers the need for other types. Stalled-out change efforts can indicate not failure but rather the need to initiate or jump-start a change effort in another area. We understand today that there is no one right answer but that multiple efforts are required to achieve the change organization’s desire to make them competitive in the future.
- (3) *Change is top-down and bottom-up.* Change must be top-down to provide vision and create structure, and bottom-up to encourage participation and generate support. Ultimately, leading change is a

shared responsibility of everyone in an organization, from top to bottom. If the whole organization is not on board with the change effort, it will fail. The whole organization must be pulling in the same direction to achieve the change initiative goals it has set.

- (4) *Organizational change has an important personal dimension.* The more profound the organizational change, the more important it is to create opportunities for people to reexamine and adjust their own values and beliefs. Unless people can integrate change on a personal level, they cannot sustain it organizationally.
- (5) *Measurement is key to successful and sustainable change.* The more an organization's goals can be quantified and progress toward these goals linked to individual performance, the more successful and long-lasting change is likely to be.

### Observations for leading change

Change leaders today are struggling to align their organization with the current environment, ensuring stability to give employees a feeling of security and at the same time promoting change to prepare for tomorrow's environment. This leadership paradox is shown in Figure 1. Change leaders have the difficult task of promoting change when employees are seeking a sense of stability. Employees would like to have a period of time when the organization is "at rest" so they can assess where they are relative to the change. Unfortunately, the external environment is not stopping for a breather. It just keeps on changing.

The job of a change leader in an organization is to challenge people to align

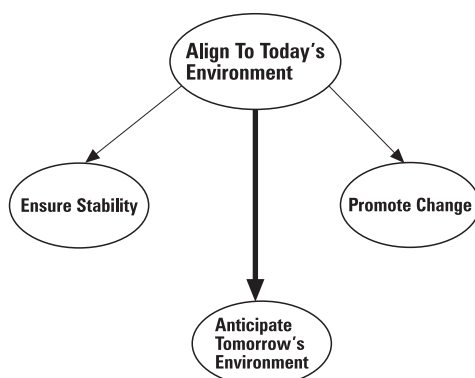
their purpose, identity and mastery with necessary organization change. This type of critical questioning can only take place in a safe environment. Change leaders help create this safe environment for this type of critical questioning to take place. They encourage people to collaborate, take risks, take responsibility and be accountable for the change process the organization must continually undergo to maintain a leadership position in its industry.

### Effective change leaders

We have found that the people who most effectively help people and organizations to manage change share a number of common characteristics:

- They frame the change in terms of results for the organization as a whole as well as the effect on the individual. They challenge others to align themselves with the new organizational change and provide the necessary resources.
- They foster and create an atmosphere that enables people to test the new change, generate recommendations, experiment with new ways of operating, and exhibit some dysfunctional behavior while the change is taking root in the culture.
- They lead the change effort with every word and action. They are the role models for the organization. Change leaders have the responsibility to establish compelling and legitimate business reasons for change, and at the same time to identify and overcome potential sources of resistance. Niccolò Machiavelli observed long ago that "Whosoever desires constant success must change his conduct with the times."
- They display a constant dedication to making change a reality. They focus on results, on success, analyze failure to determine why it occurred, and constantly encourage others to try again.
- They interact with individuals and groups in the organization to explain the who, what, when, where, why, and how of the change. Change leaders utilize every opportunity to interact with others to legitimize necessary change and to encourage challenges and answer questions. They realize that people are

Figure 1 Leadership paradox



skeptical; while some are early adopters of change, others need much convincing. They realize that there is a gap between their understanding of the change and the rest of the organization, as shown in Figure 2. They use every communication vehicle available to help close that gap.

## The change cycle

Every change initiative in an organization sets in motion a cycle of resisting change, recognizing the need for change, agreement as to the type of change required, and finally development of implementation strategies. As leaders we are often reluctant initially to admit that a change is needed. Change is very costly! We seek to convince ourselves that if we just stick to the current plan we will weather the storm. As the storm grows worse and the roof starts to leak we start to admit that a change may be needed.

After this admission stage has been passed we start a process to get others to recognize that a change is needed. We build support for a new direction. Then we begin the search for strategies and solutions.

The executive group goes through this cycle first, and then layer by layer the rest of the organization follows. The first ones through this cycle become impatient with the rest of the organization as it necessarily goes through its own deny, admit, agree, and solve cycle. We tend to forget our own reactions. We become more and more impatient and then try to speed up the process. People feel we are trying to push or sell them a concept they have yet to fully understand or feel a need to embrace. If leaders try to push past the organization's limits to change of purpose,

identity or mastery, they do so at their own and the organization's peril.

Change leaders must create an environment where people involved in the change process can open themselves up to new ideas and concepts, challenge old assumptions, adopt new assumptions, and overcome their hostility and resistance to change. Change leaders must provide tools, techniques, and laboratory settings to allow people to synthesize new concepts and align themselves to the new way (and vice versa!).

Change leaders recognize that they are always trying to balance stability and change. It is a delicate balance to accomplish since employees desire order and stability, while organizations must be ready to adapt to changing conditions quickly. Figure 3 shows the balancing point a leader needs to strive for to have a mixture of order and chaos.

## The change management cycle

Change is a cyclical process. To really implement change effectively, you need to be doing several things at the same time – always with an eye on balancing order and chaos. Change management cycles repeatedly go through the following phases:

- (1) understand the current situation;
- (2) determine the desired state and develop a change plan;
- (3) enlist others and develop a critical mass; and
- (4) track and stabilize results.

Figure 4 presents these phases graphically.

### 1. Understand the current situation

As a change leader, you need to see the big picture. Make sure your change effort is aligned with your organization's strategic business objectives. See the change in the context of what is happening in the environment, whether it is new competitors, changing customer demands, emerging

Figure 3 The balancing point between order and chaos

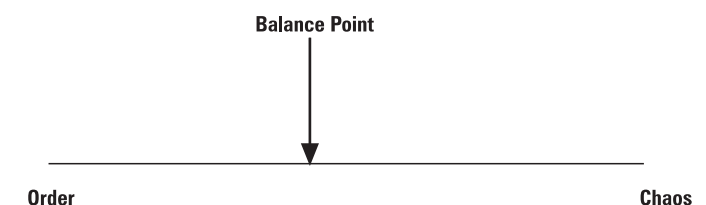
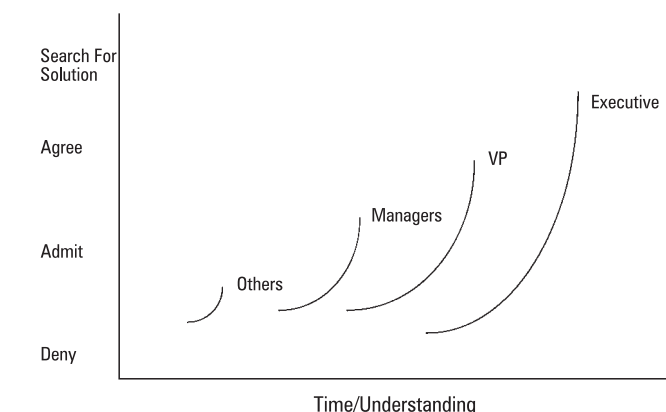
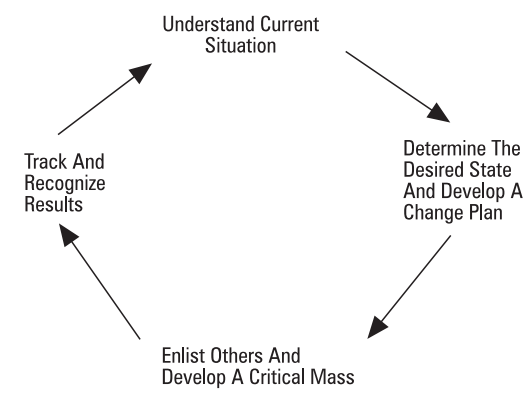


Figure 2 Change cycle gap



**Figure 4** The phases of change



technologies, or trends in government or the economy. Understand in great detail how these external conditions will impact your organization; your environment assessment will be your most powerful rationale for organization change.

A change leader needs to see the current situation not only from a “global perspective”, but also from the local level as well. Getting out and talking to people – to the stakeholders – is critical for developing a thorough understanding of both the people and the processes involved in change. You need to hear their take on what is not working well and what needs to change. Develop an appreciation for their viewpoints and an understanding of why they see things the way they do.

Finally, understanding the current situation includes understanding your own feelings about being a change leader. Understanding the level of your own commitment – especially if the change initiative did not originate with you – is crucial. Get a clear idea of who (both inside and outside of the organization) will be supporting the change and who and what will be resisting the change. Before you put yourself in the middle of what could turn out to be a difficult situation, you need to take stock of your own priorities and commitments.

## **2. Determine the desired state and develop a change plan**

Drawing upon what you have learned from talking to others and from looking at the big picture, start developing a coherent plan. Because there is usually some disagreement on what exactly the change should look like, you as change leader will probably have to analyze and synthesize many different

perspectives and come up with a tangible goal with broad appeal.

Present that vision in clear, concrete terms that everyone can understand. As you describe the change to others, help them understand how it will affect them. Listen to the words others use to describe the change and try to adjust the specifics of change to be most meaningful and acceptable to their sense of purpose, identity and mastery. There are many roads to Rome; take the best one!

Just as important, you must lay out a practical, step-by-step plan for accomplishing the change. You must show what will be accomplished with each step and how results will be measured. This will not only enhance the perception that your proposed change is a real possibility; it will justify the use of scarce resources to effect the change.

## **3. Enlist others and develop a critical mass**

Implementing wide-reaching organizational change requires a wide range of communication skills and a depth of knowledge which no one individual can possess. You need the active help and support of others. Implementing a change always involves a trial period. Usually you have to try different approaches and strategies before you start getting results. During this phase, you need people who are willing to experiment with new ideas and techniques and are not discouraged by initial failures.

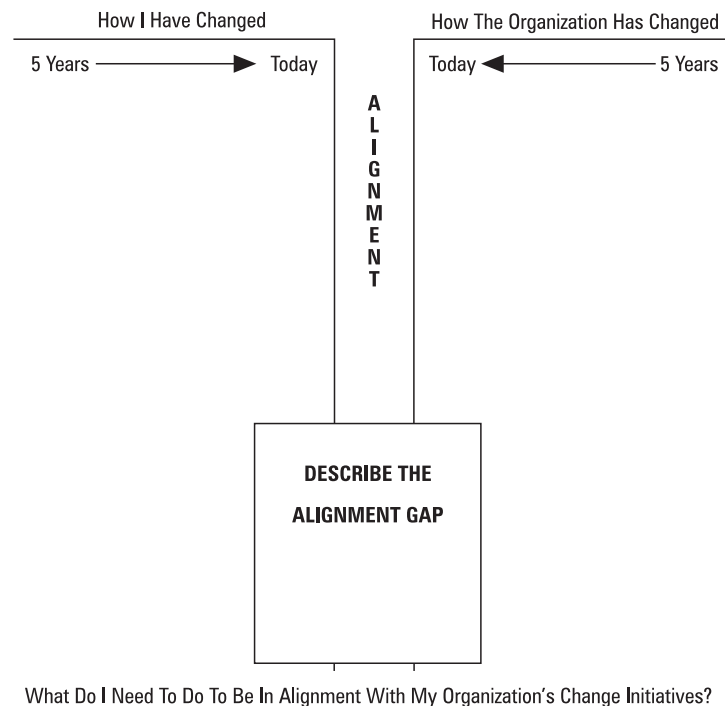
Even if you could implement the change by yourself, you would need the help of others in sustaining that change. The old ways of doing things have a way of creeping back into practice if the change does not enjoy a broad base of support. As a change leader, you must continually involve more and more people along the way. In this way you build momentum until “critical mass” is achieved. Figure 5 shows a tool that a change leader can use to focus others in understanding how their personal state and the changing state of the organization are either in or out of alignment. Understanding the degree of alignment with a proposed change helps individuals focus on the areas needing discussion and adjustment rather than simply intensifying the resistance.

## **4. Track and stabilize results**

To track and stabilize change, leaders should create specific performance targets and



**Figure 5** Checking your alignment with the organization's change



measures. Giving people specific results to shoot for serves a number of purposes:

- (1) It helps to make change more tangible in terms of both individual performance and organizational performance. Providing tangible goals increases motivation.
- (2) Tracking results also gives everyone a sense of progress and offers opportunities to celebrate as each milestone is reached.
- (3) By imposing specific performance requirements, it encourages individuals who would otherwise resist the change to adapt quickly.
- (4) Measuring results tends to sustain the change once it is in place and the organization's attention is focused elsewhere.

### Involving people in TRYing change

Change management, to be successful in any organization, requires a metamorphosis in our concepts of leadership, management, employee involvement, organization of work, and resource utilization. If change managers could get people positively involved in the change process, and channel the energy they expend resisting change into experimenting with it, they would move much faster in the adoption of new behaviors and ways of working together.

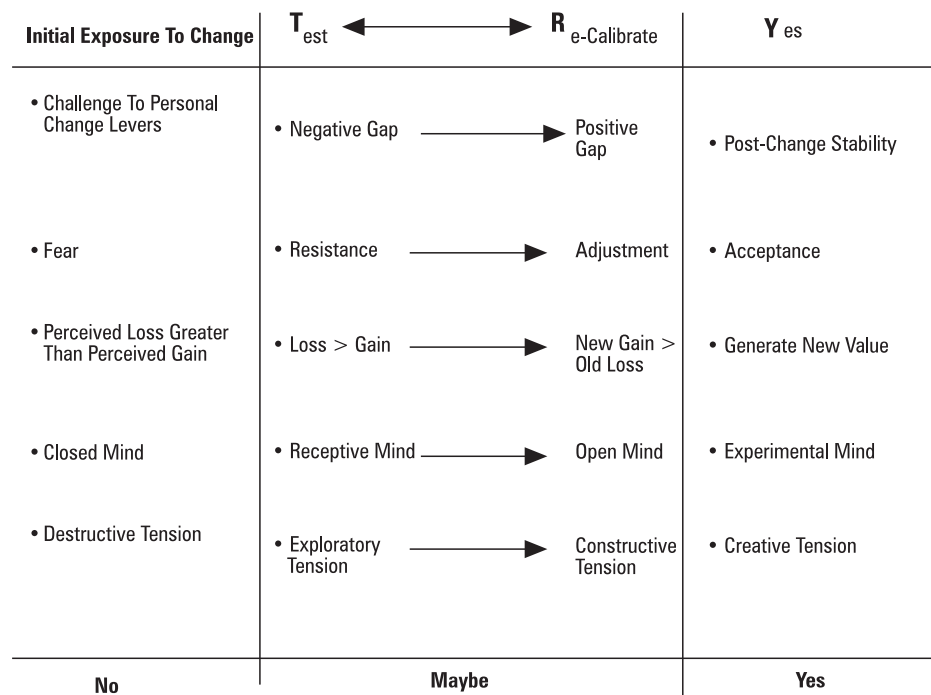
In an attempt to involve more people earlier in a constructive change process, we have developed the "TRY change" model as shown in Figure 6. This model can help change leaders understand why resistance to change is inevitable, and to suggest some ways to reduce that resistance.

The minute we say the "change" word, people start to react – they will display a red, yellow or green light to change, i.e. a "no", a "maybe" or a "yes". Understanding how and why each person reacts as they do is critical for developing effective management strategy. The TRY model highlights the personal side of the change process which is often overlooked in the rush to implement another quick fix program across the organization.

The TRY model shows that, when one is initially exposed to change, it is common to feel fear. In any change situation we may fear that the perceived loss is going to be greater than any gain we might experience. The fear of loss tends to make us close our minds to any positive rationale for change, and even to act in a way that will block or derail the change initiative.

When a change initiative is announced in an organization, it must be recognized that the change will affect each person differently. Each person (as well as the entire organization) will require an environment in which it is safe to react to and experiment

**Figure 6** TRY change: organizational and personal change process



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with the proposed change. People need the opportunity to adjust to change before they can master the behavior that the change requires. The more profound the organizational change, the more important it is to create safe opportunities for people to adjust. Unless people can integrate change on a personal level, they cannot sustain it professionally or organizationally.

We have found that people have four “change levers”. Change levers are those features that can either block or support one’s adjustment to external change. The TRY model classifies these change levers as:

- beliefs (what I think is true);
- values (what I think is good);
- behaviors (how I do things) and;
- skills (my talents and abilities).

Each of these change levers reacts differently to change at three levels:

- (1) personal;
- (2) professional; and
- (3) organizational.

The levers change at different speeds depending upon which levels are most challenged.

Personal change occurs through many incremental adjustments to our individual beliefs, skills, values, and behaviors. Over time the summation across an organization of

these incremental individual adjustments in beliefs, skills, values, and behaviors produces real change for an organization. Change is not a process that can be forced or rushed *en masse*, but rather must be nurtured at a rate that is appropriate for each individual involved, as well as the organization as a whole. As change leaders, it is our obligation to explain to everyone the realities of the situation and the pace that we can afford to proceed at that balances individual and organizational needs with market and business realities.

Initially those affected by change perceive a “negative gap”. They feel they are behind at the start: “How can I change to that? I am not capable”. This is one of the reasons why people resist. It is not the change they are resisting; it is the fear of not being able to do something new. People resist change unless they have adequate opportunity to adjust to it. People need to test change in a safe environment, where they can question without fear of retribution, influence elements of the change, initiate trials and experimentation with the new situation, and evaluate and manage the costs and benefits of change in an objective manner.

Once people are through the testing phase they need to re-calibrate. They need to adjust their behavior as well as the change plan itself.



They need to believe that the change they have made is really correct and valuable for themselves and the organization. They must feel that on balance they have gained by this process in order to reinforce the change. If this re-calibration phase is not successful, then people must go back and test. This can be a process that repeats itself a number of times until a critical mass of people feels a comfort level in each lever at each level. We must remember that this process is happening to each individual in the organization at different rates, places, and times.

An especially effective protocol for supporting ongoing testing and re-calibration is the coaching model. Coaching is based on the assumption that people benefit from stable relationships in which they can react, adjust to and manage important work events. Change coaching can occur in supervisor-supervisee dyads, peer-peer dyads or small groups, and intact work teams. Ideally, these coaching structures are continuous and officially sanctioned, i.e. adequate time and resources are devoted to their effective operation. Cynicism occurs when coaching programs are grafted on to a condition of high change and work overload. We have seen the failure of many attempts to create good change management programs due to the fact that “work comes first.” In other words, if time is not created and protected for processes that support change, the whole time will be consumed by technical responsibilities and the organization change efforts will fail.

Creating a *permanent* infrastructure (e.g. coaching/mentor relationships, supervision, strategy groups, etc.) that helps people to test and re-calibrate before, during and after each change cycle will be more effective than one created in the heat of a specific change campaign. Professionals will become cynical about the use of strategic planning retreats, coaching and consultation programs if they are too closely tied to specific change episodes and then dropped. The resulting message is that “these programs are part of implementing change rather than helping us to manage ongoing change effectively.” Developing permanent structures that allow people to work individually and together to cope with change can support the development of creative tension (“What is next?”) and an experimental (as opposed to closed) mind set. Clear expectations and benchmarks provide the grist for testing and

re-calibration activities, and for the self-management of the change levers that can result in optimal adjustment to change.

The senior management team needs time to test and re-calibrate; the assumption that leaders manage change better than their subordinates is usually incorrect. Unless leaders have an opportunity to adjust to change together and individually, they will lead in a fragmented fashion that will increase fear and resistance at large. Leaders need to learn what is driving the need for change (e.g. legislative change, risk management, public relations, payer demands, new knowledge, etc.) and to develop a satisfactory strategic and action plan to meet those challenges. They need to create time frames for their own adjustment, for organization-wide testing and re-calibration, and for final implementation. They need to review the impact of proposed change on their beliefs, values, skills and behavior. Only then will leaders be in a position to initiate constructive change coaching with the whole organization. When the change conversation moves out of senior leadership and into the mainstream, there should be a pre-existing change coaching infrastructure that can buffer the fear and loss described in the TRY model. Only then can people move from resistance to experimentation to adjustment.

## Conclusion

Change management is the process of continually renewing the organization’s direction, structure, and capabilities to serve the ever-changing needs of the marketplace, customers and employees. Change management activities must operate at a high level today since the rate of change is greater than ever.

For significant change to be implemented well in an organization, the following must happen:

- People must clearly understand what business the organization is in and who is the customer of the business. A clear definition of shared purpose is required.
- The new performance requirements have to be clearly stated and understood by employees who are expected to make a change in behavior and in the way they conduct their business. These changes must be broadly aligned with the purpose,

identity and mastery of the majority of people working in the organization.

- As change takes place, new “rules of the game” must be developed. Roles and responsibilities must be updated to reflect new performance demands, and the performance management system must be strengthened to meet the needs for continuous personal and organizational development. The behaviors, values, and expectations of the new workplace must be clearly defined.
- The organization must have a constant supply of timely and useful information that enables customer-focused and cost-effective decision making to take place at all levels of the organization on a daily basis.
- Core work processes must be aligned with organizational goals and continually improved.
- Leaders and employees must have the requisite skills in leadership, creativity, problem solving, continuous improvement, team effectiveness, and customer service.

Organizations must prepare everyone for frequent change to ensure long-term growth and stability. They must provide clear change targets and goals, and a culture that supports personal and shared coping with change and the reactions it creates. Effective management of the factors that can block or drive optimal adjustment to change will be a critical determinant of every organization’s ultimate success.

Time and again, we have observed the following common features of effective change leaders. Modeling these characteristics (as well as creating the change support structures and processes described above) will increase your ability to manage organizational change effectively:

- *Lead* through consistent word and deed.
- *Broadcast* a clear explanation of the real world drivers of change.
- *Dramatize* the dangers (individual and shared) of the status quo and the new opportunities of change.
- *Affirm* the special ability of the organization to grow and prosper.
- *Frame* change in terms of clear measurable performance objectives tied to customer satisfaction.
- *Acknowledge* the gap between (as opposed to superiority of) their understanding of the need for change vs that of others.
- *Provide* resources, tools and strategies to facilitate change.
- *Balance* stability and chaos. Avoid oversaturating change.
- *Secure* the right to question, disagree, and fail for a while.
- *Agree* with people’s feelings about changing.
- *Remain* patient while pushing for change.
- *Win* converts the old fashioned way: earn them.
- *Reiterate* the who, what when, where, why and how of change.
- *Create* a culture of self-initiated change and improvement.

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