

A New Look at Leading Change

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With the increasing complexity and rapid change in today's global economy, leading a planned change within a large global corporation is more challenging than ever. There is no one approach or methodology that can be used for every change effort. In fact, there are several lenses that both change practitioners and leaders must be aware of in an organization change process.

These lenses include consideration of how one is viewing the organization, how the organization is structured, and the kinds of conversations that are occurring within the organization, and how to harness those. The following are some insights for leading change based on some of the latest change literature.

- **Understand how we view organizations.** If we view organizations as machines, we are likely to choose a top-down approach that presupposes that people will act and respond in a predictable way. If we view organizations as continuously evolving and adapting, we are likely to choose an approach that taps into and leverages the areas of the organization most likely to naturally lead the change.
- **Understand how the organization views itself.** Organizational leaders may or may not be aware of the metaphors they are unconsciously using in thinking about their organizations. Until recently, most management science training had the machine metaphor as its foundation. This is not a bad thing. The machine metaphor helped create corporate structures and organizations that have led to tremendous progress. The downside is that in an unstable environment, organizations that hold rigidly to their form and structure are less adaptable to change.
- **Organization structure provides the container in which conversations flow.** In any large-scale change, it is important to consider the role that the organizational structure has in either hindering or facilitating organizational change. How an organization is structured determines the flow of information. Information is critical both in coordinating tasks and activities

between business units and ensuring fulfillment of a common strategy. In a rigid hierarchical structure, where information flows are restricted by level, it is difficult to have effective top-down or bottom up conversations. Many argue that change happens at a local level, in the course of employees relating to each other through conversations.

- **Focus on the conversational life of the organization.** As stated above, change happens within the conversational life of the organization. The process of creating a change strategy happens through conversation. Opinions are stated, people are heard or not heard, and decisions are made. Change that is top-down starts to happen during these strategy meetings, not as a result of the documentation that is produced.

Likewise, leaders who communicate effectively about change help their employees create new meanings about the workplace and how work will get done. Employees converse with each other both formally and informally during the course of a workday. All of these conversations either hinder or facilitate the change process. Leaders who understand this find ways to influence these conversations.

- **Consider an appreciative approach.** Appreciative Inquiry is a fairly new approach to organizational change that is, at its essence, conversation based. Rather than concentrating on problems, or deficits, the focal point is on the organization when it is at its peak performance. The focus is on creating a positive future by collecting stories of people at their best. The approach can be used with a small team or a large cross-section of an organization. Change occurs throughout the inquiry process, by generating positive images of the future and focusing inquiry and action on that positive future. Employees spend time uncovering the best of their common experiences in order to develop new and shared meanings. It is through these conversations that change occurs.
- **Be focused on the goal and flexible in the execution.** In a world that is complex and rapidly changing, it is natural to want a well-thought out, detailed action plan for leading a change effort. The problem with this is that the very nature of change is unpredictable. It is simply not possible to predict and plan for every aspect of a change effort. It is possible to anticipate impacts, and to have teams in place to address them. It is also important to have a clear, concise and concrete view of the desired results of a large-scale change effort. There will be unintended and unanticipated effects in a large-scale change effort. The best preparation is to stay focused in the present and facilitate organizational conversations that help managers and employees make sense of the changes in a way that gets results.

- **Have a systemic approach.** In facilitating organizational change it is important to look at the organization and how it is interacting with its environment, the fit between strategy, structure and culture, and whether how the organization is structured and/or designed enhances or impedes dialogue. It is also important to assess the nature of the organizational conversations to determine whether they are deficit-oriented, appreciative, and if this is a learning organization. A conversation based approach to large scale organization change will not work in isolation.
- **Think of the notion of jazz as a metaphor for organization change.** Just as jazz musicians learn the theory and rules of musical progression, leaders and organization development consultants learn the theory and rules of organizational life. Jazz musicians memorize solos and phrases of the masters until it is a part of their repertoire and they are able to pull out the appropriate one in the moment. After years of practicing and integrating what they have learned, jazz musicians recognize what phrases fit where and are able to combine elements from different places. Jazz musicians know the minimal rules and structure of each piece that they are going to play, and based on that are able to improvise.(Barrett, 1998)

Likewise, master leaders and organization development practitioners, after years of practicing and integrating theories and tools, are able to improvise in the moment with their clients, letting solutions, interventions and designs emerge. If leaders and organization development consultants are able to identify and communicate the rules and structure necessary for a successful intervention, they too should be able to create great results for their organizations.

Reference

Barrett, F. J. (1998). Creativity and improvisation in jazz and organizations: Implications for organizational learning. *Organization Science*, 9(5), 605-622.

Marcia Ruben, President of Ruben Consulting Group, is a certified management consultant who helps leaders, teams, and companies achieve high performance. Her firm focuses on organizational change management, executive development and coaching. She has worked with leaders of Fortune 500 high technology and financial services companies for over twenty years. Ms. Ruben graduated Phi Beta Kappa from the University of California, Berkeley, and received her Master's of Science degree in counseling from California State University. She is currently pursuing her doctorate in Human and Organizational Systems at the Fielding Graduate Institute.