

An OAD LLC Article Change – The Mental Perspective

Recognizing, instituting, and reacting to change can be confusing, frightening, or frustrating experiences for people. Breaking out of old habits, adjusting to new reward systems, letting go of preconceived notions based on experiences, or having new reporting relationships create behavioral and emotional changes that range from easy to impossible.

We are all creatures of habit. Daily activities create habits and expectations in both our physical and mental/emotional worlds. Fortunately the human brain has progressed to a level of conceptualization and abstract thinking. The mind cannot only anticipate and adjust to change, but plan for it as well. Raccoons can run from a flash flood, but cannot figure out how to prevent them in the first place. The same might be said for some humans, but that's another story.

The human mind craves order, explanation, and predictability...

The human mind constantly craves order, explanation, and predictability. Unlike other creatures, humans have to ascribe meaning to events. We cannot bear a situation where something has occurred for no reason. If an event or our reaction to it is simple, straightforward, and has a physical dimension that can be objectively described and measured, then ascribed meaning (or blame) is an easy mental exercise. Worn car brakes cause accidents. Viruses cause colds. If I pull the cord the lawnmower will start; and am totally bewildered and helpless if it doesn't.

If an occurrence has a non-physical or abstract dimension (or, in other words, an intellectual or emotional dimension), then ascribing meaning becomes more difficult. An easy ascription would be fear or stress after an auto accident. Most people have been in this situation, and those that have not can easily understand why these emotions would occur.

A little more difficult may be a reaction to being yelled at by a boss. The recipient of the boss' anger may feel embarrassment, fear, intimidation, or anger – perhaps all four. Observers may occasionally be surprised by person's reaction, but meaning is sought. "He's basically very timid, but I guess he had enough and just blew" or "He reacted just the way we expected."

Then there is the unexplainable. Premature death, a lunar eclipse, a volcanic reaction – events that, not just in our past, cannot be measured, explained, or emotionally accepted. Consequently, metaphysical gods or spirits were the cause. Again, the human mind demands reason and causality; and then makes preparations to repeat or banish the event.

On the positive side, sameness and habits lead to efficiency and safety. Two examples - locking a door and looking both ways before crossing a street. Another, our morning routine getting ready for work. First, get up at the snooze button's second alarm, then shave, shower, shampoo, first underwear then socks, start coffee, finish dressing.... We go through these behaviors without purposefully thinking about them. If we did behave out of sequence, we would have to stop, think, and re-plan; our efficiency would go down.

On the negative side, habits lock people in a comfort area to the point that they don't want to recognize much less adapt to change. Challenging our established routines, beliefs, expectations, and the subway schedule are unsettling. Peoples' first reaction - "Why are you changing the procedure/policy? We are efficient and productive; we know our jobs. This is a mistake."

Adopting change or differences not only requires adjustment, it requires understanding a new perspective, and that is hard work. The fundamental question change-makers have to



"Shaded blue box on our org chart, meet dotted red arrow."

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answer is “Why”. What is obvious to the change-maker is not at all obvious down throughout the organization.

Some years ago I was contracted by Polaroid to lead teambuilding/communications workshops. A corporate culture established by its founder, Edwin Land, dictated that new product development (i.e. R & D) had to go through Dr. Land and his executive committee. This was during the advent of digital photography. I will honestly say that I had no idea if this new technology would harm, much less destroy, Polaroid. To me emerging photo technology and this startup company, Adobe, on the west coast was blue sky stuff.

But I was struck by the executive committee’s reaction. “First, digital will be a bust; it won’t happen in important markets because the photo resolutions are very poor. Second, we didn’t develop it, so how good could it be? Third, if it turns out that it’s a viable technology, we have the best optical engineers in the world, so we can compete if necessary.”

Increasingly I left those workshops feeling that these very intelligent people may be in denial, but worse, their attitude was strictly reactive. My uncertainties were clinched when a very senior executive said, “Do you understand who we are? We’re Polaroid.” They might be right about their potential, I thought, but that comment clinched it for me. When you believe you’re on a marble pedestal, watch out.

Too much has been written about the empirical dictates for change, or as I rather call it, a new direction. We are overwhelmed with numbers, statistics, Wall Street demands, fads, and (occasionally) stampedes. In my many interviews with senior executives over the years regarding change they have most often told me that it was prompted by “gut”. Their collective experiences said a new direction was mandatory. Otherwise, in 5 or 10 years they would be gone.

From my experiences I have developed a shorthand list to initiate and institutionalize change. I have codified what others’ gut instincts have told me.

Change Checklist

STAGE	ACTIONS NEEDED	PITFALLS
I Examine Marketplace and Competition Realities.	Internal/External Consultants with sufficient industry experience and analytical tools.	Ignorance or Self-Delusion of Marketplace Realities.
II Organizational Self-Assessment.	Assessing and documenting current capital, equipment, human skills, experiences, temperaments, and intellect.	Ignoring, excusing, or overestimating/underestimating internal capabilities.
III Create a vision.	Strategy – where to go and what to accomplish.	Unrealistic or Too Much/Little Detail.
IV Create a plan.	Tactics – how to get there.	Confusing or contradictory organization structure, assignments, appraisals, and rewards.

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STAGE	ACTIONS NEEDED	PITFALLS
<p>V</p> <p>Put together and empower down through executive and management ranks.</p>	<p>Clarify responsibilities, accountabilities, and expectations.</p>	<p>Changing tactics or modifying strategy to accommodate weak executives/managers.</p>
<p>VI</p> <p>Establish and recognize early/intermediate wins.</p>	<p>Reinforcement.</p>	<p>Rationalizing, excusing, ignoring failures.</p>
<p>VII</p> <p>Modifications.</p>	<p>Manage obstacles and finding other avenues without abandoning strategy.</p>	<p>Tactical inflexibility or leaving impression that modification equals abandonment</p>
<p>VIII</p> <p>Make certain the components are synergistic.</p>	<p>Make a presence and have Q and A's.</p>	<p>Delegating presence to others or inhibiting cross-functional/ departmental/ divisional communications.</p>
<p>IX</p> <p>Institutionalize Change.</p>	<p>Job roles, accountability measures, rewards, succession planning.</p>	<p>Assuming others are going to do this.</p>
<p>X</p> <p>Inform people that change is an evolutionary process. It will happen again.</p>	<p>Prepare the Mindset.</p>	<p>Leaving people with an attitude that change is scary.</p>

Stage –

- I This responsibility lies with the CEO and the senior executive team, which is not to say that insights and warning bells cannot come from the ranks. The closer people are to the customer/market, the more prescient and valuable the information. Stifling observations and opinions are signs of psychological denial.

Emotional stress and/or subconscious feelings of inadequacy lead to underestimating, falsely reading, or denying marketplace realities. If one is in this position he/she should move to a sideline until change is well underway. This permits him time to grow into the new realities and responsibilities. If completely unwilling, the person needs to be reassigned where he/she will excel at managing rather than leading.

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- II The most common cause of change failure is overestimating or underestimating the organization's capabilities. Overestimating occurs when there is a desire to please or the estimators don't sufficiently understand the challenges. Underestimating occurs when people see a benefit to proposing lower expectations that can be more easily met. Both are rooted in fear.
- III A stated vision or strategy that is too grandiose and general has little meaning to the listener. It's like supporting apple pie and motherhood. Conversely, a strategy statement with considerable detail attached provides the listener with opportunities for objection, negativism, and fear. A stated what we are going to become should be followed with only several key how statements.
- IV This is the execution stage where one has to actually roll up sleeves and work. Senior executives and managers who too freely delegate the hows are abrogating their responsibilities. If their subordinates excel at proposing the implementation steps, then the executives are blessed. However, these executives reached their positions by successfully implementing the hows in the past. They have to discuss and review implementation tactics with their subordinates, sign off on decisions, and take responsibility for them. Blaming a subordinate down the road is inexcusable. Success with subordinates is just as valuable as success with superiors.
- V Considering note four, an executive should not and cannot be expected to do subordinates' work for them. And certainly they cannot set up someone to fail by providing inadequate or contradictory information. Documented responsibilities, accountabilities, and performance measures are compulsory. Everyone knows the game plan and it should not be constantly revised to suit the capabilities of the players.
- VI People need recognition, reinforcement, and reassurance that they are on the right track and succeeding. Don't assume they know this themselves. Everyone needs a pat on the back. Like your spouse insists at a dinner party – mingle. Don't overlook or excuse someone you know is going to fail. Make the personnel change now; it only becomes harder later.
- VII The marketplace changes, a change in organizational capabilities will take longer than expected, or some ideas were too utopian. Adjust and find another avenue or timetable without sacrificing strategy. Banging heads against a wall creates defeatism. Explain throughout the ranks why there are tactical changes so credibility isn't lost.
- VIII Boosting enthusiasm and sharing information to cross functional lines. Customer Service wants to hear from Sales that they are primary in contributing to ongoing sales success. Accounting and Information Services benefit from hearing the views and successes of Marketing and Production due to their efforts of supplying timely information. There are no inter-departmental/divisional disconnects; people are smarter than that. Also, people like to hear from an alien land; it shows they are really human.
- IX Document and practice the new – institutionalize and make it the new corporate culture. Don't assume that people lower in the organization are going to implement practices that reinforce the new reality – check. And let people know you are checking and supporting.
- X Prepare people that the world is not static and the company is able to meet new challenges and uncertainties.