Less Communication and More Conversation
Using Conversation to Facilitate Organizational Change

Dr. Dawn-Marie Turner
Dr. Kathy Cowan-Sahadath
Drs Lysbeth van Silfhout

Invite you to join them

Saturday August 4, 2012
8:00 a.m. – 10:00 a.m.
Academy of Management Conference
Professional Development Workshop
Franklin Room
Boston Plaza, Boston Massachusetts

Conversation is the most natural and one of the most powerful ways of communicating during change. In this two-hour workshop you will learn how to use conversation as the primary means of communication for enabling intentional change.

YOU WILL EXPLORE:
1. The role communication plays in affecting the outcome of an organizational change initiative.
2. The natural rhythm of conversation that occurs during change.
3. The use of the guided conversation© technique as a practical and effective tool for facilitating change in an organization change.
SUMMER 2012

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CHANGE LEADER

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Welcome

Change is the one experience every leader has in common. But successful organizational change is not common to all leaders.

Change and an organization’s inability to change are the two biggest threats to an organization. Organizations that are not able to change or that change too slowly don’t thrive and may not survive. Whether you are the leader in a small or family business, not-for-profit or government organization or a large multinational, to thrive in today’s business environment you must be a change leader. That is why I am pleased to introduce our new e-zine the Change Leader. It has been designed to help leaders become change leaders.

In every issue you will learn about leading organizational change—information that bridges what is known about the science of change with the practical needs of facilitating change in the real world. Our goal is to introduce you to evidence-based practices. Unlike best practices, evidence-based practice is grounded in science, and not just based on the expectation that because it worked in one area or for one organization it will work in another.

In this issue we explore communication and the need for continuous change. In my work with hundreds of employees during change, I find many who feel overwhelmed but under-informed. At the same time, leaders are tired and frustrated that their messages are not getting through. Both leaders and employees struggle with the need for continuous change.

One barrier to communication is the failure to select and prepare the right messenger, as Lysbeth van Silfhout and Leoni Kruse share their article: getting your message heard and understood is critical to your success with change. Ironically the key to continuous change may be less change and not more, as I explain in my article on continuous change. Each author provides practical tips to help you with your organizational change efforts.

Finally, I want to thank Kathy Cowan-Sahadath and Lorie Shuker-Wolfe for sharing their change experience. Their work is ongoing, but their case study provides some great insight into facilitating organizational change.

I hope you enjoy the Change Leader.

Dawn-Marie Turner, PhD, CMC
Editor in Chief
When undertaking organizational change, healthcare institutions often begin by selecting a figurehead to lead the change. An effective figurehead is a person the employees perceive as credible, likable and trustworthy. Our research suggests that employees prefer to receive change information from a frontline manager acting as a figurehead.
Anyone from the CEO to the cleaner can fill the role of figurehead, but to be effective they must be perceived by the employees as possessing at least three characteristics: credibility, likeability and trustworthiness.

**INTRODUCTION**

Healthcare institutions must be agile to cope with major changes occurring both internally and externally. In The Netherlands, one major internal change in healthcare is the shift in the power base from doctor-centric to patient-centric. Externally, Dutch healthcare institutions are being pressured to become more competitive, in some cases introducing management interventions like Lean Management, Business Process Redesign and Innovative Information Technology from the private sector to increase their market value. But how to ensure employees support these changes? Who is the right person to communicate the change to the employees? Selecting the right type of figurehead—the person who can deliver the change message to the workforce—and maximizing the role of the communications department during change may help increase the success of organizational change.

The figurehead is the person introduced and visualized by the organization to communicate the change. The role of the figurehead or figureheads (there is often more than one figurehead in an organization) is to bring the change message to employees, helping to enable change readiness and reduce change resistance. Anyone from the CEO to the cleaner can fill the role of figurehead, but to be effective she must be perceived by the employees as possessing at least three characteristics: credibility, likeability and trustworthiness. In this article we share our work related to understanding the figurehead’s role, the influence of the three characteristics on her effectiveness, and how to make use of figureheads to create momentum and energy towards the change and to reduce resistance.

**SELECTING THE RIGHT FIGUREHEAD REDUCES RESISTANCE TO CHANGE**

In healthcare institutions the use of figureheads in organizational change projects can help create sustainable change. A figurehead is the person visualized by word and image in all information sources as the most important person to communicate and present the change to employees. It is the person literally stepping up to the podium during town hall meetings, presenting the change milestones in team meetings, and celebrating success across the institution. Research has shown change effectiveness is increased when the figurehead possesses three key characteristics: credibility, trustworthiness, and likeability. Credibility relates to whether the employees believe the message and the messenger. In our survey of 159 employees across four healthcare institutions we found 59% of employees rated their frontline managers as the most credible source for receiving information about the change. This in comparison to 19% who cited higher management as their preferred source, and 22% percent that stated they preferred to get information from another manager—e.g., human resources or the communication department. Research exploring the impact of change on frontline employees also found a preference among employees to receive information from their frontline manager instead of hearing it from senior managers (or higher management). For example, nurses prefer to receive messages about a change in their work from the nurse manager; doctors prefer to receive the same message from their manager or department head. A credible, believable figurehead increases commitment to the change [1]. Employees will only change the way they go about their jobs when they learn what is expected from a familiar and credible source [2].

One reason employees prefer messages from their frontline managers is that senior managers are often mistrusted [3]. Trustworthiness is necessary for credibility and the second important characteristic of an effective figurehead. Trustworthiness influences the employees’ perception of the accuracy of the message. When the change message is perceived as accurate, resistance to change is lowered [4].

Finally, figureheads that are well-liked are more believable, more trustworthy, and are seen as more knowledgeable about the subject matter [5]. Our research found that employees who identified their figurehead as credible, trustworthy and likeable were more change ready and had lower resistance to the change. Our results also suggested a stronger relationship between figurehead characteristics and change readiness for employees with a managerial position than for those employees who were not in a management position.

**MANAGING CHANGE IS MANAGING COMMUNICATION**

Managing change requires (frontline) managers to manage communication. Effective communication requires a clear message, delivered through the right mode, by the right messenger. In our
research the selection of the right figurehead to deliver the change message was just as important as the change message itself. To ensure the communication delivered by figureheads is effective it must be accurate, consistent and, if using more than one figurehead, there must be consensus about the message.

CONSENSUS AMONG FIGUREHEADS

Introducing a credible, likable and trustworthy figurehead alone is not enough to create sustainable change. When the change is large, involves diverse or large groups of people, or the change recipients are separated geographically, more than one figurehead may be needed. In this case, there must be consensus among the different figureheads. All figureheads must communicate the same change message and share the same vision to the employees. If there is no consensus, it is almost impossible to communicate unambiguous and consistent messages.

ACURATE AND CONSISTENT CHANGE MESSAGE

When a figurehead possesses the right characteristics and when there is consensus among the different figureheads, the change message must be communicated accurately and consistently. Accurate communication means that employees understand the change message and that they see the relevance of the change. The ‘what’s in it for me’-question is answered for each organizational level. A clear, understandable change message reduces employees’ resistance to change. There must also be internal consistency between different change messages. Further, it is important that these messages are stable over time. There is a propensity among people to accept messages that are close to their current understanding of situations, thus messages that are more consistent over time will be internalized more easily by employees [6]. Inconsistency in messages may induce greater interpersonal distances and it can harm the perceived credibility of the figurehead [7].

CREATING THE CHANGE STORY AND THE ROLE OF CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

One role the communications department can and often does play is translator—that is, it translates the change vision into an appealing and understandable organizational change story that is meaningful, accessible and understandable to each level of the organization. The overall organizational change story focuses on providing a broad or long-term picture of the change, which is necessary and important but may not be immediately helpful to employees, whose focus in on the short-term effects of the change such as job loss or the need to learn new roles and responsibilities. The Communications department plays an important role here, by translating the change message for the figureheads, so that each line manager has a tailored message for his employees. The change messages can be focused on helping employees see the need and benefits of the change, creating excitement and addressing short-term concerns. Only when employees see the relevance and the inevitableness of the change for both the organization and themselves will they choose to support this change.

Another role of the communications department is to help frontline managers fulfill the role of figurehead. Although frontline managers may best fit the criteria for an effective figurehead, they may not be prepared for the role. The Communications department can provide coaching and help with tailoring of the change messages and provide general communication support. The selection and support of a figurehead with the right characteristics who sends a consistent, understandable and tailor-made change message will function as lubricating oil. This is especially true in healthcare institutions that are very hierarchical: great power distances exist between doctors and nurses and between administrative employees and support staff. Due to this power distance the healthcare sector should strive to achieve sustainable change through a careful selection of figureheads communicating the change message. A carefully selected figurehead helps healthcare institutions follow a straight course through the permanent waves of change.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Our research found that the figurehead is often appointed based on their position or role in the organization and not necessarily because he is perceived by the employees to possess the three key characteristics of credibility, trustworthiness and likability. Selecting the right figurehead can have a positive influence on your change. To ensure you are

The overall organizational change story focuses on providing a broad or long-term picture of the change, which is necessary and important but may not be immediately helpful to employees, whose focus is on the short-term effects of the change such as job loss or the need to learn new roles and responsibilities.
getting the most appropriate figureheads to communicate the change:

• Conduct a stakeholder analysis to learn who has formal and informal power and would be the best sender of the change message.

• Engage your communications department to help prepare and support the figurehead to bring the right change message for the specific audience. Our research suggests that employees prefer to receive change information from a frontline manager acting as a figurehead.

• Ensure there is a consistent change message and consensus among the figureheads.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lysbeth van Silfhout works as both practitioner and academic, combining her daily work as a change management consultant with search on the role of the line manager in successful organizational change.

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REFERENCES


George Brown College has embarked on a journey of transformation to meet emerging healthcare challenges. It has found a way to ensure that individuals receive the support and collaborative environment needed to thrive through a transformational business change. Focused on equipping the workforce to respond positively to this major change project, George Brown College executed leadership sponsorship, communications, training, and organizational design initiatives.

**POSITIONING FOR THE FUTURE**

In the summer of 2012, George Brown College (GBC) will undertake a two-pronged, groundbreaking change: it will relocate about 230 full-time academic faculty and staff and 3500 full-time students to a 320,000 square-foot facility—the George Brown College Waterfront Health Sciences Campus in the East Bayfront area of Toronto—and it will incorporate Inter-professional Education (IPE) into its Health Sciences programs.

IPE involves learning about, from and with other disciplines while learning in areas of common interest in the practice of healthcare. GBC is enabling graduates to be successful collaborators in healthcare practice with the ultimate goal of improving patient outcomes. This cultural change toward inter-professional learning and teaching is a reflection of the demand in the Health Sciences professions for a more collaborative...
approach to the delivery of healthcare. The move to the Waterfront Campus will be a key enabler for IPE at GBC.

GBC’s continued advancement presents both challenges and opportunities. To meet the growing need and demand for the Centre for Health Sciences, the College has undertaken the creation of a 320,000 square foot campus housing the Centre for Health. Currently, GBC’s Centre for Health Sciences is one of the largest programs in the community college system within the Province of Ontario in terms of student enrolment.

At GBC, the vision, first realized in 2003, identified the need for a more inter-professional education model to support an improved collaborative-practice approach in healthcare delivery. This vision is best expressed by the College:

- To create a single-site Centre for Health Sciences building that embraces an inter-professional learning education framework with an emphasis on health and wellness.
- To create an environment that is vital and innovative for future generations of students.

The new campus will bring together corporate and academic departments with both current and new staff who have previously not worked in the same location before. It will bring together four schools consisting of the School of Dental Health, School of Health and Wellness, School of Health Services Management, and School of Nursing to be at the forefront of the future healthcare. It will also create an open work environment that will encourage many of the faculty and staff out of their private offices and into a large collaborative and inter-professional workspace. The change is significant and groundbreaking.

The report titled *Building on Values: The Future of Healthcare in Canada* (1), described the need for investing in more and differently-trained healthcare providers. It cited a “crisis” in the healthcare workforce—numbers are decreasing while demand is increasing—and called for a review of how healthcare providers are trained. The industry must move from a traditional profession-focused education to a more “patient-centred” approach. The latter approach places an emphasis on team-based learning and understanding of the importance of “multidisciplinary teams and networks of providers working together to address patients’ health needs”. In response to these new challenges and this sense of urgency in the healthcare system, GBC has become a leader in driving this change.

**PROJECT OVERVIEW AND FIRST STEPS**

This case study recognizes three distinct phases to this major change initiative and highlights the change management activities that are supporting the growth in GBC and in meeting the health and education needs not only for the City of Toronto, but also across Canada.

- Phase 1 set the foundation for a number of innovative opportunities and interventions to build the case for change. Examples included renovating space for pilot collaboration and interactive use of learning technologies, creating newly integrated curriculum with faculty members from across departments and organizational governance changes to a single director for the Centre for Health Sciences. By the time the funding was needed for Phase 2, the case for change was firmly supported. An external change management consultant joined the team in Phase 3 and further advanced the change management strategy and implementation plans by focusing on specific change management principles for continuous improvement and operational readiness.

**PROJECT AND LEADERSHIP GOVERNANCE**

The three phases to this project included, first, advancing the vision through a lengthy process of developing, shaping and implementing the IPE curriculum and promoting staff collaborating in new ways. The planning and design phase addressed funding and approvals for a new campus to accomplish the vision; and finally, the third phase, focused on the people readiness and move requirements associated with transitioning to this new campus.

In the early stages of the project there was an opportunity to build a foundation for managing the change, and assess how the impact would affect the people and the college through project sponsorship. The need for an increased focus on managing this transformational change required strong leadership for the project to succeed, and a collaborative process initiated by project sponsors right from the beginning of the project has contributed to project success. This commitment to managing the change, sponsorship and governance provided the guidance, decision making and accountabilities required for successful project implementation while balancing and coordinating the overall needs of the college.

A key change management challenge was leadership team involvement, communicating about the project, and being prepared to deal with concerns across the college. Two separate but connecting teams, the Construction and Design/Structural Advisory Team created in Phase 2 and the Operational Readiness Chairs Committee created in Phase 3, provided oversight and governance. Both teams reported to the Waterfront Steering Committee and were chaired by the President, to ensure alignment and inclusiveness of all groups, academic and non-academic. The Chairs of the Operational Readiness Committees ensured that key issues raised by the respective committees were addressed, aligned and that there was continuity across committees. The Waterfront Campus Governance Structure was a unique approach to ensure school interests and program success were met.

**EXPECTED CHALLENGES**

The project teams anticipated a number of potential issues that were to be addressed in the change management strategy, including:

- Potential negative impact on the personal lives of faculty and staff resulting from new commuting patterns.
• Concerns from some faculty and staff about changes to daily work routines and relocation from an office to open workspace environment.
• Managing the integration of corporate and academic functions and work environments.
• Managing the integration of Health Sciences programs delivery.
• Establishing new business process changes and ensuring adoption of new policies and procedures.
• Managing cultural changes from the amalgamation of smaller, more intimate groups, into a larger entity. This includes individual and organizational sense of identity and identification.
• Managing work dynamics as individual’s spheres of influences, privileges, working relationships, and neighborly interactions are redefined.

Change management was recognized by the sponsors in the early stages of the project and addressed in many ways.

CHANGE MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLES

The strategy for creating an appropriate and effective change management approach for this project was based on a number of guiding principles, outlined below.

1. Understand the Change
Accurately characterizing the nature of the changes to be made was critical for the development of the Waterfront Campus Change Management Strategy because the relocation took place within the broader context of a cultural shift towards IPE. Additionally, the physical move has implications beyond an adjustment in space, such as the changes in business processes and commuting patterns.

2. Address Each Stakeholder Group
GBC’s Centre for Health Sciences consists of four different Schools, with a number of programs within each of those Schools. The relocation would affect each differently, and each group would approach the move with a slightly different organizational context. Recognizing and identifying the differences allowed the team to develop strategies that addressed those specific needs.

3. Ensure Comprehensive Levels of Engagement and Start Engagement Early
Change planning required a large level of engagement with organizational leadership as well as with the individuals experiencing change. The engagement process started early and faculty and staff understood why changes started proactively so that their expectations could be managed and concerns addressed before they became a point of resistance.

4. Provide Strong Leadership
Leadership played a critical role in this organizational change project, particularly in an academic environment where authority was decentralized. Leaders understood their role, visibly supported the project, and delivered key messages about the project when needed. The change team had access to organizational leadership, and also provided coaching and guidance to leaders about what change support was needed and when.

5. Adapt Change Management Strategy to Project Phase
Stakeholders required different types of change management
support before, during, and after the relocation. The Change Management Strategy recognized this and planned different approaches and activities as the project progressed.

INTRODUCING A CHANGE MANAGEMENT APPROACH TO ORGANIZATIONAL READINESS

Preparing people for change, facilitating staff and faculty in understanding their new work environment, creating linkages to the vision for IPE, moving in the direction of the desired cultural transformation and moving to an integrated curriculum had been well underway by college leadership and project teams already in place. Further change management emphasis and activities in Phase 3 focused on the organizational readiness to support the move to the Waterfront Campus:

- An Organizational Diagnostic was conducted with the project sponsors, project team, and stakeholder representatives. The Diagnostic defined key stakeholder groups affected by the move, examined the specific context of the move for each group, and determined risks or key change needs of each group.
- A kick-off meeting with the project sponsors and project team was held to clarify expectations and boundaries for the change management strategy. The link between the relocation and the greater cultural change to IPE was a part of this discussion to define the integration required between both initiatives.
- An assessment on the relocation, cultural change, and organizational structure of the Health Sciences programs, was undertaken.

EARLY DELIVERABLES AND SUCCESSES

Change management assessments of organizational readiness identified a number of positive accomplishments achieved over the course of the project:

- Corporate and academic groups have been brought together from early stages of the project to ensure technology and academic spaces are aligned. Traditionally these groups have not worked together; they are now planning and integrating collaboratively.
- Engaged over 120 people in the process by integrating key groups in design decisions around creating spaces to collaborate and teach differently.
- Through a process of engagement, best practices have been implemented for developing collaborative relationships between the architects, the planners, staff and faculty to “taste, feel and smell” what it is like to be part of a team.
- Established significant partnerships where the sector meets education, including research, placements and sharing of expertise.
- Met with key players to get advice on the space design and curriculum model.
- Incorporated feedback that included need for cultural competencies, involvement of families in simulation scenarios, acknowledging healthcare is delivered across the spectrum (health e-home environment).
- Utilized Prosci’s ADKAR (2) model of Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, and Reinforcement, to confirm high scores, indicating a strong understanding of the case for change and a reflection of the work accomplished in Phase 1 and 2.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The GBC Waterfront campus project was undertaken to provide the efficiency and the effectiveness that consolidating programs at one location provides, allowing for growth, profiling space and revenue opportunity. A changing healthcare industry, empowered students, new approaches in education and technological advancements has created an environment where change is becoming ‘business as usual.’ In this environment, GBC recognizes the importance of building the competency to meet new challenges:

- Change is transformational not just transactional.
- All aspects of the project need to understand the vision. Events and actions may change but the vision remains constant.
- Everyone must be engaged in the process whether they are moving or not.
- Extensive training initiatives bring key groups together to learn about the new teaching technologies that are built right into the campus.

The GBC Waterfront campus project expects the eventual outcome of such change to be a transformed and renewed institution. Though the college is in the midst of transformational change, leadership continues to create dialogue and participation so that both academic and corporate members can effectively understand and operate within new expectations that this change brings.

REFERENCES


A member of the senior management team since joining George Brown College in 2002, Lorie is currently co-leading the development of the College’s waterfront campus. The campus will house the new Centre for Health Sciences. More than just a new physical location, the facility is the launching pad for a cultural transformation and centre of excellence in health care education. “The Centre has been designed to address specific gaps in the health sector, and enable faculty and students to embrace an inter-professional learning education framework, enhancing wellness and health promotion, and facilitating inter-professional collaboration and learning among many health care professions including nursing, gerontology / activation, personal support workers and orthotists / prosthetists.”

Her interest in organizational change has been significant throughout her career. Lorie started her career as a clinical social worker at a large teaching hospital, moving to a focus on family and marital therapy with eating disorder patients. “As a trained family therapist, I learned...
change is key to the success of families who are going through difficult issues or life cycle transitions. These same concepts apply to organizations.” After attending the Rotman business school in Change Management she found the link between systems theory and the theories and practices of organizational change. Her experiences and career have consistently led to opportunities where change and new strategic directions were front and centre.

As a change leader she sees her role as an enabler and strategic thinker. “People do not change for the sake of change but for a better and more promising or exciting direction. In organizational change the ability to articulate a strategic vision that aligns to where the organization and staff believe it needs to be is the most important role that the change leader can do.” That vision and the ability to navigate all the bumps is not an easy one but a very important one. In 2011 Lorie was the recipient of the Ontario Association of Social Workers’ 2011 Inspirational Leader Award.

Lorie recognizes that leadership is a very complex role that often gets reduced to one that is more transactional in nature rather than transformational. “A good leader is one who is able to determine a successful vision, and lead the organization to achieve that vision with strong interpersonal skills.” Leaders must know how to enable their senior managers to do what they need to do and with the right skill set and to ensure that the right team of employees is there to bring this vision forward.

Lorie’s organization continues to experience great change. The new campus will test how well they have planned for the anticipated changes both within the campus and across the entire college. Financial pressures and growth needs from various sector partners will continue to challenge the College to grow, do better and to think creatively despite reduced traditional sources of revenue.

What she found most helpful throughout the change process is recognizing the power of a successful vision that resonates with people and one that despite the aggravation and fears still makes sense for people to work towards. The other issue is the power of leadership (ensuring consistency throughout the process and enabling qualities to support the staff). “The people side of change is so powerful. My background in social work was extremely helpful in appreciating and understanding why people have difficulty changing.”

GUIDELINES FOR AUTHORS

The Change Leader welcomes unsolicited articles for publication. Articles published in The Change Leader focus on the practice of organizational change. Articles should explore:

- current organizational change practices
- new information and/or evidence-based practices and research findings
- existing topics in the academic literature and their relevance to current or future organization change practice

Manuscripts should be written in a journalistic style with a limited use of jargon and appeal to a broad spectrum of general business readers. Articles are reviewed and authors may be asked to make changes to their article prior to acceptance.

HOW TO SUBMIT A MANUSCRIPT

Manuscripts must be submitted as a Microsoft® Word document (1997 or later) and contain the following items:

AUTHORS’ PAGE

The authors’ page should list: 1) the title of the manuscript; 2) the full names and academic degrees of the authors; 3) the identity of the corresponding author, including his or her name, full address, telephone number, fax number and e-mail address; and 4) a word count for the text.

MANUSCRIPT LENGTH

Aim for a word count of about 1000 to 2000 words.

MANUSCRIPT FORMAT

Use a standard 12-point font such as Times New Roman throughout. Double space and left-justify the text. Number each page of the manuscript consecutively. Use the following divisions within the text:

- Summary – In 1-3 sentences, summarize the article’s main point(s). This section will appear at the beginning of the article and should be written to entice readers to explore the topic.
- Introduction – Describe the intent of your article in a paragraph or two. In other words, this section introduces your problem to the reader.
- Body – One or more subheadings may be used to break up the text and improve readability. Number the call-outs for tables and figures consecutively in the text. Number the references consecutively in the text.
- Practical Implications – This section consists of two or three bullet points that describe the practical implications of your topic. Ask yourself the question: What are the most important take-away points for my readers?
- References – Limit the number of references cited to six or fewer. If more references are required submit as a separate page with the manuscript. Use the reference style of the American Psychological Association.
- Tables, Figures and Photos – Place the actual table, figure and/or photo at the end of the text, each on a separate page. Figures and photos should be submitted as a JPEG file.
- Submit articles to Changeleader@thinktransition.com
The International Council of Organizational Change

GETTING TO KNOW THE INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL

The International Council on Organizational Change (ICOC) is a group of international change management scholar practitioners working in a collaborative, non-competitive way to inform and advance the practice of organizational change and change management worldwide.

The Council was founded in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada in 2008. The goal of the Council is to create a forum for the exchange of ideas and best practices to influence and elevate the science of organizational change around the world. Members of the ICOC are experts in their field, actively involved in the research and practice of organizational change. We deliver our work throughout the world through publications, workshops, seminars, white papers, conferences, and other avenues.

Since the ICOC began its members have collaborated to conduct, present and publish organizational change research exploring:

- The risk of best practice in change management and the need for evidence based practice
- Current models of and definitions of best practice
- Getting value from a change management methodology
- Manager’s perception of organizational change skills

Currently research is focused on communication during change, organizational change skills, and change process mapping.

If you are a scholar-practitioner with an active interest in organizational change research and interested in participating on the ICOC, contact Dr. Dawn-Marie Turner at dawnmarie@thinktransition.com.
Organizations today must constantly change, but doing so does not mean bombarding employees with change projects. The secret to creating an organization that is able to change continuously is less change, not more.

In today’s dynamic business environment, an organization that cannot constantly change, will not survive. Peter Drucker said, “Organizations must be organized for constant change… [because] today’s certainties are tomorrow’s absurdities.” The problem is, too many organizations are not organized for constant change. Their approach to change leads to frustrated leaders and exhausted, disengaged employees.

The secret to creating an organization that can constantly change is less change, not more. Constant change does not mean bombarding employees with one change initiative after another, or even worse, several changes at the same time. A barrage of change initiatives can reduce an organization’s capacity for change, reinforce the status quo and lead to less real change.
Creating an organization that can constantly adapt and move through change without major disruptions to its operation requires a fundamental shift in the way change is approached. Leaders need to move away from an approach that manages each organizational change as an isolated activity, to one that recognizes every organizational change as part of a series of interrelated transitions.

This shift in focus has two distinct advantages when it comes to organizing for constant change. First, this shift in focus makes it possible to address the often hidden interconnections of an organization, which have a direct impact on the employees' ability to respond to change. Second, it acknowledges that organizational change is multidimensional.

CHANGE CREATES RIPPLES THAT MATTER

No organizational change, no matter how small, is an isolated event. Every change sends a ripple through the organization. The extent to which any ripple will affect an organization depends on the leaders' ability to assess, understand and respond. When change is managed as an isolated event a leader is more likely to overlook all but the most immediate ripples, raising the risk that a change in one area will negatively impact change or performance in another area.

Take for example one organization that recently made a series of small departmental changes to reduce inefficiencies. The changes appeared to solve the problem in the intended department, but they created a whole new set of problems for at least one other department. One unexpected problem was the need to create workarounds to accommodate the changes made in the intended department. The new workarounds created inefficiencies, and because they and other additional changes were not anticipated or planned, the negatively affected department had to draw resources from other activities as they scrambled to adjust. This type of change reduces the capacity of the whole organization. And this situation is not unique: I have heard many employees and leaders from different organizations describe similar scenarios.

Preparing the organization for constant change begins with stopping the management of change as a series of isolated events. Every change—regardless of its size—is connected to the organization as a whole. When leaders facilitate change from the perspective of these interconnections, the organization can respond to constant change with fewer change initiatives.

CONSTANT CHANGE REQUIRES FOCUS ON THE WHITE SPACE

Every change has two dimensions, the event and the white space. The event is the concrete portion of the change. The white space is the gap that each employee must navigate to adopt the new behaviours, activities or processes.

When implementing organizational change, a shift in focus to include the transition helps give employees the time needed to navigate the white space before the next change initiative begins. When change is viewed only as an event, it is easy to overlook the white space of change.

Recently a leader described a reorganization that his company was undertaking, stating he was almost done. He had created the new organizational structure, the new job descriptions were almost ready, and the company had begun hiring for some of the new positions. He was correct; the change event was almost complete. However, the transition was just beginning. If his organization was going to achieve the intended outcome of the change event, time and support would be needed to help his leaders and employees navigate the white space. When the transition dimension of the change was factored into the equation, he estimated it was about 12 to 18 months away from the desired outcome of the change being achieved.

Organizing for constant change requires defining when a change is complete. No change should be considered complete until most change recipients have successfully navigated the white space.

Dr. Kilian Gravenhorst described a change innovative organization as one that demonstrates all the conditions for successful change. One key characteristic of the change innovative organization is that employees believe they have enough time to accept a change and move through each phase of the change process.

CONSTANT CHANGE – THE NEW REALITY

It used to be that organizations experienced long periods of stability interspersed with short bursts of change. Today it is just the opposite: short bursts of stability interspersed with constant change. It is possible to organize for constant change and create organizations that move through change without causing major distress to employees, change fatigue, and disruptions to the organization. However, doing so requires leaders to re-organize their thinking about the way their organization approaches and manages change.

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dawn-Marie Turner is President of Turner Change Management. A company dedicated to helping leaders turn change into their competitive advantage. Her research focuses on change readiness, communication and organizational change skills. Contact her at www.thinktransition.com
What Change Leaders are saying...

“... leadership is about dealing with an inherently complex, sometimes chaotic, psychologically challenging, and always fast moving world. Increasingly, a major task leaders must accomplish is to create some sense of order and meaning out of chaos, both for themselves and for those they lead, without succumbing to the temptation of premature closure and rigid thinking as a defense against the anxiety of uncertainty.”

Dr. Ken Starkey, Professor of Management & Organizational Learning
Nottingham University Business School

“Most leaders have an implicit story in their head about the change they want to realize in their organization. It’s both valuable and confronting if I as a consultant help them to make that story explicit with a few simple questions. I find that most of them realize they could be more effective if they put an effort in paying attention to the rules of story telling.”

Dr. Kilian Bennebroek Gravenhorst,
President of PlusPulse and Developer of the Change Monitor®
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Dr. Dawn-Marie Turner
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