

## A Roadmap for Successful Organization Change

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A global study by IBM® in 2008 reported that 60% of all projects aimed at achieving business change failed to reach some or all of their intended goals. This is an astonishing statistic given the importance that change plays in our lives and organizations. Anticipating and successfully executing planned change is one of the most important organizational imperatives of our day. As members of organizations, we must possess the competence to lead and manage change in order to meet our stakeholders' needs and stay ahead of the competition.

This article is the second in a series on organization effectiveness.\* In the previous paper we demonstrated how to identify necessary changes in an organization's strategies, structures, and people processes by applying a gap analysis and a model of effectiveness. Now that we have pinpointed what change(s) need to occur, let's turn our attention to the process of successful planned change.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this article is to encourage its readers to consider a roadmap of planned change that will guide them in their future change efforts. We will offer several techniques that will guide the reader to successfully implement planned change within organizations.

### **Planned Versus Reactive Change**

Perhaps it seems strange that I have used the word "planned" in relation to the word change. For the purposes of this article, it is important to distinguish the differences between planned and reactive change.

Planned change is purposeful. It is designed and implemented in a timely fashion in anticipation of future events. Usually proactive, planned change implies developing a vision of the way things could be in response to either external or internal forces. Reactive change, on

the other hand, is usually ad hoc, a piecemeal response to events as they happen without any prior thought.

### **Introduction to Change Phases**

Kurt Lewin was a German born psychologist who emigrated to the United States in 1933. Considered to be the father of social psychology, Lewin was one of the first to study group dynamics and organization development. Among his many contributions is a roadmap of planned change which encompasses three steps: unfreezing, action/transition, and refreezing. There is much we can learn from this roadmap as we attempt to make changes in our own organizations.

### **Unfreezing Phase**

Unfreezing is the phase which prepares the organization for change. This is the first and perhaps the most important phase as the organization begins to formulate the change initiative and elicit participation from those who will be affected. There are three fundamental aspects to the unfreezing phase: (1) disconfirmation, (2) cognitive dissonance which leads to learning anxiety, and (3) creation of psychological safety.

According to Schein (2002), all learning and change efforts begin with some form of disconfirmation, that is, feedback to the organization's members about the organization's current performance. This feedback could be in response to changes in the environment or to internal changes needed to increase the organization's capabilities and make it more competitive. The important point here is when the information is presented, it must be something that the organizational members connect with and care about; it must produce enough "pain" that the organization is willing to go through the process of changing rather than remain in its current state.

\*Go to [www.philpconsulting.com](http://www.philpconsulting.com) to retrieve the first article, "Organizing for Effectiveness During a Recession."

The effects of disconfirmation throw the organization's members into what is called cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance is an uncomfortable feeling caused by holding two contradictory ideas simultaneously. The theory of cognitive dissonance proposes that people have a motivational drive to reduce dissonance either by changing their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, or by justifying and rationalizing their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Cognitive dissonance often leads to a defensive reaction called "learning anxiety."

When we enter into a new learning process, we often feel a sense of anxiety towards the loss of our effectiveness, our self-esteem and our identity as it relates to our work. Learning anxiety is the primary cause of defensive reactions to change and where the real work of unfreezing lies. In order to get the organization's members to accept and view the information as valid and relevant, the leaders of a change initiative need to balance the potential threat of the new information with a sense of "psychological safety." Usually this can be accomplished by including the organization's members in the action/transition phase of planned change.

### **Action/Transition Phase**

The second phase is called the action or transition phase. This phase involves intervening in the organization's systems to develop new behaviors, values, and attitudes. During this phase it is important to create small wins in the short term while also providing continual communication of the overall goal. Furthermore, much of this phase consists of reframing the change effort in a way that allows the organization's members to embrace the new standards of performance while maintaining their identity and self-esteem. One of the best ways to encourage organizational members to embrace change is to model the desired behaviors. Consider that 83% of the information we receive is filtered through our sight, mentors help model the desired behaviors as well as help create a sense of psychological safety. This is why leadership and mentorship programs are so vital when implementing planned change.

### **Refreezing Phase**

The third phase is the refreezing phase which institutionalizes the changes into the

organization's culture. The simplest method for refreezing the changes is to create policies and procedures that reinforce the desired behaviors. It is important to note, however, that these changes must be congruent with the organization's core values and mission. Otherwise, organizational members will have difficulty accepting and adopting the new policies and the changes will have no permanence.

Next we will examine several techniques for navigating the unfreezing, action/transition, and refreezing stages of change.

### **Techniques for Unfreezing Phase**

Create a sense of urgency. This is the first step outlined in Kotter's *Leading Change* (1996), and it is perhaps the most important step in the whole process. Creating a sense of urgency, or a crisis, galvanizes the organization towards advancing the change effort.

Provide Evidence. Use hard facts and data to connect the change effort to the present function of the organization. Present a clear picture of the organizational consequences for not changing.

Offer a Vision. All organization members want to be part of something that inspires them. Creating a vision that leads to the heart of the mission and values of the organization will encourage people to participate.

### **Techniques for Action/Transition Phase**

Get Constituents Involved. Involving those who are most affected by the change and giving them an important role in the process sends a strong message of transparency and openness by the sponsors of the change effort. Having a voice in what occurs empowers constituents, providing them a feeling of control in an otherwise uncontrollable situation. They are also more likely to help create solutions when setbacks occur or trouble spots arise during the change initiative.

Create First Steps. Make it easy to get going by creating quick achievable goals. This builds momentum and shows others that the change effort is likely to succeed.

Coach. Having coaches in place allows others to identify someone to approach when they have questions or concerns. Make sure the coaches not only understand their roles and the phases of change, but are also able to help others through the change process.

### **Techniques for Refreezing Phase**

Reward. Build in rewards for the desired behaviors. These can be small and simple, like individual gift certificates, or large, like a trip for an entire department.

Develop Rites of Passage. Create rituals that celebrate the changes and signify the burial of the old ways of doing things. Don't underestimate the significance of rituals - they can be a powerful draw to create closure and a significant step toward the future vision of the organization.

Socialization the Changes. As mentioned before, it is important to institutionalize the changes by imbedding them into the formal systems and structures. But don't stop there - build it into the social fabric of the organization by constantly communicating the benefits and the vision of change.

### **Measure of Time**

The bigger the change initiative, the longer it takes to complete the phases of the change cycle. All the phases are necessary when an organization is creating any sort of change effort to improve its effectiveness. The change effort could involve implementing a leadership development program, restructuring, succession planning, or addressing decision making in a team or department. Regardless of the situation, Lewin's three-phase roadmap represents the necessary steps an organization must traverse to create successful planned change.

### **Summary**

Most change efforts fail because organizations fail to do the hard work up front, especially in the unfreezing phase. By following Lewin's three phases of change, organizations have a greater chance of successfully executing changes that increase their competitive advantage and align their capabilities toward achievement of their goals.

### **References**

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### **Company Overview**

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