12-2010

Forestalling Change Fatigue

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Abstract

{Excerpt} It is a given that organizational change affects people. It is people, not processesor technology, who embrace or not a situation and carry out or neglect corresponding actions. People will help build what they create.

Change, that is, the act, process, or result of changing, is the norm. Change alone is unchanging: it works through the co-evolving dimensions of economy, environment, polity, society, and technology to make up systems of mutual sustainability or (inopposition) mutual vulnerability. (Since all dimensions are connected, none can change by itself.) On account of that, individually or in groups, we all experience change in our daily professional, personal, social, and civic occupations: change is the law of life. (If anything, the rate of change looks as if it is accelerating. But who are we to speak? Neolithic man probably thought the same.)

Comments
Suggested Citation

Serrat, O. (2010). *Forestalling change fatigue.* Washington, DC: Asian Development Bank.

Required Publisher's Statement

Knowledge Solutions

Forestalling Change Fatigue

By Olivier Serrat

> It is a given that organizational change affects people. It is people, not processes or technology, who embrace or not a situation and carry out or neglect corresponding actions. People will help build what they create.

A Modern Satyricon

In 1957, Charlton Ogburn[1] recounted his experience as a junior officer during the Second World War: "We trained hard, but it seemed that every time we were beginning to form up into teams we would be reorganized. Presumably the plans for our employment were being changed. I was to learn later in life that, perhaps because we are so good at organizing, we tend as a nation to meet any new situation by reorganizing; and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency, and demoralization."

As though it were eternal truth, Charlton Ogburn's quip on change fatigue has since been attributed to sundry sages, most commonly Gaius Petronius (c. 27–66), a Roman courtier and satirist. Is it really the case that *"Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose?"* Notwithstanding copious studies and applications of change management, do we simply—over and over again—lack a unique strategy, candid dialogue, clear roles and accountabilities, and bold action, each powered by visible leadership? Then again, are change and its management both more complex and simpler than that?

On Change and its Misrepresentation

Change, that is, the act, process, or result of changing, is the norm. Change alone is unchanging:[2] it works through the co-evolving dimensions of economy, environment, polity, society, and technology to make up systems of mutual sustainability or (in opposition) mutual vulnerability. (Since all dimensions are connected, none can change by itself.) On account of that, individually or in groups, we all experience change in our

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1. Charlton Ogburn. 1957. Merrill's Marauders: The Truth about an Incredible Adventure. *Harper's Magazine*. January.
2. Heraclitus (c. 535–c. 475 BC), a Greek philosopher, wrote in riddles to explain that change is central to the universe: "You cannot step into the same river twice."

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daily professional, personal, social, and civic occupations:[3] change is the law of life. (If anything, the rate of change looks as if it is accelerating. But who are we to speak? Neolithic man probably thought the same.)

> *Because things are the way they are, things will not stay the way they are.*
> —Bertolt Brecht

Change is also an essential part of the life (and death) of organizations—even when they do not operate in a competitive market.[4] However, purpose-driven organizations with little time for social anthropology or the subtleties of complexity, culture, or social learning theories have customarily misinterpreted developmental, transitional, and transformational change—including its value, and reduced its elements to processes, technology, and people. In their narrowest and least promising view, the processes they design to meet (when they cannot foresee) complex, rapid, and radical changes in their external environments bank on technology that personnel will be expected to leverage. In a technocratic age[5] with a fondness for performance measurement, aka "doing something,"[6] the means that shareholders or senior management prescribe aim to persuade too: identify, engage, and implement. (Skeptics consider both coercive and participative approaches to change as placebo.)[7]

> *No plan survives contact with the enemy.*
> —Helmuth von Moltke

With some learning from a poor track record to date, actions along a (typical) three-stage change implementation (or transition) curve depicting take-off (aka ending, losing, and letting go), potential stalling or regression (aka the neutral zone), and success or failure—or somewhere in between (aka the new beginning)[8] have been recommended. The following articulates 10 steps to making it work (if it is going to work):[9]

• Specify the what"[10] and "why"—set the broad direction, including the rationale and its weight.
• Distinguish the "who"—always have individuals at the heart of your change effort and communicate with them.
• Understand the barriers, risks, and issues.
• Identify all the levers, influences, power, and resources at your disposal.
• Formulate the campaign—be clear about the "what" and "how."
• Detail the "how"—think things through as much as possible.
• Launch the campaign—be flexible, adapt, stay cool, persist, and do not give up.

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3   Any human being is capable of change. Most individuals do so through the natural process of behavior modification, usually by observing, retaining, and replicating in social learning (provided both motivation and opportunity exist).

4   Transformative change comes in various shapes for all kinds of reasons. In the private and public sectors, driven by external and internal agents, its "why" might be rationalized by (i) the need to respond creatively to a new climate of public opinion, (ii) the need to speed up decision making, (iii) the need to recapture markets, and (iv) the need to save money. In 2006, an online McKinsey Quarterly survey received 1,536 responses from a representative sample of executives at publicly and privately held businesses across a full range of industries, as well as nonprofit and governmental institutions. Cost-cutting was a consistent theme (according to 56% of respondents). Half (50%) said their organization's main objective was to move from good performance to great performance, with 41% observing it was linked to restructuring, e.g., merging, splitting up, or divesting. Only 27% were involved with turning around a crisis situation (on the whole the headline-grabbing context for change). See McKinsey Quarterly. 2006. *Organizing for Successful Change Management: A McKinsey Global Survey*. July.

5   The term "technocracy" derives from the Greek words *tekhne* (meaning, skill or craft) and *kratos* (power, as in government or rule).

6   Egged on by inexorable pressure for performance from shareholders or senior management, sometimes both, many organizations adopt lofty targets and embark on flurries of activity with neither well-defined agreements nor routes for achieving them. (Retreats and drop boxes are favorite gimmicks with which to try to bolster team spirit and elicit contributions toward these. Glossy pamphlets, mandatory briefing sessions, and tool kits usually follow.) All too often, it does not matter why the change is needed, who should change, what should change into what, and how the change should take place: the object is to identify key results areas and achieve related milestones. Doing something calms the conscience; it also suggests initiative and can-do qualities in quick-wits and earns them promotion. Corners are cut or taken fast. Pressure builds up on a par with individual and team fears, breeding more initiatives.

7   A placebo is a tablet, liquid, or other form of medication that has no active ingredients and no intrinsic remedial value but serves to appease or reassure a patient. (In medical research and medicine, simulated interventions can actually produce perceived or actual improvements.)

8   As though organizations were patients nearing death, some have stretched and applied Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' five stages of grief, viz., denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, to speed recovery. See Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. 1973. *On Death and Dying*. Routledge Publishing.

9   Peter Floyd. 2002. *Organizational Change*. Capstone Publishing.

10 The "what" of change covers much ground, for instance, an organization's brand; culture; styles of leadership and management; policies; corporate strategy; resources; systems, structure, and business processes; functions; products, programs, and services; communications; degrees of freedom and autonomy afforded to people and operations; and operations and locations.

- Define clear measures and establish measurement systems to track progress.
- Sustain, institutionalize, and embed the change.
- Accept that change is a journey—so end, review, and start again.

> *There is nothing wrong with change, if it is in the right direction.*
>
> —Winston Churchill

But it does not help that a strategy that has been decided is frequently overtaken by emerging events or circumstances. This impacts the goal, focus, direction, and perhaps even need for the earlier change; improvisation becomes the order of the day and strategic planners are rued. (Paradoxically, change efforts can, through over-management, reinforce the systemic issues they attempt to address.) As you would expect—given the odds against success only 30% of change efforts succeed—disclaimers precede and follow:

- No amount of advance thinking, planning, and communication guarantees success—change as we think we know it being inherently unpredictable.
- Any change involves a shift of the organization's power structure—that being the greatest causes of passive or open resistance.
- Individuals who support change at the onset can become neutral or even passive or active resisters over time
- All change efforts run into overt and covert resistance.

Change fatigue pervades organizations that cannot learn for change.[11] (After all, irrespective of the outcome, transformation takes energy that must first be mobilized then sustained.) Tell-tale signs of fatigued organizations are (i) senior management and change sponsors do not attend progress reviews; (ii) there is reluctance to share, perhaps even comment on, information about the change effort; (iii) resources are given over to other strategic initiatives; (iv) clients, audiences, and partners demonstrate impatience with the duration of the change effort or increasingly question its objectives; and (v) change managers, champions, and agents are stressed out and the change team considers leaving (not quite, it seems, the hope, sense of focus, enthusiasm, feeling of momentum, or confidence that drive accomplishment). The solution? Forget "heroic" leaders;[12] eschew transformation; focus on continuous (not episodic) developmental (or at most transitional) improvements at the middle or bottom of the organization to maintain long-term organizational health; and, above all, distribute (servant) leadership.

The Social Psychology of Fear

Change is not difficult; couching it in military terminology instills fear and does it a disservice. The central issue is never the "what," "why," "who," and "how" of change: it is always about (triple- or, better still, quadruple-loop) learning,[13] facilitated or hampered by organization, people, knowledge, and technology.

Organizations are human institutions, not machines.[14] Man's fears are of something and for something. People must first understand and buy into the need for change (and use organization, knowledge, and technology in support) if any meaningful progress toward a desired future state is to be made at all. Social neuroscience teaches much: change has significant psychological impacts on the human mind. To the fearful it is threatening (because things may get worse); to the hopeful it is encouraging (because things may get better); to the confident it is inspiring (because the challenge is now to make things better).

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[11] Peter Senge mooted the idea of the learning organization 20 years ago. But we still have not learned to think less like managers and more like biologists. We still view organizations as rigid hierarchies instead of seeing them as communities and networks of practice. Why then, one might ask, is the static organization not yet extinct? The answer is that it may still have comparative or absolute advantages such as brand identity, technological exclusivity, economies of scale. Else, it may—for a while longer—be operating in slow markets characterized, for instance, by low trading volumes or levels of volatility.

[12] Transformational leaders infantilize their organizations: they keep personnel at such a low stage of development that they cannot even frame possibilities.

[13] The majority of organizations operate by way of single-loop learning—they spend the bulk of their time detecting and correcting deviations from the "rules." In double-loop learning, they are able to reflect on whether the rules might need to be altered. In triple-loop learning, they deliberate at length on how they think about rules, not just on whether the rules should be changed. Alas, quadruple-loop learning is rarely associated with organizational learning: reflective and comparative, it analyzes systemic options and evaluates the foundational claims of each. This brings it to investigate the deep assumptions of paradigms and the principles they are built on, ethics, horizons, and approaches to knowledge creation. The payoffs are breakthroughs by perpetual practice in humane, built-for-change organizations.

[14] If the success of change efforts were simply a function of resources, or even intelligence, organizations would have found the magic formula by now.

In truth, however elaborate they may be, most change management techniques from the mid-20th century to date derive from conventional command-and-control mindsets that demotivate knowledge workers. These techniques are in point of fact responsible for poor organizational performance and resistance to change: they threaten status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness—five domains of social experience that are deeply important to the brain. Consequently, a good number of staff disengage and seek protection in apathy. (And, in such instances, resistance will not be limited to macro-level changes.)

Co-opting Staff for Self-Led Change

Certainly, it is difficult and ultimately pointless to make people do what they do not want to do. Nobody likes to be subjected to change. But change that we dream up and embrace on our own is different—that kind of change staff undertake and never tire of. If, instead of forcing personnel to perform this or that somersault, we found out what they want to do and helped them achieve it—in so doing building participation and receptivity to change— we would discover that change takes little suasion to envisage and implement. Redefining a relationship requires openness, reciprocity, and, especially, an appreciation of one's vulnerability: it does not mean one must do battle with the old.

According to Nick Morgan,[15] Semco SA, a privately held manufacturing and services company in São Paulo, Brazil that practices "management without control," epitomizes the bottom-up approach to change.[16] He reports that (i) staff choose their jobs, titles, places, hours of work, and even pay; (ii) everyone undergoes a 360-degree evaluation every 6 months, which forms the core of any needed change; (iii) leaders are picked by staff and almost always come from within Semco SA, so that no radical changes are imposed by outsiders trying to make a good impression; (iv) the position of chief executive officer changes regularly: four persons rotate through the job every year; and (v) the company does not even try to prepare annual budgets—6 months is as far down the road as it can see. In brief, Semco SA appears to redefine change: instead of being the work of senior management, change is the responsibility of "atoms," groups of 8–12 persons who see to the company's basic processes. As a result, change becomes continual, gradual, low-level—and virtually unnoticed. How we are conditioned to think determines how we are conditioned to act.

Further Reading

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[15] Nick Morgan. 2001. How to Overcome Change Fatigue. *Harvard Management Communication Letter*. Vol. 4, No. 7, July.

[16] The rules for "management without control" of Ricardo Semler, Semco SA's president, are to (i) forget about the top line, (ii) never stop being a start-up, (iii) do not be a nanny, (iv) let talent find its place, (v) make decisions quickly and openly, and (vi) partner promiscuously.

For further information

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