

Implementing Change

When to Change

Given the pressures and the types of changes possible to institute, when is the decision made to pull the lever, "Let's change now"? Basically, an organisation can institute change when things are going well, when results are mixed, or when a full-fledged crisis is upon it.

An organisation can anticipate pressures down the road. Considering making changes proactively can be partly a matter of foresight and preparation; but it also can entail the belief that, if the organisation is not routinely changing itself, it risks complacency and stagnation.

Or, an organisation can encounter a problem, not necessarily life-threatening but one deserving attention, and, thus, feel the need to introduce change. It might, for example, consider creating a quality program after receiving disturbing results about its own service quality.

Given these general "times" for introducing change, one might assume that the process is easier when the organisation is in crisis: the situation is clear to all, survival is on the line; everyone recognizes that the way things have been done won't work anymore. But the very fact of the crisis suggests that at best there has been inattentiveness to its origins; there may be deep organisational problems that deter introducing changes to confront the situation. Thus, one might say, changes really should be made in anticipation of difficulties. But, paradoxically, making changes before "the event" is equally difficult - how can an organisation be energized to make changes when the need for them is not universally perceived? How **far** down the road is down the road?

Some argue that a way around this paradox is to manufacture a sense of crisis, rather than wait for the "real" one to appear. This crafting of urgency presumably elicits a responsiveness to change while not placing the organisation at risk. The danger of this approach is in crying wolf. Claim too many times that survival is at stake and the organisation will greet you with "This, too, shall pass."

When to change, thus, involves an exquisite sense of timing: have we waited too long or have we started too soon? The challenge is to choose the time when the organisation both should make changes and can do so. However, those two dimensions don't always come together - hence, the challenge.

Implementing Change

When people think about change, they often picture designing a bold new change strategy- complete with stirring vision- that will lead an organisation into a brave new future. And, in fact, this crafting of a visionary strategy is a pivotal part of the process of change. But even more challenging-and harder to get a grasp on- is what follows the strategy and the vision: the implementation process itself. When it comes to the daily, nitty-gritty, tactical, and operational decision making of change, the implementer is the one who makes or breaks the program's success.

Of course, the implementer doesn't act alone. Change succeeds when an entire organisation participates in the effort. An organisation can be divided into three broad action roles: **change strategists**, **change implementers**, and **change recipients**, and each of these roles plays a different key part in the change process. Change strategists, simply put, are responsible for the early work: identifying the need for change, creating a vision of the desired outcome, deciding what change is feasible, and choosing who should sponsor and defend it. And change recipients represent the largest group of people that must adopt, and adapt to, the change. These are the institutionalisers, and their behaviour determines whether a change will stick.

But change implementers are the ones who "make it happen," managing the day-to-day process of change. The implementers' task is to help shape, enable, orchestrate, and facilitate successful progress. Depending on the extent of the "vision" they are given, they can develop the implementation plan, or shepherd through programs handed down to them. Simultaneously, they must respond to demands from above while attempting to win the cooperation of those below.

Common Pitfalls of Implementation

Real-life stories of organisational change rarely measure up to the tidy experiences related in books. The echo of well-intentioned and enthusiastic advice fades as the hard work of change begins. No matter how much effort organisations invest in preparation and workshops - not to mention pep rallies, banners, and pins - they are invariably insufficiently prepared for the difficulties of implementing change. The responsibility for this situation lies in several areas.

Those who make change must also grapple with unexpected forces both inside and outside the organisation. No matter how carefully these implementers prepare for change, and no matter how realistic and committed they are, there will always be factors outside of their control that may have a profound impact on the success of the change process. These external, uncontrollable, and powerful forces are not to be underestimated, and they are one reason why some have questioned the manageability of change at all. Shift in government regulations, union activism, competitive assaults, product delays, mergers and acquisitions, and political and international crises are all a reality of organisational life today, and managers cannot expect to implement their plans free of such interruptions.

If a company already has a track record of opposing change, more care should be taken to design a gradual non-threatening and, preferably, participative implementation process, including the following tactics:

- ⊕ Explain change plans fully
- ⊕ Skilfully present plans
- ⊕ Make information readily available
- ⊕ Make sure plans include benefits for end users and for the organisation
- ⊕ Spend extra time talking
- ⊕ Ask for additional feedback from the work force
- ⊕ Start small and simple
- ⊕ Arrange for a quick, positive, visible payoff
- ⊕ Publicise successes

At this early stage of the change process, implementers may also want to systematically examine the forces for and against change. Change will not occur unless the forces driving it are stronger than those resisting it. By lifting these forces, managers have a way to determine their organisations' readiness for change. If the forces against change appear dominant, implementers should consider what additional forces they can muster - for example, in the form of committed followers, or of better proof of the need for change-before launching a change plan.

The Recipients of Change

People in the throes of change often speak in terms of being diminished. They also use words like anger, betrayal, and shock - in short, they describe dramatic emotions that rarely encompass the positive. They experience being unappreciated, anxious, at a minimum, confused.

In contrast, much has been written about the need to embrace change with enthusiasm. We are to "foster hardiness" and be flexible; change is a challenge to confront, an adventure; we must "thrive on chaos." What accounts for this difference between actual reactions to change and what we are supposed to feel? Can this gap be bridged? Not easily.

No organisation can institute change if its employees will not, at the very least, accept the change. No change will "work" if employees don't help in the effort. And, change is not possible without people changing themselves. Any organisation that believes change can take hold without considering how people will react to it is in deep delusion. Change can be "managed" externally by those who decide when it is needed and how it "should" be implemented. But it **will** be implemented only when employees accept change - and the specific change internally.

By grasping more organisationally the experience of being changed, those managing the process can gain a broader understanding of the effects - intended and unintended of the changes they are instituting.

One point must be stressed at the outset. For some people, any interference with routine provokes strong reaction. These people are "set in their ways" or worse! At the other extreme are those for whom the next mountain is always to be attacked with ferocity. These are the daredevils among us. Most people fall between these two poles, and it is with them that managers mostly must focus.