



Train Ride Reading March 2009

Weaving Change

Change management benefits from respect for continuity.

Change models for management purposes are not exactly in short supply. Depending on your situation, you might use Lewin's 3 phases of change, Hollings's 4 phases, Kübler-Ross' 5 phases, Greiner's 6 phases, Lippitt's 7 phases, Kotter's 8 phases ... there is something for every taste and every organisation.

It will therefore come as a relief that this article does not propose yet another change model. What I am offering here is a perspective that cuts across models and might in fact be helpful alongside any one of them. I am addressing the article to managers and leaders in business but it is equally relevant to anyone else who drives change in some way.

It is no secret that the success of change in an organisation hinges on engaging people in the right way. People need to embrace change, to actively support it, and to be energised and inspired by it. This is not easy to achieve – especially when change has to be radical and urgent and is forced by unprecedented economic calamity.

Our natural tendency is to concentrate hard on the actual change project, to organise our thinking and actions around it, and to focus on the present

rather than dwell on the past or dream into the future. In times like these, we live and breathe change. Business strategy is reset at the stroke of a pen. Old plans are scrapped. The structure of the organisation may be reshaped beyond recognition.

And yet – humans are creatures of continuity. Regardless of the revolution happening around them, people retain their ambitions, their plans, their hopes, their fears, their aversions, their aspirations. Relationships between people grow continuously, expert knowledge evolves gradually through experience, and people's sense of purpose in life is out of reach of any corporate restructuring.

Soon after the iron curtain had fallen in 1989 and the communist regimes had collapsed, there was much consternation in the West that Eastern European countries did not automatically and immediately become mirror images of the established democracies on the lucky side of the divide. It should not have come as a surprise. Regimes may change and indeed fall overnight, but people do not. People follow their own individual paths through life, and although external circumstances are linked into those paths, they do not exert total control.

Leading people through change therefore requires respect for the continuity of their life and career paths. "Respect" does not mean grudging acknowledgement of perceived obstacles – it means consciously embracing and utilising continuity.

What you have on your hands if you are a leader and manager is a colourful set of strands, and your job is to weave all those strands and the demands of the business into a single fabric. Make sure none of those strands gets broken, and your fabric will turn out strong.

What does this mean in practice?

First of all, respecting continuity in people is only possible if you know them in the first place. You need to know what makes them tick, what worries them, what attracts them, where they want to go. And it is not enough to just have a snapshot of this information – you need to be aware how people have evolved over time and have a feel for extrapolating their paths into the future. Established managers in an organisation tend to have that knowledge anyway, and it is just a matter of consciously making the most out of it in a change context. For new or interim managers who are brought in as part of structural changes it is a much greater challenge – but it is worth the time and effort. Find, and work with, all the strands, and your fabric will turn out strong.

There cannot be a definitive “list of strands” but, for illustration, let me look at three common ones:

- Career path: “Getting ahead” in their professional life means different things to different people. Some enjoy climbing a predefined ladder, others relish the excitement of moving between different types and areas of work. Some people attach value to continuously expanding reporting and budgetary responsibility. Others thrive on building their technical prowess and authority. Usually, there are many possible next steps in an individual's career path – although it can take a manager or coach to make the individual conscious of the full range. As long as the path continues in one of those favoured directions, change is acceptable or even exciting news rather than a threat. For a manager navigating and driving a change process, this perspective opens up far more options than the classic black/white consideration of “how much will xyz resist if I move him away from his current role”.

- Work relationships: No, this is not about budding romance at work, but about the fact that people collaborate best once they have built strong rapport, respect, and trust on a professional and to an extent on a personal level.

Each such relationship is an asset, and one of those strands that deserves continuity. Organisational structures are rarely perfect in times of change, and it is sometimes those relationships that save them from falling apart.

Can you build on those relationships, e.g. by spreading the members of a close-knit team over multiple departments that you want to collaborate more closely in the future? Can you ensure that still weak relationships continue to grow, e.g. by resourcing the first post-change project such that certain people are forced to work closely together? In other words, can you weave those relationship strands into the overall change process?

- Unfinished business: People who care about their work hate leaving unfinished business. It is of course an integral element of change in business that projects have to be canned, systems are abolished, and strategic plans are binned. But the emotional involvement of people cannot be switched off – it continues, potentially for a long time. You can bemoan this – or you can turn it to your advantage. Again, consider an item of “unfinished business” as one of the strands that requires continuity in some way, and think about redirecting or transferring that emotional involvement to another project or responsibility.

So if you consider these three and other strands, and consider them for all the people in your sphere of influence, and consider at the same time the commercial and strategic demands of the change process (and you can again

think of these as a set of strands) – what you have might not so much feel like the raw material for weaving an exciting fabric, but rather a desperately, dauntingly, complex puzzle. How can there be any hope to respect the continuity of dozens and dozens of strands when there are enough other constraints to worry about already?

The good news is that it is not necessary to come up with a perfect solution. There is no tipping point – the benefits accrue with every additional strand you manage to weave in. Also, the strands of people who leave an organisation as part of a change programme do not feature in your weaving effort. It might actually turn out that the “Weaving Change” perspective affects decisions on who should stay and who should leave.

But the most powerful tool you have as “weaver” is your influence over structure and responsibilities. You may not be able to set the overall change agenda but, as a manager, you have influence at least over the microstructure of your team or department – roles, project details, assignment of responsibilities, pairing of people, etc. Using these degrees of freedom makes it absolutely feasible and possibly even enjoyable to be the “weaver”.

It is satisfying for almost any individual to see their career evolution, their personal development, their ambitions – in short: their strands – respected. People like an inner logic in their professional and life path, even if someone initially needs to point out that inner logic. People need to have a story to justify to themselves and to those around them (colleagues, friends, partner, family) why they go along with an uncomfortable change process, and continuity through change effectively writes that story.

Finally, a recent, prominent, example of a leader driving change while consciously respecting and embracing continuity: This is of course Barack

Obama who built his campaign and indeed his first actions in office around one theme – Change. But any major speech he has delivered, be it the race relations speech that arguably saved his campaign, be it his victory speech last November, or be it his inauguration address, has always put that change into a historic context and presented it as the logical continuation of aspects of the American Dream.

As I said in the beginning, I am not in any way discounting the usefulness of standard change management models, tools, and methods. But what I would encourage managers and leaders of change to do is to add a “Weaving Change” perspective, to embrace continuity, and to carefully weave its strands into a new and strong fabric.

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