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Effectively Managing Organizational Change

Throughout organizational history it has been witnessed and written of time and again just how difficult initiating and leading change, as it relates to human behavior, can be. As early as the fourteenth century, statesman and writer Niccolo Machiavelli recognized the individual and group perceptions of change: “There is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things... This arises partly from the incredulity of mankind who do not truly believe in anything new until they have actual experience of it.”¹ Although Machiavelli is known for what are generally viewed as unethical tactics such as deception and force (in modern management texts these are termed “Machiavellian Tactics”), his perception of human resistance to change is nonetheless insightful.

BY CASEY J. WICK

Ask any manager to recount a time when significant changes to their organization were required, and the response will more than likely be a woeful tale of suspicion, resistance, and eventually reluctant acceptance. Initiating and implementing organizational change can be, and very often is, a journey characterized by periods of temporary progress followed by slow regression back to old habits and operating practices. Countless challenges and barriers rooted in individual and group perceptions lay around each and every bend in the road to effective and lasting changes. More importantly, the journey of organizational change is one in which the pressure influencing change can shift rapidly and without warning making the destination seem unattainable. Fortunately, with firm commitment and thorough planning, the initiation and implementation of pressure-driven changes can be successfully made within an organizational setting.

THE PRESSURE TO CHANGE

Successful agents of change, whether internal or external, understand it is paramount for environmental changes to be matched by organizational change if the organization is to remain effective.² When working to implement organizational changes, it is crucial to understand the critical elements including; the forces causing the pressure to change, the process by which change occurs, the causes and nature behind the resistance to change, and finally strategies for overcoming such resistance.

All organizations face two basic sources of pressure to change, external and internal pressures.³ Because these two distinctions often share common traits, such as communication channels, organizational policies and individual/group perceptions, the differences may be perceived as arbitrary. However, in order to accurately evaluate the forces creating pressure to change such a separation will facilitate a clearer understanding and an effective change process.

Organizations are often driven into change action by a solid jolt from forces outside its own boundaries where no immediate control is exercised. These external forces include regulatory, social, technological, or political pressures triggering the organization to respond. Whatever the cause, change driven by external forces is generally of a proactive nature. That is the need for change is a result of foreseeable situations coming in the future. Regulatory requirements and technology are two good examples of foreseeable forces.

Generally speaking, most new, or changes to existing, regulatory requirements are announced in bulletins published by the authority having jurisdiction. Knowing of these new or changed regulations gives the organization an opportunity to be proactive and begin the necessary changes to be compliant before the new regulations become law. Likewise, advances in technology occur rapidly but not without a certain period of advance notice. Upgrades to software, innovations in energy management/building automation systems and advances in equipment are all preceded by vendor demos and product specific training.

Successful organizational change driven by external pressures requires the capacity to effectively receive, filter, and accurately interpret inflows of information from various external channels. Once the information is processed action must be taken in innovative and creative ways leading to a predetermined and desired organizational position.

Internal sources of pressure are of a different nature yet no less influential or critical. Internal sources of change can often be traced to process, procedural, or behavioral issues within the organization itself.⁴ Shortcomings within the organization that often create internal pressures include: high absenteeism and turnover, low productivity, frequent grievances, and even conflict and sabotage. For example, a sudden and dramatic exodus due to a newly offered retirement option could cause a string of promotions and lateral moves.

Because of the rapid nature of the staff movements, many may be



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made without adequate preparation. The result will be redundant, misinterpreted, or inadequate communications leading to systemic breakdowns within and between divisions, departments, and offices. Periodic internal assessments can be effective in identifying symptoms of internal situations that may result in the need for change.

However, most often internal change is reactive and is driven by pressures which appear with little or no advance warning. Organizations are forced to take rapid corrective action with little time to prepare an adequate plan for change. In such circumstances organizations must take an approach which will stabilize the internal environment for a period long enough to identify the true cause of the pressure, establish a clear vision of the necessary improvements, and initiate the change process toward the desired outcomes.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CHANGE

Appropriate and realistic change is characterized by several key elements including; expected outcomes, schedule and progress expectation, individual and group responsibilities and control mechanism necessary to track progress toward newly established organizational goals. Such changes essentially come about through a sequence of organizational events or a psychological process that occurs over time.⁵ Modern organizational behavior theorists agree that organizational change occurs through what is generally viewed as a three-step process.

The first step, *unfreezing*, is the result of a recognition that the current organizational status is inappropriate or inadequate. Unfreezing involves moving individuals and groups out of old mindsets and habits. Change leaders, participants, and stakeholders must arrive at a shared and agreed upon vision in order for organizational change to be effective and lasting. Elements such as progress and schedules must be universally understood and accepted in order for backward slides to be avoided.

Once the unfreezing has occurred, the *change, or moving*, stage of the process begins. Individuals and groups begin to exhibit the new behaviors and practices identified as desirable outcomes. New policies and procedures are initiated and change leaders work to motivate the organization to pick up momentum toward the desired position. At this point interested parties often assume there will be an immediate and positive result from the changes in policies, processes, or behaviors. However, there is more often than not a drop in performance or productivity immediately after such adjustments are initiated due to the learning curve associated with the transitions. This performance gap must be identified and accounted for in the progress and schedule as defined in the change plan.

Once the desired changes begin to take hold, *refreezing* must occur to ensure the attitudes, behaviors, and processes become part of the new organizational culture. Refreezing strengthens and reinforces the changes and diffuses them through the organization for assimilation. During the refreezing period it is critical to safeguard against the new habits and behaviors from becoming too rigid. Flexibility is important to controlling the change process and allowing for appropriate adjustments when necessary. The main focus of refreezing must be to build and foster fluid adaptability, regular and continuing internal assessment, and continuous improvement.

While there are countless individual reasons for resistance to change, surprise initiation, misunderstanding of the need for change, lack of trust, fear of failure, poor timing, and competing demands are most often the primary culprits. Directly relative to the significance of the cause of the change there will be relative and escalating levels of fear and anxiety by those affected. For example, in the case of policy change, the individual may not understand the reason for the policy change and fear getting disciplined for failing to adhere to the new policy. This may cause a certain amount of short-term stress and anxiety until the new policy takes hold and the individual or group becomes comfortable with the change.

In a more serious event, such as a catastrophic fire or major organizational restructuring, individuals will experience a much greater level of fear and anxiety possibly leading to debilitating physical or emotional manifestations. In both cases there is a common thread that makes them similar—the fear of the unknown. It is fear of the unknown that causes individuals and groups to be so resistant to change. In the realm of the unknown there is always the possibility of failure and loss of security which is the driving force behind resistance to change.

EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

Effective strategies for reducing or eliminating resistance are essential to the process of implementing lasting and effective organizational change. While there are several strategies generally accepted as effective, they all have certain traits in common and are most effective when used in combination. Developing a positive climate for change is at the top of the list. The beliefs employees hold about the organization will affect their responses during times of change. Effective, honest, and transparent communication with employees will help to build a positive belief about the change leaders and in turn will facilitate dissipa-

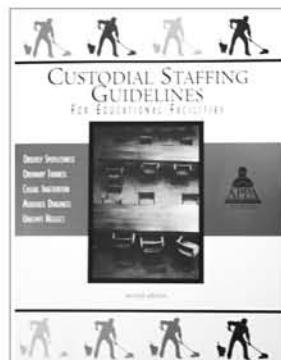
tion of the related anxiety within the organization. Encouraging an interest in improvement will have a profound effect on individuals and groups involved in the change process. Here one must be conscious of the perils of the “Do as I say and not as I do” perception. If employees are being encouraged to accept change and improvement yet the leadership does not participate in improvement programs a conflicting message will be sent.

Education is universally accepted as the foundation of effective strategies because of its proactive nature. Education focuses on accurately and clearly informing employees of the driving forces behind the need for change, developing the necessary skills and knowledge and supporting individual and group development. With few drawbacks, education is clearly one of the most desirable strategies. However, regardless of the format in which it is delivered, education can be time consuming and costly.

Participation is another strategy change leaders frequently rely on. Acting as a substantial contributor will instill a genuine sense of ownership within the participants and stakeholders alike. By being participants in the planning, implementation, and follow-up phases of the change process employees are more likely to give full commitment.

Facilitation is yet another highly effective change strategy and is essential in situations where individual stress, anxiety and

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adjustment difficulties underlie the resistance. In such situations efforts such as work stress counseling, scheduling flexibility, and specialized training in time management, adaptation, and group interaction may dissipate employee fear.

Several other strategies are defined and characterized within the process of overcoming resistance. Other strategies identified include manipulation, co-optation, and explicit/implicate coercion. While these strategies are defined and accepted, they are not considered desired or even ethical. Most often these tactics lead to rapid inappropriate changes that are short lived. Additionally, these strategies certainly leave participants feeling as though they have been deceived and taken advantage of. Such emotions will only serve to diminish individual and group trust which is extremely destructive to an organization.

As with any effort which includes swaying the perceptions of individuals and groups, building employee trust and buy-in can be a daunting process. Identifying and understanding the real forces causing the pressure to change is critical to developing a plan of action. Likewise, knowing the fundamentals of the change process will allow change leaders to establish, implement and control the rate and progress of the change efforts.

Change leaders must use the right combination of strategies to influence the employees to accept and work toward a clearly defined and common goal. Dealing with individual perceptions can be an extremely difficult and time consuming task. How-

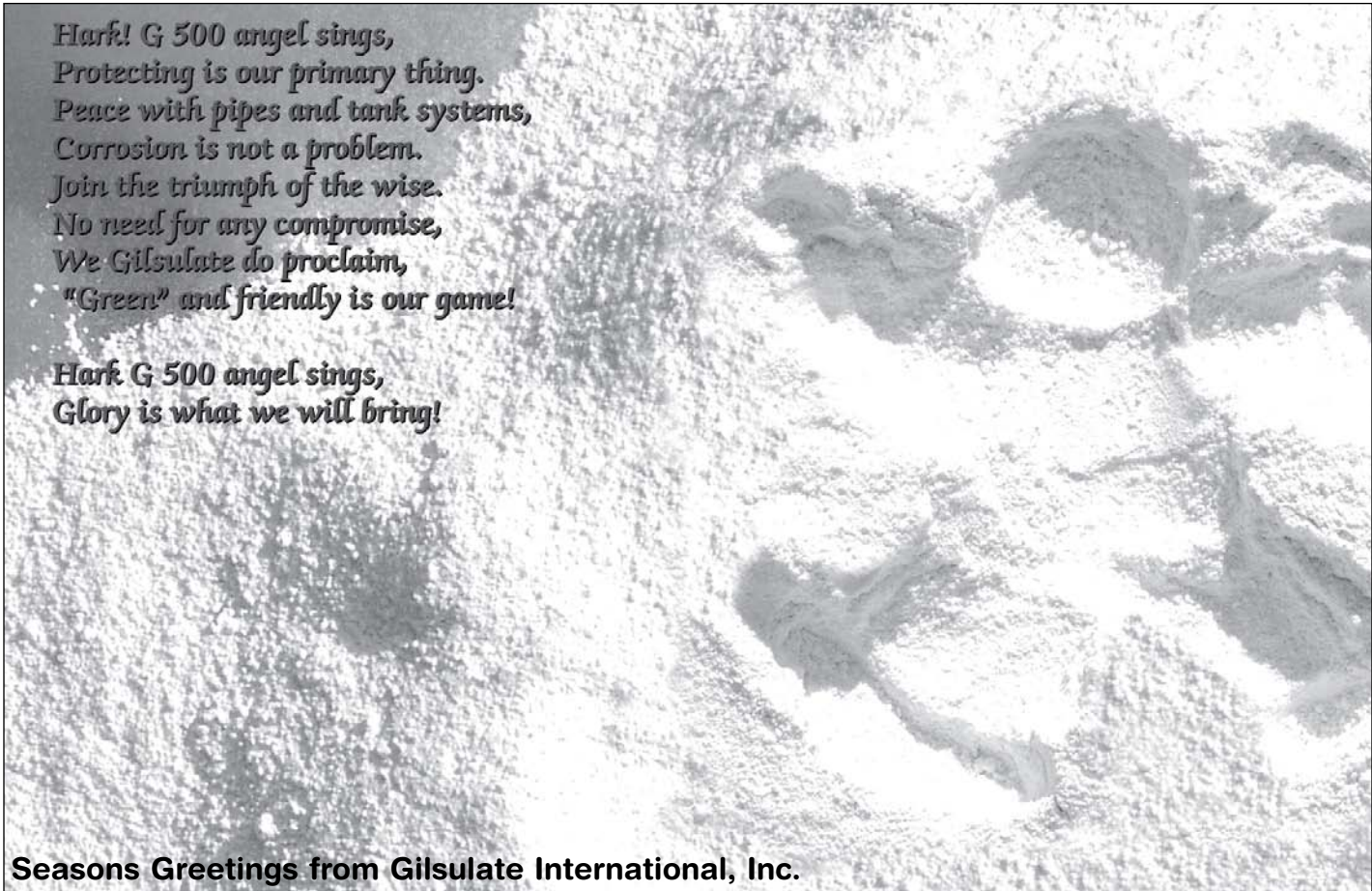
ever, by utilizing tools such as training and education, open, accurate, and transparent communication, employee participation, and facilitation organizations can ensure positive and lasting changes leading to organizational efficiency and success.

Initiating and implementing positive and lasting organizational change truly boils down to sound leadership. As Jack Work wrote, "Leaders are those who in their inimitable ways, inspire confidence, undermine despair, fight fear, initiate positive and productive actions, define goals, and paint a brighter tomorrow." 

NOTES

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4. Bateman and Snell. *Management, Building Competitive Advantage*, Irwin/McGraw Hill 1999
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6. Work, Jack W. *Leaders Of The Future*, The Drucker Foundation, New York, NY 1996

Casey Wick is assistant director of physical plant, custodial services, at Hamilton College, Clinton, NY; he can be reached at cwick@hamilton.edu. This is his first article for *Facilities Manager*.



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