

Managing organizational change – Part 4 – **Adapting to change**

This article is the fourth in a series dealing with the issue of managing change in organizations. Each article deals with a specific problem and proposes measures or approaches for dealing with it. In this article, we examine in general how adaptation to change is experienced by the members of an organization and focus in particular on the awakening stage.

Adapting to change – or resisting ?

Daily life offers many examples of the great capacity of people to adapt. However, experience in the organizational field tends to demonstrate the contrary, simply because there are so many examples of unsuccessful change programmes. Thus, for example, a recent study by Mourier and Smith (2001) of 210 North American companies revealed that only 25 % of managers interviewed described their experience of organizational change as a success.

Faced with such disappointing results, managers often fall back on the argument that these failures are due to “resistance to change”. Although the resistance-to-change explanation is quite tempting, we do not believe that it is worth pursuing. Indeed, what is really required when it comes to intro-



ducing change is not merely eliminating resistance – in which case one could end up with a passive workforce – but inspiring a general mobilization and integration of the objectives of the change. What is really at stake, therefore, is *adapting* to change.

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In fact, if efforts need to be devoted to fighting resistance to change, this is usually because the damage has already been done and one is in a reactive position – it may even be too late to act effectively. It would have been better to follow approaches likely to minimize the appearance of resistance.

Our approach can be summed up in the following statement which, although simple, has many implications: *it is up to the organization's management to provide the necessary means for both line and supervisory staff to adapt to the change it is seeking to introduce.*

Marianne's experience

While we have changed the names of those involved, the situation described here is an actual one.

Marianne, with the backing of her CEO, has just hired a firm of consultants to perform an audit of the situation within her company's management with a view to identifying the reasons for the increasingly serious problems of poor integration of change that have been noted. Tension has grown to a point where the staff



is now making representations to the Board. The union has become involved and its representatives have written a letter to management requesting immediate action to restore a healthy working climate. They refer to many cases of unease within management itself without, however, identifying specific problems.

Marianne has some 25 years of management experience and has risen to many different challenges. Well known for her determination and organizational abilities, she had accepted six months before to manage the commercial department of a newly established insurance brokerage firm – ASROP Insurance Co. This company resulted from the merger of six regional enter-

prises, in one of which Marianne held a similar position.

This is how she described things at her first meeting with the consultant: “From the day I took office, I made it my duty to define the new organizational set-up so that Sales would quickly become fully operational and fully integrated. I sought to avoid any problems for the customers and to let them reap the benefits of the merger as soon as possible.”

“Following the approval of the new strategy, work plan and budgets, we put the new structure in place within weeks: working timetables, communication channels between branch offices, quality control measures, IT tools, pricing schedules, unit supervisors, forms, etc.. This was certainly not easy, for the new organizational set-up involved reassigning several people to different posts.”

In fact, albeit a month behind the original schedule, the principal components of the programme were in operation. But the grumbling was already beginning to make itself heard. Not only was criticism coming from all quarters, but some staff also went as far as blaming management to their customers whenever a problem or a snag arose.

Moreover, the staff showed little enthusiasm for adopting the new working methods.

Interviewed by the consultant, the branch managers had the following comments: “The staff is working rather slowly, claiming they no longer understand how they should be doing their work. There is a

high error rate in the files they handle and it is always ‘someone else’s fault’ or due to shortcomings in the set-up of the new operations.

“The data input to the computer system is often wrong and incomplete, needing a considerable amount of time to be put right, which adversely affects the different units’

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productivity. The procedures to be followed need to be explained over and over to the staff who tend to become irritable and impatient.

“Some even show a negative or purely mechanical attitude, complying passively with what they are asked to do and nothing more – just like children!”

Yet there was no lack of talent and competence within each of the companies that were merged – on the contrary.

“One shouldn’t overdramatize, however,” Marianne added. “It is true that the staff had to assimilate many changes and novelties within a short period, but in fact, they did that rather well in spite of a few remaining difficulties. With time and a little goodwill on the part of everyone, things should work out fine.”

In spite of this show of optimism, the situation is still critical. At this stage, the productivity gains expected from reengineering the process are failing to materialize and the company’s market position could even regress. One should concede that Marianne had little time to prepare the operation because the management of the new company expected fast results. However, that is where the pitfall lay: the race against the clock proved to be rather counterproductive – the objectives were not being achieved and the department seems to be at a dead end, a situation for which Marianne may well be held accountable.

To understand how, despite the best of intentions, this manager came to find herself in such a situation, let us take a closer look at the process that people usually experience when exposed to major change.

Managers often fall back on the argument that failures are due to ‘resistance to change’

Organizational change in three dimensions

Adapting to change is often seen as an essentially individual process – which is a misconception. In fact, organizational change occurs in three dimensions – individual, collective, and organizational (see **Figure 1**).

Individual change:

When exposed to change, the individual is faced with the need to reconcile several challenges. On the one hand, he needs to form his own personal opinion of the relevance and quality of the proposed change. If he accepts the need for change, he will then have to make substantial efforts to acquire and master the new competencies required, while experiencing the insecurity that arises from losing his established bearings.

What is more, he must at the same time watch and even probe the reactions of his co-workers to see whether they are in favour of the

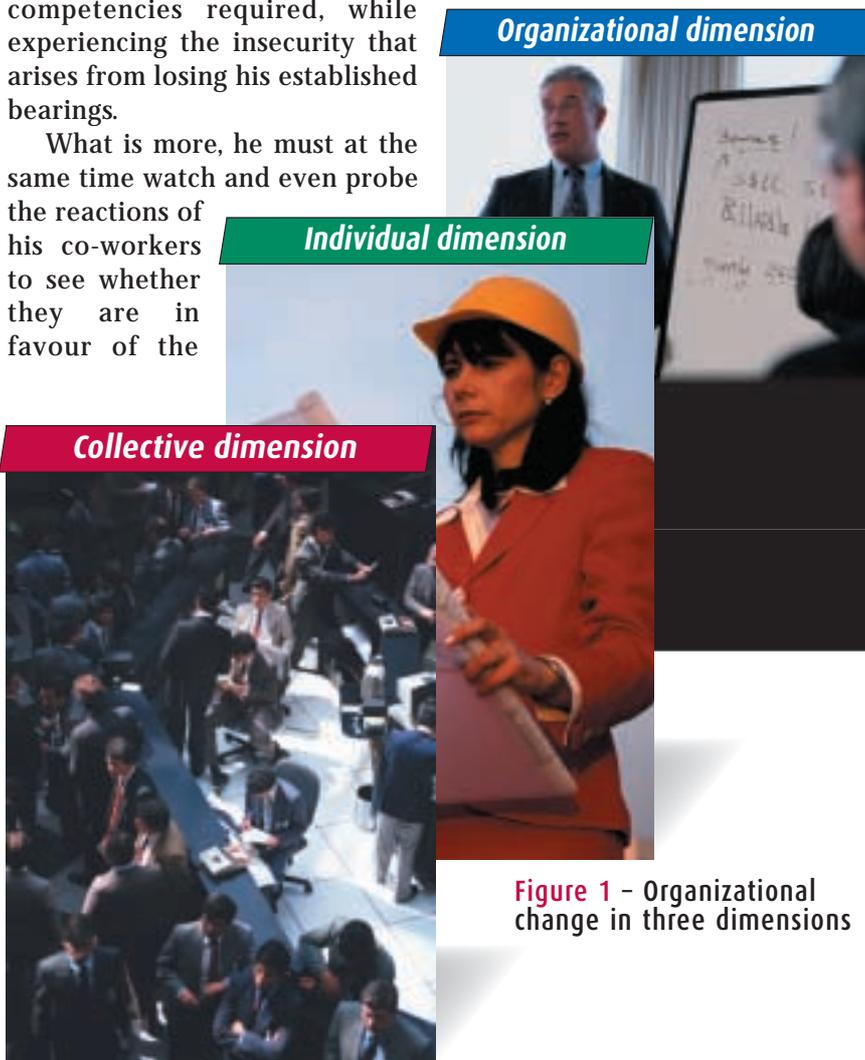


Figure 1 – Organizational change in three dimensions

change or not, and thereby assess whether he is exposing himself to the disapproval of his peers by accepting or rejecting the change. He will be engaging, in fact, in a form of negotiation or game of influence from which the “collectively acceptable” position will ultimately emerge.

Finally, he will have to bear with the new methods, which are often not yet finalized, proposed by the initiators of the change. In a way, the individual dimension is like an obstacle course that one has not chosen to negotiate, with a large number of hurdles to clear!

The collective dimension: Management tends to underestimate the determining influence of peer pressure in the acceptance or rejection of change. For example, the director of a small enterprise recently expressed his dismay after his staff, at a union meeting, had voiced their opposition to a change project that would have entailed loss for a few, while in private, several had encouraged him to go ahead with the project. He had just been confronted with the confusing phenomenon of peer pressure.

Indeed, it has been largely demonstrated that in spite of our first impressions, many people will choose to behave in that way they believe is acceptable to their peers, and will only with great difficulty break rank afterwards, for fear of being rejected by the group. Our research suggests that acceptance of change involves a form of explicit “social compact” whereby existing practices are discredited, while new alternatives are welcomed, in most cases under the impetus of natural leaders, or at least with their tacit approval. The work of Everett Rogers (1995) on the adoption of innovations is very eloquent on this subject.

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The organizational dimension:

In addition to the individual’s personal mind set with regard to change and to the peer pressure experienced, he must also accommodate the organizational framework in which he operates, i.e. the actions taken by management to promote and introduce change, as well as the technical or operational means that need to be implemented in order to effect and enable the required change.

New structure, quality concepts, customer-oriented services, different lines of reporting, process reengineering, new technology, improved manufacturing process, revised horizontal relations, modified procedures, all of these are examples of organizational aspects that will need to be developed, tested, adjusted, assimilated, assessed, corrected and documented. Somewhat technical and bureaucratic, this dimension is more accessible and is often where management focuses its attention within the organization, overlooking the

two other dimensions.

In fact, these three dimensions evolve together and if one jams, the others will be directly affected. The interdependence of these three dimensions therefore adds to the complexity of the task, which no doubt explains in part the low rate of success achieved in managing change. This is the kind of challenge that only particularly versatile but rigorous managers can take on.

The three-stage change process

The most popular model applied for explaining the process of change in human beings is that of Kurt Lewin (1951), who suggests a model involving three stages labelled as unfreezing, movement, refreezing. Our own

research in this field has led us to alter this approach to some extent:

*Individuals, groups and organizations which succeed in adapting to change, must typically go through three stages (see **Figure 2**): **awakening, transition, ritualization.***

Their boundaries are blurred and their duration may vary from one situation to another.

In this article, we will be dwelling on the “awakening” stage, which is crucial for success in setting a change programme in motion. The transition and ritualization stages will be discussed in the next article of this series.

Awakening

This stage begins when the individual responds to a prompt for change. This is the case, for example, of the foreman who weighs up a new way of organizing the work put forward by the quality department. It is the case of the sales representative who wonders whether he is really going to fill out the new customer-profile questionnaires as requested by the marketing department. Incited to change, these two individuals are wondering about its relevance to them. We are therefore dealing with a period of reflection, when the pro's and con's of the change proposed by management are put on the scales before a position is taken.

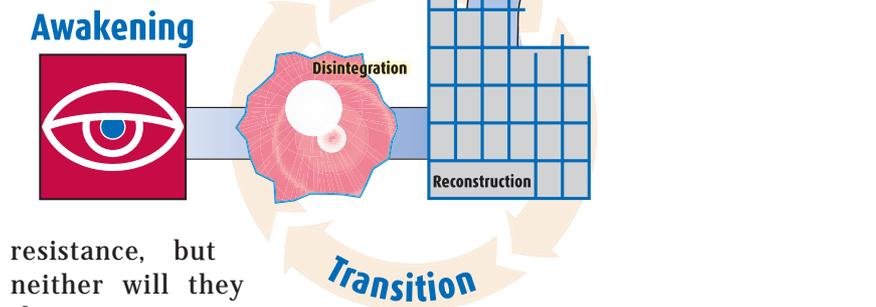
Depending on whether the outcome to this assessment is judged positive, lukewarm or negative, the reactions will range from enthusiastic support, to apathy, to downright rejection. From this emerge three typical profiles:

The supporters

These see obvious advantages in the change and adhere enthusiastically. They will become actively involved and will make efforts to assimilate the change.

The ambivalent

For these, the advantages and disadvantages balance out, so that they hesitate to break away from the status quo, which they perceive as less risky. However, if the pressure for change is strong, they will accept it as a necessary evil. They will not exert active



resistance, but neither will they show strong commitment. In fact, they will wait to be led (and sometimes dragged) reluctantly through the exercise, which they would rather do without.

The opponents

Their assessment of the situation is negative and they use their energy to bar the way. They will be unwilling, sometimes rebellious and, if they fail, may cast themselves into the role of victims, constantly on the lookout for the slightest mistake to which they can draw attention. They do not seek to adapt to change; at best they may submit to it in the end, but with resentment.

In the case of the ambivalent, as with the opponents, though perhaps more strikingly with the latter, people will do their utmost to opt out of the change. For instance, the foreman will conjure up countless reasons for discrediting the proposed reorganization. If nonetheless forced to go along, he will probably act in a robotic and reactive way, keeping to the strict minimum of what is asked. In other words, he will display an attitude of submission and it would be hopeless to expect motivation on his part. And why not?

The stage of awakening can generate a lot of anxiety

Figure 2 - The process of change

Table 1 – Triggers of change¹⁾

	Agree	Rather agree	Rather disagree	Disagree
The staff concerned recognize the shortcomings of the existing situation and experience significant discontent; or can foresee such a risk in the long run.	+4	+2	-2	-4
People enjoying credibility in the eyes of the staff concerned are openly in favour of the proposed change.	+4	+2	-2	-4
The staff can hope to see its benefits increase.	+2	+1	-1	-2
Results for your company (or department)?				
The awakening has been...	10 to 7 successful	6 to 1 limited	0 to -6 poor	-7 to -10 nil

If one is seeking to modify mechanical behaviour, satisfactory results may be obtained provided one is prepared to accept the ensuing complaints and grumbling. However, if one is seeking initiative and enthusiasm, a different approach is required.

In the awakening stage, therefore, the challenge for management is to rouse a large enough “critical mass” in support of the change. This precautionary step is usually neglected by managers, who usually fail to go beyond a few general presentations of the proposed change. Having done that, they believe they have done their job and expect people to be convinced by their arguments as a matter of course. Unfortunately, most of the time, this is an illusion, not to say naive.

How, indeed, can staff accept the proposed changes, or even understand them, if they have taken no part in defining the problem beforehand? Managers themselves, under the same circumstances, would demand to be treated as intelligent people and to be

associated in identifying the problems and finding solutions.

The first condition, therefore, for getting people interested in our proposals for change is to involve them in shaping a shared understanding of the problem – and that is the very first task that management should address. In the case of the foreman, for example, reorganizing the work seems nonsense if he does not think that the current set-up is deficient. For the salesman, filling out a

customer profile is not only an unnecessary burden, but also just one more management fad, unless he can visualize the problems it is meant to correct.

The success or failure of the awakening stage will also depend on the presence of sufficiently significant triggers for change (see **Table 1**), the main three of which are usually the following²⁾:

- the shortcomings of the present situation are perceived by the staff concerned and generate dissatisfaction among them (or such a risk at least appears on the horizon);

**Accepting to question
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1) Adapted from *Le pilotage du changement*. See bibliography.

2) *Le pilotage du changement*, p. 92.

- pressure on the part of the leaders in the area;
- opportunities for individual gains.

Experience suggests that managers have a tendency to dangle before staff the gains associated with the changes they are promoting,

when in fact this trigger is often the least effective and least durable of the three. A combination of the other two is usually the most effective, and even more so when the third – the prospect of personal gain – is added.

How can we stimulate these triggering factors? **Table 2** gives a few

Table 2 – Some ways of increasing receptiveness to change³⁾

	Agree	Rather agree	Rather disagree	Disagree
You draw your staff's attention to the external threats that justify these efforts to change.	+2	+1	-1	-2
You use examples of unfortunate cases that have occurred in the past to support the need to change current practice.	+2	+1	-1	-2
You let the staff identify for themselves the gap between existing practices and the actual features of the environment (customer bases, competition, regulations, etc.).	+2	+1	-1	-2
You let the staff identify for themselves the aspects that are detrimental to the company's efficiency.	+2	+1	-1	-2
You supply factual data about the customer base and how it evolves (size, location, profile).	+2	+1	-1	-2
You supply factual data on how the competition performs (benchmarking).	+2	+1	-1	-2
You provide the results of studies on sources of discontent among clients.	+2	+1	-1	-2
You allow staff to dialogue with customers on the nature, relevance and quality of services offered.	+2	+1	-1	-2
You allow staff to observe practices elsewhere in order to foster greater receptivity to new ideas.	+2	+1	-1	-2
You organize activities that stimulate discussions about the envisaged changes (conferences, courses, training sessions, etc.).	+2	+1	-1	-2
Your result?				
Your style of management...	20 to 14 clearly supports awakening	13 to 1 somewhat supports awakening	0 to -13 does not support awakening	-14 to -20 discourages awakening

3) Adapted from *Le pilotage du changement*.

suggestions stemming from our experience.

The stage of awakening can generate a lot of anxiety. Indeed, accepting to question our mode of functioning means giving up part of our usual references and automatic responses, i.e. our habitual sources of stability. So there is a significant risk here, particularly with regard to our personal interests, which may also be at stake.

That is why it is so important to devote as much effort and energy as required to this stage, to allow those involved to become familiar with the new frame of reference. Managers sometimes feel that this is a waste of time, when in fact it is quite the contrary. It will of course be rather time-consuming, but it is an investment that will produce visible returns in the transition phase, because there will be no resistance to change – or at least less – to deal with, and the likelihood of success will be all the greater.

What, one might ask, is most efficient: bypassing the awakening stage with an 80 – 90% chance of the project coming to a standstill, or devoting time and energy to the awakening process and see the project move ahead rapidly and smoothly towards the objectives sought, with little resistance?

Marianne's problems, revisited

Marianne's efforts were well meaning and she devoted herself fully to her assignment. It should be recognized, however, that the results were not all that positive, at least not up to that point. The principles just described should help us to see bet-

ter what she might have done differently.

- Marianne focused mainly on the organizational dimension. She approached things on the technical level, discussed them with her immediate colleagues, took decisions, and then acted. There is no indication that the job was poorly done. But the individual and collective dimensions were overlooked.
- The staff and middle management were associated neither in defining the objectives to be pursued, nor in identifying the constraints to be taken into account. Thus, without a shared understanding of the problems to be put right, there was no awakening.
- As they were not involved in designing the new operating mode, they did not take on board the new ideas.
- They had no opportunity for open discussions with their co-workers or with management about the stakes, the approach and directions of the change, resulting in a lack of team spirit.
- Since there was no shared understanding of the challenges and their solutions, the staff had the impression of being towed in the wake of a single person's whim, and became either rebellious or apathetic. Marianne devoted little time to the awakening phase, taking for granted that people would quite naturally concur with her views. Reality turned out to be quite different and she now needs to spend a lot of time and energy correcting effects of the backlash and restoring a proper course towards efficiency.
- Marianne had need of more than submission. She needed the staff's active support, but neglected to build the required alliance.
- The deployment of new operating procedures was handled like

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any other everyday operation, overlooking the fact that such changes can seriously jeopardize the stability of the people and groups involved. Conducting change requires methodical support and leadership, both intensive and sustained, almost to the point of ritualization. We shall return to this in our next article.

- Communication of the changes, as well as their implementation, was delegated to branch management. While such a practice may be encouraged in everyday management, in the case of organizational change, it often proves to be a mistake. We will also return to this aspect in a forthcoming article. For the time being, we shall limit ourselves to saying that

The awakening stage needs to be managed methodically and with rigour

throughout the cycle, the promotion and management of change should be addressed proactively by upper management – or at least be given its support in a very visible manner – while involving the lower management levels.

Conclusion

In giving Marianne here as an example, the intent is obviously not to discredit managers who, like herself, focus on the technical aspects of change and try to skip the natural stages of its adoption. Our purpose is rather to show that adaptation to change involves complex processes, and that the awakening stage needs to be managed methodically and with rigour. ■

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