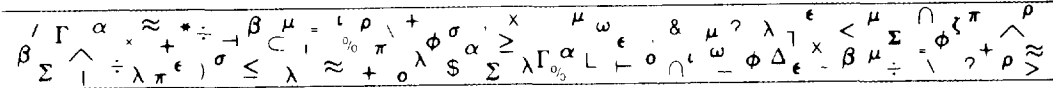


People Skills: The Need to Change—Problem or Opportunity?

ROBERT E. LEVASSEUR

*Fox Consulting Group, Inc.
158 Hesperus Avenue #2R
Magnolia, Massachusetts 01930*



Life is full of changes. Companies, because they need to plan and control their activities, are particularly affected by the increasing rate and increasing complexity of change. Unfortunately, their efforts to deal with change, especially that caused by technological innovation, often fail [Zuboff 1988]. As a result, they are always searching for better ways to manage change.

In this column, I will discuss some ideas that managers and professionals trying to grapple with change have found helpful.

The Change Model

Kurt Lewin created a very simple and elegant model to explain the nature of change [Burke 1987, pp. 54–56]. Lewin's model has three stages: (1) unfreezing, (2) movement, and (3) refreezing. Change is not possible unless the affected individual, group, or organization decides to change. When this happens the current situation

unfreezes or opens up. The effort to change or to move to a new state can then begin. Finally, for the change to last, it must become accepted practice. In effect, the situation must be refrozen.

American companies face increasing competition from abroad and must change to remain competitive. For some, recognizing the competition is reason enough to change. Others remain frozen, wedded to their traditional ways of doing business despite a steady erosion in earnings. Companies that decide to act often make efforts to improve productivity and quality. If these efforts are sincere, supported by top management, and actively involve employees, the companies change. The change lasts if management rewards and reinforces new behaviors and provides consistent leadership, support, and resources. The system is, in effect, refrozen as a result. Despite its

Copyright © 1992, The Institute of Management Sciences
0091-2102/92/2203/0115\$01 25

PROFESSIONAL—COMMENTS ON
ORGANIZATIONAL STUDIES—BEHAVIOR

simplicity, this model has profound implications for the management of change.

Implications of the Model

Imagine that every person has a set of forces that influence him or her to change in a given situation. Imagine also a set of opposing forces that resist the change. The net effect of these forces produces the person's current state.

For example, suppose that your group is being merged with another group for economic reasons. You do not know the people in the other group. In announcing the consolidation, management has asked for your full cooperation to make it a smooth transition. What forces influence you to change, that is, to welcome and work cooperatively with the new people? They might include the pressure from management, your professionalism, your loyalty to the organization, your need to have a job, and your friendly nature.

What forces work against the change? They might include the other group's poor reputation, your fears about possible changes in your job, and your fear of losing a good manager. What if the net effect of these two sets of forces is that you are not willing to accept the newcomers? And what if most of your colleagues feel the same way? Conflict seems inevitable.

If you were the manager of the group, what would you do about the situation? In the context of the model, you have two pure choices. You can either (1) increase the strength of the forces promoting change or (2) decrease the strength of the forces opposing change. Consider your answer carefully because, to paraphrase Mark Twain, the difference between the right answer and the almost right answer

“is like the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.”

Managers who see resistance to change as a problem typically choose to increase the pressure for change. Those who are resisting the change increase the strength of their opposition to maintain their current state. The conflict and the cost escalate.

Managers who see resistance to change as an opportunity work to decrease the strength of the opposing forces. They realize they have a major opportunity to tap that reservoir of energy from which productivity flows. Working with people to neutralize or reverse forces that cause them to resist change is the way to unfreeze a situation and to enlist their cooperation. If you get people involved in the process of identifying, planning for, and implementing mutually agreeable solutions, the desired changes can occur and will stick. The people involved do the refreezing.

Conclusion

Change is a fact of life. So is the need for change management in organizations. Lewin's model is one of the simplest and yet most powerful available to those who must manage change. While there is much more to managing change, nothing is more profound or potentially far-reaching. Think of what would happen if every manager saw resistance to change as an opportunity and chose to encourage cooperation rather than to confront those opposed to change.

References

- Burke, W. Warner, 1987, *Organization Development, A Normative View*, Addison-Wesley, Reading, Massachusetts.
- Zuboff, Shoshana 1988, *In the Age of the Smart Machine, The Future of Work and Power*, Basic Books, Inc., New York.