

CHANGE IS CHANGING

by Christopher Black



We're developing a sickness in the workplace. We're mostly unaware that it is happening, and we are being fooled to think its symptoms are part of normal work life. Not only is this not normal, it's a symptom of a growing reaction to a working model that is outdated and no longer sustainable. This sickness is the way we think about, and act, in response to change.

Just twenty years ago the change landscape within organizations was reasonably straightforward. One could consider change to be a binary event – either the company was experiencing change, or it wasn't. Change was an event that was triggered to help alter company's operations and was conducted in response to a threat or an opportunity. It had a start and a finish and was often encapsulated within the constructs of a project.

Increasingly, instead of a discrete organizational project, the characteristics of organizational change are more recognizable as a web of highly complex, interdependent and entangled initiatives. External factors such as globalization, climate change, an aging workforce, and rapidly evolving technology elicit forces that multiply levels of complexity. These forces hold increasing influence over the political and regulatory landscape, and promise a challenging road ahead.

For some, the shifting minefield of public opinion (as in greater concern over environmental impact) is

changing the very business models that have shaped organizations for years. For others, it's not the nature of the shift, but rather the speed and imminence of its arrival.

Change addressed by linear management models scale poorly, and will not suffice in the years to come. John Kotter, a well-respected figure in the field of organizational change, recently acknowledged that, "We can't keep up with the pace of change, let alone get ahead of it." [Kotter, J. (2012)] Is it time for a new approach?

If we're looking for alarm bells to signal the need for a new approach to change management, then the canary in the coal mine cue would be how well our employees are doing.

I've interviewed several Atlantic Canadian business leaders, and all have recounted their concerns about how well they were coping with increased volumes of complex change. When it came to describe

their company has come to handle existing change efforts. She explained that her staff had become addicted to the excitement of being involved with high-stakes, high-stress, mission-impossible projects. In her words – an addiction to crisis-mode.

Speaking plainly, she indicated that the added stresses took the focus off operational responsibility, relegating the importance of the 'day-to-day' to secondary status. Instead, the focus is often dominated by a furious tornado of change initiatives with dynamically shifting priorities that set the conditions for crisis in the workplace.

Of course, not all projects breed crisis. The trend, however, is an ever-increasing volume of projects with greater complexity and risk. Employees work hard to balance their operational duties with the project tasks assigned to them. Long hours and sacrifice for the organization are rewarded; often at the expense of time with family.

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how employees were doing, no phrase illustrated the situation better than, "Light me a fire so I can put it out."

These are the words of a director from a large firm based in Halifax, Nova Scotia. She described how

The net result is that we assign a higher value to crisis work over time committed to normal operations; we reward personal sacrifice over excellence in day to day duties, and we remove the space and opportunity to truly think and innovate at a time that demands it the most. ▶

Some might argue that this is the way business survives; the commitment of staff to ushering project activity to successful completion is part of the corporate contract. So how well it is working? A widely cited statistic is that, “more than 70% of all organizational change initiatives fail.”¹ This article will argue that change is not like it was in the past. Its characteristics are much more dynamic and infinite than they used to be, and the models we rely upon to manage them are flawed because the lens has changed.

Today, we are challenged to conduct our business on a stage of increasing volatility. To be agile and thrive, we must look within our organizations to build on existing strengths, rather than looking to consulting project managers to help us step our way through the dark periods. We must create capacity for change that fosters innovation, engagement and ownership while creating agility and resilience in the face of these challenging circumstances.

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The 1990s brought a revived recognition of the importance of human involvement in the change process. As if mimicking the Kubler-Ross stages of grief, change models prescribed the steps to help stakeholder transition. Lewin’s Change Model has three steps, Kotter’s has eight, Hiatt’s ADKAR model has five.

When companies were able to focus on a single event and complete it before encountering the next, this process worked. However, the ‘stepped approach’ works best when

you believe that change has a start and a finish. It does not work as well when change begins to manifest itself as a constantly shifting entity as it does today. In his 2019 book *Reshaping Change: A Processual Perspective*, Patrick Dawson speaks to this amorphous and shifting anatomy of change and asserts that in today’s world, managing change as a fluid and dynamic reality of business is likely to be much less disruptive than the end to end approach.

Dawson’s perspective represents a shift in thought around how change must be managed and viewed in organizations. In fact, it is so different, the word ‘change’ becomes problematic. ‘Change’ is no longer linear and finite. Instead, it is dynamic, fluid and infinite. In fact, a better word to describe this process might be ‘evolution’, and the ‘evolution’ itself categorized now as a complex system. This new lens means that the prescriptive stepped approach of the past no longer holds as much value. Instead

we seek a dynamic, endogenous and engaged model where change does not happen to the stakeholders; the change is driven by them, becoming part of their everyday process. He notes if we find a way to actively engage stakeholders in a participatory way, through change we develop the opportunity to build trust and engagement.

Globally, there is a shift of focus away from seeing change as discrete from operations. Instead we are weaving our old concepts of ‘change’ into the fabric of the organization itself.

Instead of bringing in specialists to run projects or manage change on our behalf, the main thrust is to recognize that the dynamic and changing aspects of the business are to be led through endogenous collaboration and commitment to vision, rather than imposed by the executives and the project managers they hire. This kind of commitment comes from an engaged and networked workforce responsible for, and empowered to, protect the vision and mission of the company.

Globally, progressive organizations are working to do just this. There are as many approaches as there are organizations, but the overwhelming theme involves scaling back the authoritarian dominance of the organizational hierarchy (over day to day operations) and moving to a more dynamic and distributive organizational construct: the network. In doing so, employees closer to the customer can be more autonomous in their response to company objectives and their challenges. Working in smaller networks, the organization promotes the empowerment and commitment of the individual as well as the collaborative strength of the network to deliver on the mission of the organization in an agile way.

For some organizations, the benefit of building a network structure is not restricted to agility. Buurtzorg, a neighbourhood nursing company in the Netherlands recognized a 20–30% decrease in per-patient costs with a corresponding increase in patient care quality and nurse job satisfaction. This was achieved after shifting their care delivery model to a decentralized one. Now the company employs 14,000 nurses in teams of 10–12. Each team services a select neighbourhood, managed by a group of fifty employees in the central office. ►



FAVI, a French auto parts manufacturer, found new efficiencies through innovative thought that resulted in a reduction of prices on average 3% each year and a record of on-time shipments spanning twenty-five years. They attribute their success to teams that have ended control and responsibility for what happens. FAVI maintains roughly 50% of the market share while its competitors have long since outsourced their factories to China.

Even in a rules-bound environment such as the US Navy, promoting a collaborative approach to problem resolution and change implementation transformed the landscape. On becoming the captain of the worst performing submarine in the US Navy fleet, Captain David Marquet was charged to turn around the record of the USS Santa Fe. He did this by recognizing and trusting the capabilities of the individual officers and crew in his charge.

Remarkably for a US Naval Captain, he announced that he would never give another order on the vessel (except for the launch of warheads). Instead his team would have to work together with mission in mind to determine how to proceed. He would ask, "What do you intend to do?" After being briefed and if satisfied, he would respond by simply saying,

"Very well." The Santa Fe quickly progressed to setting the bar for retention, operations and promotions.

Adopting this distributed model of authority to optimize organizational agility is not easy. Kotter asserts that, "people are loath to take chances without permission from superiors...

client, that creates engagement and focus in the workforce. We foster empowerment to safely innovate at the network level, and develop an holistic sensibility that leads to demonstrated greater agility. We inspire and educate staff on a new way to manage change, and to participate in their working life.

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(they) cling to their habits and fear loss of power and stature." [Kotter, J. (2015)] In order to use the dynamic nature of change to build trust and engagement, we cannot just hand over the keys to the organization and watch the whole picture unfold, come what may. Empowerment is not something to be endowed and engagement is not something that can be forced; both must be grown.

Org 2.0's focus is to cultivate an environment that builds this kind of empowerment and engagement. Our mission seeks to help organizations meet the challenges of the future by building the capacity to respond to change. We develop a custom plan, tailored for each

By building supporting teams within the organization, change is owned by the company, not by external consultants. As a result, our clients are better equipped to make the right decisions at a much faster pace. We help teams collaborate and act in small, 'safe-to-try' experiments that can be executed in the present to generate transformational learning. We work in 90-day increments. At the end of each period we demonstrate where progress has been made and where focus is needed to meet the final goal. Our goal is to leave our clients with a self-sustaining model that feeds the morale of staff and that builds the ability to respond with agility to a new kind of complex change. ♦