



The Process of Managing Change

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The economic crisis. Gridlock in federal and state government. Climate change. The housing bubble bursting and waves of foreclosures. Budget cuts, layoffs, the collapse of GM and Chrysler. Not a lot of good news out there over the past year. And yet, we see enough positives to begin to see some light at the end of the tunnel (or, at least, we think the light at the end of the tunnel may have been turned back on.)

We are in a time of significant transition in this country and around the world, and great change always carries with it a tremendous amount of stress, disruption, anger, and fear. A lot of the anger and fear gets stoked by the pundits, screamers, and inciters on the Internet and cable media. Conservatives want to turn the clock back to the past, even if it did not work very well. Liberals want change to happen right now! even if many people are not ready to accept the change. And many of us are simply fed up with the way things are right now; some of us are even taking to the streets to express the stress, anger, and fear we are feeling.

“Thanks a lot for pointing all this out!” you say? Well, I’m not saying anything that isn’t obvious to most of us. Over the next several posts I’ll be exploring what all of this means to me and will try to make sense of it for myself. Whether that will help anyone else, or not, remains to be seen.

Understanding the Process of Change

Over the past decade we have learned a lot about the process of change and the ways in which change affects people. Understanding how the change process operates helps us understand our own reactions to changing circumstances and events, especially when we had little say in the actions or events that caused the change. And, simply stated, the bigger and more global the change, the less influence we have on the outcome. That builds frustration and fear, especially when the effect upon us is negative.

The first phase of the change process is, really, the belief that *no change* is best. Often referred to as “**Pre-contemplation of change**,” this group has gotten a lot smaller in the past year or so. Most of us now believe that we are going to be doing a lot of things differently in the near-term future. Many of us now believe we really *must* do a lot of things differently. Nearly all of us have *some* things that we *do not* want to change. Of course, we don’t agree about what we do not want to change, which makes the ongoing debate interesting.

The second phase of change is often called “**Contemplating Change**.” In this phase we now have decided that change is necessary; not just desirable. We haven’t been able to decide exactly *what* to do and/or *how* to do it, but most of us agree that the U. S. healthcare system needs reform (for example). We will eventually decide the what and how issues in a compromise yet to be determined.

The third phase of the process is sometimes referred to as “**Preparing to Change**,” and occurs once we have figured out what we are *going* to do. We may not yet understand the *how* of the change, but we are actively looking for ways to make the change. It is generally accepted that the financial systems and national economies through the world are interrelated and intertwined and have become dangerously under-regulated over the past several decades. We seem to be exploring some alternatives and have begun talking seriously about how to best effect a restructuring of the financial system. And some new regulations have already been developed and are or soon will be in effect.

The “**Active Change**” part of the process is all about implementation, fine-tuning, training, practice, and course correction. By the time we get to this stage in the change process we have changed a good deal. We may have some false starts and back-sliding along the way. We adjust what we are doing the “new way” as we learn more about operating in a new manner. This part of the process is often a case of two steps forward and one step backwards, especially when the old way of doing things wasn’t overwhelmingly painful. The downsizing and restructuring of General Motors is actively underway now, although not yet complete. The attempt to sell the Saturn brand to Roger Penske did not turn out as originally planned, so the brand will be shut down. I’m sure the leaders at GM did not want to shutter all those Saturn dealerships, but they “course corrected” as best they could.

The final stage in the change process is often referred to as “**Consolidation & Maintenance**” and occurs once we have embraced the new way of doing things. There may be an occasional slip backward, but at this point we are cleaning up the loose end, making final tweaks and adjustments, and getting the new approach fully installed in “the way we do things around here.” Too often we neglect to fully integrate the new way of getting things done; it requires continued effort until the new pattern is fully ingrained in our individual or organizational behavior.

Mental Models

Change does not happen easily and painlessly because the status quo is strongly attractive to both individuals and organizations. We are driven to think and act by how we view the world around us. We look for information, interpret events, see opportunities, and make choices based upon our *mental model* or perception of reality. Information that does not fit into our mental model is often ignored, discounted, or viewed as just plain wrong, if we are willing to even recognize that it exists. We are stuck to the super-glue of our own mental model and are often unaware that we are stuck.

Our mental model prevents us from recognizing that our present way of operating is not likely to get us the results we want. We often redouble our efforts along the same path without grasping that the path has changed. We either do not see that the world around us is now different or we rail against the changes that surround us and pronounce them as wrong. For example, those who warned us about climate change were roundly dismissed and derided for sounding the alarm until the success of [An Inconvenient Truth](#) brought the issue to the attention of a wide audience. Our mental model simply could not accept the notion that the need for a reduction in the use of fossil fuels required concerted action *now*.

Our mental model also prevents us from seeing ourselves as engaged in a *process* that will result in a new behavior or new approach. We are often so invested in our current perception and behavior patterns that we are unable to see that we *can* change. We see the changing world around us as threatening and hostile; a bad place to be resisted at all costs. In essence we see ourselves as the victim of change rather than the agent of change in our own life.

Because the changing situation is either ignored or viewed as a bad thing, our mental model keeps us from developing change strategies that help produce and reinforce the new behavior or method of operating. We fail to see *how* to change and are often unable to create a plan for how to successfully adapt ourselves and our behavior. As a result we will often abandon our efforts to change at the first hurdle or roadblock. Sustaining the new behavior in the face of setbacks and resistance from others and from within ourselves becomes so difficult or impossible that we give up.

Organizations also have mental models. The rapidly-changing and fluid environment in which business, government, and nonprofits operate call for flexible, adaptive, and forward-focused organizations. Perhaps no better example of excessively rigid corporate mental models exists than the Big Three U.S. auto manufacturers. Their resistance to improving vehicle quality in the 1980's created huge opportunities for Japanese and German automakers. Once again, the Big Three's mental models caused them to resist calls for higher fuel economy and alternative fuel vehicles even as petroleum prices skyrocketed in recent years.

So, why do so many change initiatives fail so miserably?

- We do not understand the nature of change
- We fail to grasp the fact that change is a process
- We neglect to identify our own (and our organization's) mental model(s)
- We do not determine the stage of change we are currently in
- We give up too easily on the new approach – our desire for a “quick-fix” makes us impatient

The relative success of a change initiative depends upon the individual's or the organization's readiness for change and willingness to be flexible.

At Midwest Consulting Group we are all about personal and organizational change. Let us help you and your organization to turn today's rapidly-changing environment to your advantage. Contact us today!