Change: More Often than Not, We Can't

Robert F. Moran Jr.

Change

A year and a half ago the word "change" invoked hope. Both political parties, but especially the democrats, used the word to express the most important benefit they would bring to our country if elected. Many voters responded with belief and hope at a level of excitement not always present during campaign seasons. Hope was present to the extent that many, many people were willing to donate to the campaign of the candidate who preached change most frequently and powerfully. A year and a half ago that candidate was about to be inaugurated. The country felt good. The election of an African American had shown the strength and value of our democracy and the unique character of the United States. Hope for a better next four years was high.

A year and a half later, that hope is harder to find. The country is in a funk. Uncertainty and, to some extent, fear, are the predominant emotions. What has happened? The recession has created economic uncertainty, not only for those directly affected but also for almost everyone else. However, that is not all. Many, including some of those who were the most enthusiastic supporters of the new president, are disappointed that there is little if any visible change in national government or Washington. Some are feeling betrayed. Impatience for radical change in Washington is growing.

Why is it that we frequently read or talk about how difficult change is but are so disappointed when the change we desire does not occur easily and immediately? Apparently, the truism—it is very difficult to change, especially to change behavior—has not penetrated to the level needed to influence our daily thinking. It is unreasonable to expect observable change in an entrenched bureaucracy such as that in Washington in just a year and a half. But that hasn't stopped lots of people from being disappointed in newly elected officials.

This lack of sensitivity to how truly difficult it is to elicit behavior change is not limited to broad circumstances such as change in this country's political establishment. Those seeking change in a library—both managers and staff—can fail to plan adequately for and implement change within the library because the depth of the difficulty of changing the behavior of others is just not understood. Research described in a 2005 article by Alan Deutschman in *Fast Company* magazine helps library managers and staff understand how incredibly difficult it is to change someone else's behavior and also provides ideas on how an organization can structure itself to facilitate change in the behavior of its staff.[1]

Change or Die

Deutschman's article begins with a question: If you found out that you were going to die if you did not change your behavior, would you change? "What if a well-informed, trusted authority figure said you had to make difficult and enduring changes in the way you think and act? If you didn't, your time would end soon—a lot sooner than it had to. Could you change when change really mattered? When it mattered most?"[2]

When I ask students in a class, "If you found out that you had to change or you would die, would you change?," 90 percent hold their hands up saying, "Yes, of course I would change." I respond, "Nine of ten of you who are holding your hands up are wrong; to the extent you represent people in the United States; 90 percent of you would not change." The research described in this article investigated the responses of seriously ill heart patients regarding the need to change their lifestyles. Ninety percent of those studied did not do so. "If you look at people after coronary-artery bypass grafting two years later, 90% of them have not changed their lifestyle," the interviewed doctor said, continuing: "And that's been studied over and over and over again. And so we're missing some link in there. Even though they know they have a very bad disease and they

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know they should change their lifestyle, for whatever reason, they can't."[3]

The article continues:

Changing the behavior of people isn't just the biggest challenge in health care. It's the most important challenge for businesses trying to compete in a turbulent world," says John Kotter, a Harvard Business School professor who has studied dozens of organizations in the midst of upheaval: "The central issue is never strategy, structure, culture, or systems. The core of the matter is always about changing the behavior of people.[4]

Whether the need for change within an organization is due to the need to respond to external changes, or we wish to change our own approach to management". . . more often than not, we can't."[5]

Understanding the Process of Behavior Change

Changing the behavior of people is a complex, lengthy process that needs to be understood and taken into account. Briefly put, people will change only when they thoroughly understand the value of new behavior and feel that they should change. With regard to understanding, the new behavior must make sense, not only logically, but also personally. With regard to feeling, people need to have sufficient understanding of the positive relation between the change they are expected to make and their personal wants and desires.

The idea that people do not change just because they are given a reason to change is nothing new. The research described in the article being reviewed here helps explain why no one should expect employees to change just because they are told a set of facts or given a logical argument. A statement, though objectively true, will influence another person only if that person can take in and accept its meaning.

Our minds do not just have a long list of facts to which we add other facts that we observe or are told. Rather, our ideas are related and organized to help effective thinking. Cognitive researchers refer to these sets of facts as frames—mental structures that shape the way we see the world. We may be presented with facts, but for us to make sense of them, they have to fit the mental structures already there. For example, if someone who has worked for years in a hierarchical organization is told by new management that his or her ideas are welcome and will be taken seriously, this objective fact will not fit that person's perception of how the workplace functions; the statement that his or her ideas will be listened to will be rejected. How many new ideas ought to be expected from such people? They won't change just because they were presented with this

fact—everyone's ideas will be accepted. First, to change, one must be able to change one's frames for the new circumstance, and this takes time, often months.

Secondly, we are not just minds. In fact, in everyday living, our emotions play an equal if not greater part in behavioral change. A manager's focus on reasons to change is not sufficient if these reasons do not engage the person's emotions.

Behavior change happens mostly by speaking to peoples' feelings . . . This is true even in in organizations that are very focused on analysis and quantitative measurement, even among people who think of themselves as smart in an MBA sense. In highly successful change efforts, people find ways to help others see the problems or solutions in ways that influence emotion, not just thought.[6]

When we purchase a new car or a make a similar purchase, do we make our choice just based on the item's qualities, or just as much on how we feel about it? For example, "I just fell in love with it." Significantly, an experiment described by Deutschman that treated heart patients holistically—addressing their feelings as well as their minds—resulted in changed behavior that endured well beyond the experiment.

Organizational Structure and Change

People will not be moved to change their behavior through announcements at meetings, detailed memos, or even lengthy discussions at retreats. More time than this is required, and the focus must be broader than these approaches allow. In terms of time, a change effort needs to be ongoing. To announce a need for a change in staff's behavior and then wait the months needed for a change in related frames is not likely to be effective. Staff members need to be able to constantly adjust the way they see the world. In terms of focus, a change effort needs to allow staff members to feel the value of the change for themselves.

Facilitating change is one of the many benefits of an open organizational structure. A library organized along the following principles will provide staff the thorough knowledge of the library, its circumstances, and its operations necessary for them to adapt their mental frames; the time to make adjustments in the way they see their work world; and the understanding and involvement needed to experience how the proposed changes will benefit the library and themselves:

- Library-wide and departmental visions and goals are developed collaboratively.
- Roles are defined broadly in relation to service and users.

- Focus in every department is on the users—that is, on the benefits users acquire as a result of the work of each employee.
- Information flows freely—management focuses on sharing information; little is withheld.
- Limited hierarchy is in place—shared authority and control.
- Decisions are made at the point where maximum knowledge about the issue exists.
- Each person assumes responsibility for his or her own performance and for helping colleagues.

A Library Organized for Change

This manner of organizing provides all staff an understanding of the library's purpose, goals, and operations that is broad enough to facilitate their adjusting and adapting their mental frames. It increases the likelihood that staff will recognize how their work contributes to the library's success and how old ways inhibit the library's success and their personal satisfaction. With regard to personal satisfaction, I have written elsewhere about the untapped positive emotions available within a library staff.[7] Briefly, most librarians are service oriented; service gives them satisfaction. However, traditional organization blocks many from seeing the service value of their day-to-day activities. Finally, because staff members have broad enough knowledge on a day-to-day basis to change their mental frames, they will be able to constantly update the way they see their work world thus reducing the time period from recognizing the need to address a new challenge to the implementation of the required change.

References

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