

[Note: This document contains the first three-quarters of the first chapter (or about one-tenth overall) of my Master's Thesis.]

Change and Resistance and Leadership

In the conversations carried on in hallways, in meeting rooms, and in the media, we find ourselves confronted with the topic of *change*. We hear change characterized as turbulent, as overwhelming, even as immobilizing. We hear about particular changes with some people clamoring in favor of a specific change while others obstinately oppose it. We find changes that reverse prior changes (e.g., the government lowers the speed limit on interstate highways then subsequently raises it). We have changes with local impact (e.g., a new area code from the phone company) and international impact (e.g., the adoption of the Euro as a pan-European currency). We hear about the pace of change and the number of changes and even changing the very nature of change itself.

The Nature of Change

Observers of organizations have focused attention on change, and more particularly *organizational change*¹, for decades. Thirty years ago, Richard Beckhard wrote,

Managers are continually working on the problems of how to develop a flexible organization which can move with changing requirements, which can be 'proactive' (influencing the environment) rather than reactive. Managers are seeking ways to establish a work climate in which increasingly complex decisions can be made by people *with the information* regardless of their location in the organization. Managers are looking for ways in which increasingly complex technologies can be managed and in which people who have an ever higher sense of freedom and autonomy can be encouraged to *want* to stay and work in their organizations. The search for ways of concurrently increasing collaboration among the members of organizations and at the same time increasing the rationality of decisions occupies many hours of management time and many chapters in management books.

Organization development is the name that is being attached to total-system, planned changed efforts for coping with the above-mentioned conditions. (Beckhard p. 7)

Thus for at least thirty years some people have investigated organizations and their need to confront change.

Patricia Pritcher meanwhile suggests that change does not really pose anything new. She contends that we simply delude ourselves by painting the past as a serene era of stability.

Every age imagines itself faced with unprecedented rapid changes and turbulent times, and it's just narcissism to imagine that our age is somehow exceptional. Only history can make a relative judgment. In France, a fourteenth century man stepped outside onto his doorstep one morning to find that half the population of his village had been wiped out by the great plague (in which half the population of Europe was destroyed). He wanted to call on God for help, but didn't know whether to address himself to Rome or to Avignon because two legitimate popes were at war. Not verbal war, *real* war! As he stepped from the threshold of his hovel, he was assaulted by a marauding band of mercenary soldiers who supported themselves in France by rape and pillage. This was the Middle Ages. Did the man know he was living in the Middle Ages? Of course not. He just lived around Lyon. Did he know that the Renaissance was just around the corner. Of course not. No one did. Did he think the times were turbulent? *You bet.* (Pitcher p. 122)

People, Pitcher contends, have always felt themselves awash in change. In retrospect the historians might point to certain periods as characterized by rather more change or rather less change; but in the moment, people have found themselves put upon from all sides.

James Botkin suggests that we do indeed see a great deal of change about us, but that change now operates on a different plane:

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the pace of change today is not very different from the last time we had idealist generations entering their maturity. But you have to look in sets of centuries to see the similarities. The invention of the automobile and the airplane represented just as great a change to our great grandparents as the computer and knowledge revolution poses to us today. The pace of change is similar (both are frantic!). What's different is what changes – a shift from how we move to how we think – but the pace and process are the same. (Botkin p. 51)

Botkin suggests that change runs in cycles, but points out that this time the subject has shifted from what we *do* to how we *think*.

Still others will point to the explosion of information and new discoveries in recent decades. In 1969, the same year that Beckhard wrote about the birth of organizational development, Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner looked at change in relation to education:

The standard reply to any comment about change (for example, from many educators) is that change isn't new and that it is easy to exaggerate its meaning. To such replies, Norbert Wiener had a useful answer: the difference between a fatal and a therapeutic dose of strychnine is "only a matter of degree." In other words, change isn't new; what is new is the *degree of change*. ...

about [150 years] ago there developed a qualitative difference in the character of change. Change changed. (Postman and Weingartner p. 10-11)

So we have always had change with us they say, but at the beginning of the 1800s the *degree* of change changed.

Postman and Weingartner looked at change in relation to education accomplished in public schools. Arie De Geus looked at education and learning in the context of business organizations. If we learn, then *by definition* we change: we will have a richer understanding and will now do things differently. So we hear about the importance of learning, and the need for leadership to assume a stronger role in dealing with learning.

The organization's ability to learn faster (and possibly better) than the competition becomes its most sustainable competitive advantage.

Senior management must set the context and the process within which the maximum of the organization's available brain capacity engages in continuous learning. The design and the running of these processes is a line management responsibility which cannot be delegated. (De Geus p. 157)

An organization's ability to learn and subsequently to change becomes an element of organizational endurance.

We have a variety of comments on change: change has always been with us; change has always been with us but now change has a different focus; the change occurring now has a new degree; change resulting from learning holds the key to competitive advantage. We can make reasonable arguments on either side of the question whether we, in our day-to-day lives, face more change than people in some earlier time. One thing, however, *does* appear to distinguish our era from earlier times: the combination of change and the dominance in peoples lives of large organizations (e.g., large corporations, large health care systems, large governments, large cities).

Whether we actually work in the huge multi-national enterprises or in mom-and-pop retail shops, large institutions drive much of our daily lives. The food we buy, the clothes we wear, the automobiles we drive, the media we use for information, our public schools and roadways: for all of these we depend on the effectiveness of large organizations. We need them to operate effectively, and effective operation requires adaptation over time to changing circumstances. Along this line, Robert Greenleaf recalls a suggestion from one of his college professors:

One day, in the course of a rambling lecture, my old professor made a statement along these lines: “There is a new problem in our country. We are becoming a nation that is dominated by large institutions – churches, businesses, governments, labor unions, universities – and these big institutions are not serving us well. I hope that all of you will be concerned about this. Now you can do as I do, stand outside and criticize, bring pressure if you can, write and argue about it. All of this may do some good. But nothing of substance will happen unless there are people inside these institutions who are able to (and want to) lead them into better performance for the public good. Some of you ought to make careers inside these big institutions and become a force for good – from the inside.” (Greenleaf p. 1-2)

Greenleaf took his college professor’s suggestion and upon graduation went to work for the largest institution around at the time: AT&T. He spent the next four decades working within that institution, trying to help lead it to ‘better performance for the public good.’ He tried to effect change from within the organization rather than apply pressure from without. He wanted what I believe many people want: to belong to an effective and enduring organization operating on a sound ethical base.ⁱⁱ

I encounter changes around me in my organization each day. Some appear relatively small and of limited scope while others appear relatively large and with profound implications. I do not expect the number or the magnitude of the changes to abate in the near future. Meanwhile, the reaction of the people around me ranges from vociferous cheerleading in favor of the change through quiet acceptance to mounting a boisterous challenge. I want to turn from the broad topic of the presence of *change* to the corollary topic of *resistance* to change. The manner in which in an organization’s leadership can understand and constructively deal with the presence of resistance serves as the topic of this paper.

The Nature of Resistance

Mounting a boisterous challenge constitutes one reaction to a proposed change. Of course, the challenge may instead remain muted. In either case, I will call that ‘resistance.’ The Random House Dictionary defines *to resist* as *to withstand, strive against, or oppose* (Random House). When someone withstands or strives against or opposes a change, they exhibit *resistance* to that change. Where does that resistance originate? How can the leadership of an organization respond constructively to this resistance and promote the realization of the intended change?

I offer the hypothesis that

Organizational resistance exists only as an *abstract construct* comprised of the aggregation of many instances of *individual resistance* to change. Further, *individual resistance* to change occurs as just one important *variable* within a *system* containing a collection of inter-connected *feedback loops*. Finally, the actual *achievement* of planned organizational change depends on recognizing the *sources* of resistance in *each person* and the subsequent use of *interventions* intended to address those varied sources of resistance to change.

In this thesis, I will explore the sources of individual resistance to organizational change and offer a model which permits leaders to make thoughtful and informed interventions designed to reduce the resistance and thereby increase the probability of actually achieving the intended change.

I will begin by examining the origin of one model commonly used in dealing with change and resistance. In analyzing this formula, with the basic version ascribed to Richard Beckhard, I want to identify some of the circumstances surrounding its creation. I believe that the model surfaced in a time of generally (a) less broad-based *cynicism*, (b) a more *compliant* population, and (c) less attention to *personal values*. I suggest that as a consequence the formula omits three variables critical in today's environment. I will argue that a useful model for contemporary change must certainly take into account not only the power of a desirable vision and the power of a clear first steps. It must also take into account *people's sense of autonomy*, whether the proposed change shows *congruence with people's personal sense of values*, and *the belief that change can actually occur*.

To help an organization's leaders surface and address resistance to change, I offer an alternative model built on a more systemic view. I suggest that each person involved in the change process will continually re-examine:

- the challenge of the vision,
- the clarity of the pathway called for by the vision,
- the sense of autonomy for participating in the change process,
- the sense of congruence between the organization's and the individual values, and

- the belief that change can actually occur in this organization.

Each person will place the challenge of the vision somewhere on a continuum from very high to very low. Each person will likewise place his or her sense of autonomy somewhere between high and low, and so on for each of the other three sources of potential resistance.

Greenleaf reminds us that a fundamental responsibility of leaders is to see into the future and lead the way to that future, to change things in such a way as to help achieve that future. He writes, indeed, that we can view *failure to foresee* as an *ethical* failure: today's necessity to make an ethical compromise sometimes results from a past failure to take right actions when the leader had more choices available (Greenleaf p. 26). The leader must look forward to tomorrow and take action today. Thus the role of leadership in leading a change centers on keeping the combination of these five variables 'high enough' to counterbalance the resistance and achieve the intended change.

The Nature of Leadership

In order to make the case for a clear connection between leadership and change I must first draw a distinction between leadership and management. John Kotter contrasts management and leadership this way:

Management is a set of processes that can keep a complicated system of people and technology running smoothly. The most important aspects of management include planning, budgeting, organizing, staffing, controlling, and problem solving. Leadership is a set of processes that creates organizations in the first place or adapts them to significantly changing circumstances. Leadership defines what the future should look like, aligns people with that vision, and inspires them to make it happen despite the obstacles. (Kotter p. 25)

Note the distinction he makes between the roles of leadership and management with regard to 'significantly changing circumstances.' We do need analysis and careful thinking, but we cannot depend solely on a simple analytical process. We need also vision and inspiration to overcome the obstacles. Debra Amidon agrees with Kotter adding her bias '*managers integrate; leaders innovate*' (Amidon p. 113).

Kay Gilley offers a different way of contrasting managers and leaders. Instead of suggesting that they do different things, she suggest that leadership does not focus on doing at all: 'Leadership is different from management. Leadership is a state of being;

management is a way of doing. ... The leader *gives* service to those who work *with* him or her. Managers receive service *from* those who work *for* them' (Gilley p. 70). She focuses on the direction of service and *doing* versus *being*. Kevin Cashman echoes this doing versus being contrast, when he writes, 'Managers control by virtue of their *doing*. Leaders lead by virtue of their *being*. When we are (as is often the case) rapidly alternating between management and leadership, the relationship between control and openness is a constant dynamic' (Cashman p. 47). Leaders do not *do* different things, they *are* a different way. And Jack Hawley picks up the idea of *control* as a key differentiator:

Management, in a word or two, is control and coordination; leadership is profound caring and respect – you might say love and spirit.

Just how basically different are these two sets of functions? If you live by the management list, you'll probably have a successful career. If you live by the leadership list you'll have a good life. (Hawley p. 168)

Hawley connects leading to caring. Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus go even further:

We have here one of the clearest distinctions between the leader and the manager. By focusing attention on a vision, the leader operates on the *emotional* and *spiritual resources* of the organization, on its values, commitment, and aspirations. The manager, by contrast, operates on the physical resources of the organization, on its capital, human skills, raw materials, and technology. (Bennis and Nanus p. 89-92)

Bennis and Nanus use the reliance on vision and its emotional impact as a hallmark of leadership in contrast with management.

In this paper, when I use *leader* I want to call attention to the varied aspects of that role just noted: dealing with significantly changing circumstances, defining the future, aligning people, inspiring people, innovation, a way of being, serving others, caring and respect, emotion and spirit.

In addition to this understanding of leader, I must also differentiate between *leader* and *leadership*. Given the current dominance of large organizations, the question becomes, Can a large organization depend on a single leader to do all of those things just listed? Can we hold just one person responsible? David Whyte does not think so.

Trying to run complex companies, big or small, by imperial command, from the top down, may be the single most unnecessary burden carried by any corporate manager. Attempting something that is doomed to fail, they produce a manual of required responses covering all

eventualities. ... It also carries an implicit lack of trust in the essential elements of the system -- people. Not only that, but hierarchical systems based on power emanating from the top cannot plan for the wild efflorescence of impossible events we call daily life. They are continually immobilized by the changing nature of reality. (Whyte p. 269)

Whyte writes that trying to run things from the top implies a lack of trust in those not at the top. And following such a course will result in failure because of an inability to deal with change. Amidon agrees that we cannot depend on just one person. The forces that bind an organization together must come from all sides: 'Leadership must come from the top down, the bottom up, and the middle out. In other words, everyone has ownership' (Amidon p. 46). In times of rapid change, the organization must accept leadership from all levels. The key then lies not in depending on *a leader*, but accepting *leadership* as it emerges in the moment.

Notes

ⁱ Note that throughout this document I will use the word *change* rather than *transition*, because I hear *change* used more commonly by the rank-and-file within organizations. Certainly such writers as Bridges (Bridges) make a useful distinction between change and transition. In the context of the rank-and-file, however, the distinction may serve as a distraction.

ⁱⁱ When Greenleaf left AT&T, he in fact founded the Center for Applied Ethics, later re-named the Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership.

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