



Employee Change Agents: The Foundation for Effective Organizational Change

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Abstract

This paper specifically looks at the process of organizational change and how employees can influence the outcomes. Organizations tend to underutilize their employees during times of change. An organization is basically a collection of people with the same objectives. Ultimately, I seek to understand how an employee change agent framework can function as an essential tool for controlling and analyzing organizational change.

As a manager and an instructor of management, I believe that is the employee that essentially controls the success of any change in an organization. Employees should be charged with the ability to foster positive change by management, but more so, by themselves. It is the employees responsibility to make the change work in the organization, along with making changes in themselves to help improve not only the organization, but to improve their own working behaviors. All employers should be creating a learning organization by asking their employees to become responsible members of the organization. Allow your staff to be present at the table. Also empower your staff to become more aligned with the core mission of the organization. The more your staff believes they are making a difference for the organization, the more vested, accountable, and responsible they will become.

Keywords: Employee Change Agents, Organizational Change, Management

1. Introduction

There are many change procedures that focus on either the organization as a whole or how management should work with their employees to make change. This means that there are normally two perspectives for focusing change. The first one is to focus on how to change an organization from an organizational level. To do this, attention must be placed on the whole process involved in the organization. The second one is to focus the change on the people within the organization. The second is usually more effective due to the fact that an organization is not an entity itself, but a collection of people. Most research has proved that for a change to be effective, change efforts should be focused on the people because organizations after all are just a collection of people working towards a common goal.

Organizations who do focus on people, usually interpret that to mean the change effort needs to be centered on upper or executive management, as change from the top is more likely to take place. This is the premise of many change initiatives, to have leadership spearhead the change and allow the change to flow down the hierarchy. I intend to concentrate this paper on another option, focusing the change on the actual employees. This includes not just explaining the change, but empowering the employees to make the change. Employee involvement in change management is the specific focus I intend to discuss. Empowering employees to strive to be more efficient and effective is a must. And while many managers are afraid to turn over the reins to their staff, author, David Childs (2009) states "occasional glitches, created by empowered over-exuberance, do not create nearly as many problems or obstructions to performance as those that would be created by an office full of bureaucratic robots." (Childs, p.53) From my experience, and from historical research on change management, this focus is lacking and needs attention.

2. Change from the Inside

From a change perspective, most initiatives are communicated from the top down. Consultants and change agents will work with the decision makers in an organization to help facilitate whatever change needs to take place. Upper

management then works the change down the hierarchy of the organization. Through this and all other change techniques, the employees are given marching orders to transform. For employees to be successful, they must follow the change and implement the new 'ways' of the organization. What normally will distinguish a good change from a bad change is if the management can get buy-in from the employees.

Buy-in and following orders are necessary from staff to make any change work; however I believe more can be done. Organizations spend a great deal of time and money investing in change, only to hand this change over to the employees to be responsible for implementing the transformation. Since it is often up to the employees to make the change work, it should be the employees that are the focused upon by the organization.

As stated in several pieces of literature, employees are the most important aspect of an organization, just use the Hawthorne study as an example. Kinicki and Williams (2008) believe this to be true because, "...the people actually involved with the product or service are in the best position to detect opportunities for improvements" (p.46). This being said, they should also be the most important aspect of any change to the organization.

Within change, we are not normally changing the organization; we are changing the people in the organization. This reinforces the need to shift focus from the organization and management and instead target employees. If employees are the ones that are impacted by the change, they should be the ones that implement the change. For this to occur, employees need to realize their own potential in this change effort and take control of the situation.

Employees should be charged with the ability to foster positive change by management, but more so, by themselves. To do this I have developed a couple of questions that employees must ask themselves to become effective change agents. The first one relates to the employee taking control and implementing the change: *Is there something I can do to make the organization a better place?* The second question is more introspective and relates to employees taking the responsibility to change: *Is there something I personally need to change to make myself a better employee?* The answers to these questions provide the foundation for if an employee is ready to be a strategic partner within the organization.

- If the answer to the first question is yes, then it is the employee's responsibility to do what needs to be done to make the improvement.
- If the answer to the second question is yes, it is the employee's responsibility to do what needs to be done to make the improvement.
- If the answer to the first question is no, then the employee is at a place where he or she needs to decide if the job is a correct fit.
- If the answer to second question is no, then the employee also needs to decide if they have surpassed the growth potential in the job.

When an employee answers these questions, the focus should be related to either improving him or herself or the organization; if not, employees are hindering progress towards productive change.

2.1 Employees as Change Agents

The first question focuses on an employee's ability to step up and control the organization. Leadership is not something granted by position; it is something that all people can learn to do. According to Burke (2008); "[Leadership] is usually associated with the behavior of senior executives" (p. 192). Whereas individual needs are focused on "the extent to which one's needs are met on the job" (p. 194). Not many change interventions focus on the actual employee adding input into the organization and/or the change taking place. As he also (2008) states, "...leaders do make a difference, especially in terms of organizational change" but they are only part of the process (p. 227). Change affects everyone, so everyone has to affect change. It is the individual employee that will have the most impact on if change will be effective.

As I stated earlier, employees are one of the most important pieces of an organization. Because they are so important, all change models discuss how to deal with employees during the change process. This is normally limited to telling employees how to change or what to do during the change. What the models do not discuss is how to have employees empower themselves to make the change. Professor Jerry Gilley at Colorado State University (2009) states, "that you cannot empower anyone, they must empower themselves." I agree and believe that this statement gets to the root of all change. The main questions an organization needs to consider are: what is change in an organization? Does the organization change or do the people change? If an organization is really just a group of likeminded people working towards a common goal, then it is easy to answer that question with; it is people that change. That is a pretty generic statement, but when there is change, it is the people in the organization that will have to either make the change, change their process for how they complete the task, and/or both. This means that what really needs to happen for a change to be successful is the people who make up the organization have to take control and make the initiative work.

This being true, how do we change people? Change is a foreign and strange phenomenon that does not come easy to most employees and most organizations have the people they presumably want because they hired them in the first

place. So really, we are not changing the people, but usually a process that they are doing to complete the work being done in the organization. During many change processes, organizations will and do change people. This is done through lay-offs, attrition, people frustrated and quitting, and new people hired on. Change does affect people, but the change must come from already hired employees that are performing at an optimal level. Sometimes they will not change, and that will lead back to negative consequences.

In order to keep the employees management will want and to make sure they are where the change starts, I propose that they reflect on the questions in this paper.

2.2 Employee Responsibility to the Organization

Is there something you can do as an employee to make the organization a better place? As an employee it is critical that they should always be asking this question. I already stated that an organization is a collection of likeminded people who have shared goals. If each employee were to ask this question every day, then change would not be so daunting. Change would merely be part of a daily routine. As part of Deming's (1960) philosophy, this is a big part of Total Quality Management (TQM). Deming (1960) states; managers must "get every employee involved. To build teamwork and trust, TQM companies see that every employee is involved in the continuous improvement process. This requires that workers must be trained and empowered to find and solve problems. The goal is to build teamwork, trust, and mutual respect." (p. 59) How better to do this than to teach all employees to continuously reflect on this question.

For this to be successful, management must encourage employees to ask this question, and allow them to act on the answers. This does not mean to give them free rein to make changes, but if the question is considered by the people who do the work, then the answer should help the process. If a true team member is continuously asking how they can improve, and they are the ones tied to the actual work, then this should lead to supportive buy-in, performance, and overall more effective and efficient change.

Employee buy-in is very important for change to be successful. Employees that feel that they are contributing to the organization will be happier about the change, and will work harder to be successful. What I am targeting is the personal aspects of an employee's own processes that all leaders should know. David Neeleman, founder and CEO of JetBlue Airways Corporation says when he worked at former employer Morris Air, "We had 250 people in their homes doing reservations at Morris Air... They were 30 percent more productive – they take 30 percent more bookings, by just being happier" (Friedman, 2005, p. 37). Empowered employees typically leads to productive benefits such as long term employment, increased job satisfaction, pride in the organization, and overall better communication, all of which contribute to lower operating expenses. Leaders must learn enough about their employees to create an environment that fosters long term loyalty that will allow employees to take the risk of asking how they can do what they do better. Other additional benefits of empowered and satisfied employees include the fact that long term employment saves the company in the long run due to lower turnover costs. Turnover costs can include advertisements for posting jobs, the hiring process which may include hidden costs such as salaries if a search committee is required, training new employees, as well as the stress on co-workers who have to help during the training process.

Leaders must have the ability to understand what is important to their employees. "Managers spend most of their time relating to other people – in conversations and meetings, in groups and committees, over coffee or lunch, on the phone, or on the Internet." (Bolman & Deal, 2002, p. 345) Henri Fayol, a French CEO was the first leader to start discussing what he called "employee equity" (Simms, 2002). Fayol believed that employees should be treated with respect and as equals with management. Thinking like this was pretty radical in the early 20th century, but now times have changed. Today, I believe employees will be more productive if they are treated with respect. This leads us to our next question:

2.3 Employee Responsibility to become more Effective and Efficient

The second question focuses on an employee's ability to step up and control their own behavior. *Is there something you personally need to change to make yourself a better employee?* This question is a little different and the more important piece of this paper. Not only should good employees continuously ask about making the organization better, but they must also reflect on their own production behavior. Empowering employees to take the reins and make the change happen is great, but I also discussed earlier that there are times when the employee must change too. Management must be ready to help empower employees to also make changes in themselves. As an employee, and as a valued member of the organization, employees must also be critical of what they are doing to better themselves along with making the organization better.

Most changes in organizations are made at the individual level, and it is great when organizations have people that will continuously ask the first question. But how many people are willing to ask themselves the second question. If an organization must evolve to grow and be more productive, should not the people in the organization also do the same? I believe that the second question gets to the center of all change, what can each employee do to be better? If people thought like organizations, they would continue to make themselves strategic partners with the organization.

Is there something I can do personally to make myself a better employee? That question is very difficult for most people to answer. Organizations spend millions of dollars continuously trying to answer that question about the company. If this logic can be brought down to the employee level, then each person in the company should be asking if they can do anything to make themselves better.

The Myers-Briggs and DISC are both used by organizations to assess how employees' personalities impact how they work with each other. But how often do they use these tests to explore how an employee works alone. It would make sense that if you could make each individual better then as a result it would make the whole organization better since an organization is a collection of individuals. As organizations work towards improving processes, they also need to work towards improving individual performance. This individual change for performance improvement refocuses from an employer making the individual more effective and efficient to the employee improving their own performance.

This concept explores motivation and how to motivate employees to become better at what they do on a daily basis. Motivation is a lot like empowerment, management cannot make an employee feel empowered, nor can they make an employee feel motivated. This is something that comes from within a person. Employees must motivate themselves. The old saying that you can lead a dog to water, but you cannot make them drink holds true for employees, you can hold out incentives, praise, and many other rewards, but you cannot make them work if they are not motivated.

So how do we as change agents make employees want to critically reflect and improve upon their own work behavior? By looking at these models, there are many areas that focus on individual performance, but they do not focus individual behavior. This is where this paper is intending to add to the existing literature and add a section about self motivation and individual work behavior. Management must realize that individual behaviors are based on what the individual wants to do at work. This idea is not new. In their book, *Management, a Practical Introduction*, Angelo Kinicki and Brian Williams (2008, p.46) discuss how Hugo Munsterberg stated back in 1892 that managers need to:

- 1) Study jobs and determine which people are best suited to specific jobs.
- 2) Identify the psychological conditions under which employees do their best work.
- 3) Devise management strategies to influence employees to management's interests.

Two out of three points by Munsterberg state that the employee must be engaged in their own work experience. Managers need to create a work environment that allows employees to internally motivate themselves for improvement. And the only way for managers to achieve this is to create a work environment that allows employees to want to answer the second question and want to improve their own behavior towards work.

It is time to add a new box to change models that discusses the individual employee work perspective. And it is time for management to take the perspective that employees cannot be forced to behave in a certain way, they must create a work environment that makes employees want to behave in a way that creates a more productive organization.

3. Managerial Responsibility

Although the most important aspect of this paper is focused on employees changing their own behavior, it is also just as important for managers to understand this about their staff. Managers set the tone for the organization. They uphold and support the organizational culture. They must create an environment that fosters employees to want to succeed. As I stated earlier change does involve employees. And they usually are the component that has to drive the change to become effective. But to create organizational change that will last, managers and leaders must empower their subordinates to want to change.

Suggestions for managers would be to take a proactive approach to the questions asked in this article. Create an environment where these questions are part of the culture. These could also be implemented into annual reviews. All employers should be creating a learning organization by asking their employees to become responsible members of the organization. Allow your staff to be present at the table. Also empower your staff to become more aligned with the core mission of the organization. The more your staff believes they are making a difference for the organization, the more vested they become.

4. Further Research

Because most of the organizational change research in the past focuses on management, not much is written about focusing on employees. The limitations of this paper are contained to what has been previously written and my own past experience as a manager and leader. Further research, both quantitative and qualitative, is needed in this area. Beyond further research, it is important to understand the most employees think that they are already doing what is being suggested in this paper. The issue then lies in the gap between what is, and what should be. And this is the area that should be focused upon my managers.

5. Conclusion

This paper focused on a critical piece that is missing in management, the piece that includes change in the individuals in the organization. I believe that it is the employees responsibility to make the change work in the organization, along with making changes in themselves to help improve not only the organization, but to improve their own working behaviors. Empowerment comes from within, and employees must take the ownership of making themselves better.

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