Change Management 101

A Primer

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Section I: Introduction

Purpose and Audience

The purpose of this paper is to provide a broad overview of the concept of "change management." It was written primarily for people who are coming to grips with change management problems for the first time and for more experienced people who wish to reflect upon their experience in a structured way.

Section II: Change Management Defined

Four Basic Definitions

In thinking about what is meant by "change management," at least four basic definitions come to mind:

1. The task of managing change.
2. An area of professional practice.
3. A body of knowledge.
4. A control mechanism.

The Task of Managing Change

The first and most obvious definition of "change management" is that the term refers to the task of managing change. The obvious is not necessarily unambiguous. Managing change is itself a term that has at least two meanings.

One meaning of "managing change" refers to *the making of changes in a planned and managed or systematic fashion*. The aim is to more effectively implement new methods and systems in an ongoing organization. The changes to be managed lie within and are controlled by the organization.[1] However, these internal changes might have been triggered by events originating outside the organization, in what is usually termed "the environment." Hence, the second meaning of managing change, namely, *the response to changes over which the organization exercises little or no control* (e.g., legislation, social and political upheaval, the actions of competitors, shifting economic tides and currents, and so on). Researchers and practitioners alike typically distinguish between a knee-jerk or reactive response and an anticipative or proactive response.

The task of managing change also includes managing its impact on people. For many managers, this aspect of the task of managing change is complicated by the fact that they have to help their people cope with change and the managers also face their own coping challenges.

An Area of Professional Practice

The second definition of change management is "an area of professional practice."

There are dozens, if not hundreds, of independent consultants who will quickly and proudly proclaim that they are engaged in planned change, that they are change agents, that they manage change for their clients, and that their practices are change management practices. There are numerous small consulting firms whose principals would make these same statements about their

[1] Perhaps the most familiar instance of this kind of change is the "change control" aspect of information systems development projects.

firms. And, of course, most of the major management consulting firms have a change management practice area.

Some of these change management experts claim to help clients manage the changes they face – the changes happening to them. Others claim to help clients make changes. Still others offer to help by taking on the task of managing changes that must be made. In almost all cases, the process of change is treated separately from the specifics of the situation. It is expertise in this task of managing the general process of change that is laid claim to by professional change agents.

A Body of Knowledge

Stemming from the view of change management as an area of professional practice there arises yet a third definition of change management: the content or subject matter of change management. This consists chiefly of the models, methods and techniques, tools, skills and other forms of knowledge that go into making up any practice.

The content or subject matter of change management is drawn from psychology, sociology, business administration, economics, industrial engineering, systems engineering and the study of human and organizational behavior. For many practitioners, these component bodies of knowledge are linked and integrated by a set of concepts and principles known as General Systems Theory (GST). It is not clear whether this area of professional practice should be termed a profession, a discipline, an art, a set of techniques or a technology. For now, suffice it to say that there is a large, reasonably cohesive albeit somewhat eclectic body of knowledge underlying the practice and on which most practitioners would agree — even if their application of it does exhibit a high degree of variance.

A Control Mechanism

For many years now, Information Systems groups have tried to rein in and otherwise ride herd on changes to systems and the applications that run on them. For the most part, this is referred to as "version control" and most people in the workplace are familiar with it. In recent years, systems people have begun to refer to this control mechanism as "change management." Moreover, similar control mechanisms exist in other areas. Chemical processing plants, for example, are required by OSHA to satisfy some exacting requirements in the course of making changes. These fall under the heading of Management of Change or MOC.

To recapitulate, there are at least four basic definitions of change management:

1. The *task of managing change* (from a reactive or a proactive posture)
2. An *area of professional practice* (with considerable variation in competency and skill levels among practitioners)
3. A *body of knowledge* (consisting of models, methods, techniques, and other tools)
4. A *control mechanism* (consisting of requirements, standards, processes and procedures).

Content and Process

Organizations are highly specialized systems and there are many different schemes for grouping and classifying them. Some are said to be in the retail business, others are in manufacturing, and still others confine their activities to distribution. Some are profit-oriented and some are not for profit. Some are in the public sector and some are in the private sector. Some are members of the financial services industry, which encompasses banking, insurance, and brokerage houses. Others belong to the automobile industry, where they can be classified as original equipment manufacturers (OEM) or after-market providers. Some belong to the health care industry, as providers, as

insureds, or as insurers. Many are regulated, some are not. Some face stiff competition, some do not. Some are foreign-owned and some are foreign-based. Some are corporations, some are partnerships, and some are sole proprietorships. Some are publicly held and some are privately held. Some have been around a long time and some are newcomers. Some have been built up over the years while others have been pieced together through mergers and acquisitions. No two are exactly alike.

The preceding paragraph points out that the problems found in organizations, especially the change problems, have both a content and a process dimension. It is one thing, for instance, to introduce a new claims processing system in a functionally organized health insurer. It is quite another to introduce a similar system in a health insurer that is organized along product lines and market segments. It is yet a different thing altogether to introduce a system of equal size and significance in an educational establishment that relies on a matrix structure. The languages spoken differ. The values differ. The cultures differ. And, at a detailed level, the problems differ. However, the overall processes of change and change management remain pretty much the same, and it is this fundamental similarity of the change processes across organizations, industries, and structures that makes change management a task, a process, and an area of professional practice.

Section III: The Change Process

The Change Process as "Unfreezing, Changing and Refreezing"

The process of change has been characterized as having three basic stages: unfreezing, changing, and re-freezing. This view draws heavily on Kurt Lewin's adoption of the systems concept of homeostasis or dynamic stability.

What is useful about this framework is that it gives rise to thinking about a staged approach to changing things. Looking before you leap is usually sound practice.

What is not useful about this framework is that it does not allow for change efforts that begin with the organization in extremis (i.e., already "unfrozen"), nor does it allow for organizations faced with the prospect of having to "hang loose" for extended periods of time (i.e., staying "unfrozen").

In other words, the beginning and ending point of the unfreeze-change-refreeze model is stability — which, for some people and some organizations, is a luxury. For others, internal stability spells disaster. A tortoise on the move can overtake even the fastest hare if that hare stands still.

The Change Process as Problem Solving and Problem Finding

A very useful framework for thinking about the change process is problem solving. Managing change is seen as a matter of moving from one state to another, specifically, from the problem state to the solved state. Diagnosis or problem analysis is generally acknowledged as essential. Goals are set and achieved at various levels and in various areas or functions. Ends and means are discussed and related to one another. Careful planning is accompanied by efforts to obtain buy-in, support and commitment. The net effect is a transition from one state to another in a planned, orderly fashion. This is the planned change model.

The word "problem" carries with it connotations that some people prefer to avoid. They choose instead to use the word "opportunity." For such people, a problem is seen as a bad situation, one that shouldn't have been allowed to happen in the first place, and for which someone is likely to be punished — if the guilty party (or a suitable scapegoat) can be identified. For the purposes of

this paper, we will set aside any cultural or personal preferences regarding the use of "problem" or "opportunity." From a rational, analytical perspective, a problem is nothing more than a situation requiring action but in which the required action is not known. Hence, there is a requirement to search for a solution, a course of action that will lead to the solved state. This search activity is known as "problem solving."

From the preceding discussion, it follows that "problem finding" is the search for situations requiring action. Whether we choose to call these situations "problems" (because they are troublesome or spell bad news), or whether we choose to call them "opportunities" (either for reasons of political sensitivity or because the time is ripe to exploit a situation) is immaterial. In both cases, the practical matter is one of identifying and settling on a course of action that will bring about some desired and predetermined change in the situation.

The Change Problem

At the heart of change management lies the change problem, that is, some future state to be realized, some current state to be left behind, and some structured, organized process for getting from the one to the other. The change problem might be large or small in scope and scale, and it might focus on individuals or groups, on one or more divisions or departments, the entire organization, or one or on more aspects of the organization's environment.

At a conceptual level, the change problem is a matter of moving from one state (A) to another state (A'). Moving from A to A' is typically accomplished as a result of setting up and achieving three types of goals: *transform*, *reduce*, and *apply*. Transform goals are concerned with identifying differences between the two states. Reduce goals are concerned with determining ways of eliminating these differences. Apply goals are concerned with putting into play operators that actually effect the elimination of these differences (see Newell & Simon).

As the preceding goal types suggest, the analysis of a change problem will at various times focus on defining the outcomes of the change effort, on identifying the changes necessary to produce these outcomes, and on finding and implementing ways and means of making the required changes. In simpler terms, the change problem can be treated as smaller problems having to do with the how, what, and why of change.

Change as a "How" Problem

The change problem is often expressed, at least initially, in the form of a "how" question. How do we get people to be more open, to assume more responsibility, to be more creative? How do we introduce self-managed teams in Department W? How do we change over from System X to System Y in Division Z? How do we move from a mainframe-centered computing environment to one that accommodates and integrates PCs? How do we get this organization to be more innovative, competitive, or productive? How do we raise more effective barriers to market entry by our competitors? How might we more tightly bind our suppliers to us? How do we reduce cycle times? In short, the initial formulation of a change problem is means-centered, with the goal state more or less implied. There is a reason why the initial statement of a problem is so often means-centered and we will touch on it later. For now, let's examine the other two ways in which the problem might be formulated — as "what" or as "why" questions.

Change as a "What" Problem

As was pointed out in the preceding section, to frame the change effort in the form of "how" questions is to focus the effort on means. Diagnosis is assumed or not performed at all. Consequently, the ends sought are not discussed. This might or might not be problematic. To focus on

ends requires the posing of "what" questions. What are we trying to accomplish? What changes are necessary? What indicators will signal success? What standards apply? What measures of performance are we trying to affect?

Change as a "Why" Problem

Ends and means are relative notions, not absolutes; that is, something is an end or a means only in relation to something else. Thus, chains and networks of ends-means relationships often have to be traced out before one finds the "true" ends of a change effort. In this regard, "why" questions prove extremely useful.

Consider the following hypothetical dialogue with yourself as an illustration of tracing out ends-means relationships.

1. Why do people need to be more creative?
2. I'll tell you why! Because we have to change the way we do things and we need ideas about how to do that.
3. Why do we have to change the way we do things?
4. Because they cost too much and take too long.
5. Why do they cost too much?
6. Because we pay higher wages than any of our competitors.
7. Why do we pay higher wages than our competitors?
8. Because our productivity used to be higher, too, but now it's not.
9. Eureka! The true aim is to improve productivity!
10. No it isn't; keep going.
11. Why does productivity need to be improved?
12. To increase profits.
13. Why do profits need to be increased?
14. To improve earnings per share.
15. Why do earnings per share need to be improved?
16. To attract additional capital.
17. Why is additional capital needed?
18. We need to fund research aimed at developing the next generation of products.
19. Why do we need a new generation of products?
20. Because our competitors are rolling them out faster than we are and gobbling up market share.
21. Oh, so that's why we need to reduce cycle times.
22. Hmm. Why do things take so long?

To ask "why" questions is to get at the ultimate purposes of functions and to open the door to finding new and better ways of performing them. Why do we do what we do? Why do we do it the way we do it? Asking "why" questions also gets at the ultimate purposes of people, but that's a different matter altogether, a "political" matter, and one we'll not go into in this paper.

The Approach taken to Change Management Mirrors Management's Mindset

The emphasis placed on the three types of questions just mentioned reflects the management mindset, that is, the tendency to think along certain lines depending on where one is situated in the organization. A person's placement in the organization typically defines the scope and scale of the kinds of changes with which he or she will become involved, and the nature of the changes with which he or she will be concerned. Thus, the systems people tend to be concerned with technology and technological developments, the marketing people with customer needs and competi-

tive activity, the legal people with legislative and other regulatory actions, and so on. Also, the higher up a person is in the hierarchy, the longer the time perspective and the wider the range of issues with which he or she must be concerned.

For the most part, changes and the change problems they present are problems of adaptation, that is, they require of the organization only that it adjust to an ever-changing set of circumstances. But, either as a result of continued, cumulative compounding of adaptive maneuvers that were nothing more than band-aids, or as the result of sudden changes so significant as to call for a re-definition of the organization, there are times when the changes that must be made are deep and far-reaching. At such times, the design of the organization itself is called into question.

Organizations frequently survive the people who establish them. AT&T and IBM are two ready examples. At some point it becomes the case that such organizations have been designed by one group of people but are being operated or run by another. (It has been said of the United States Navy, for instance, that "It was designed by geniuses to be run by idiots.") Successful organizations resolve early on the issue of structure, that is, the definition, placement and coordination of functions and people. Other people then have to live with this design and, because the ends have already been established, these other people are chiefly concerned with means. This is why so many problem-solving efforts start out focused on means.

Some organizations are designed to buffer their core operations from turbulence in the environment. In such organizations all units fit into one of three categories: core, buffer, and perimeter.

In core units (e.g., systems and operations), coordination is achieved through standardization, that is, adherence to routine. In buffer units (e.g., upper management and staff or support functions), coordination is achieved through planning. In perimeter units (e.g., sales, marketing, and customer service), coordination is achieved through mutual adjustment (see Thompson).

People in core units, buffered as they are from environmental turbulence and with a history of relying on adherence to standardized procedures, typically focus on "how" questions. People in buffer units, responsible for performance through planning, often ask "what" questions. People in the perimeter units are as accountable as anyone else for performance and frequently for performance of a financial nature. They can be heard asking "what" and "how" questions. "Why" questions are generally asked by people with no direct responsibility for day-to-day operations or results. The group most able to take this long-term or strategic view is that cadre of senior executives responsible for the continued well being of the firm: top management. If the design of the firm is to be called into question or, more significantly, if it is actually to be altered, these are the people who must make the decision to do so.

Finally, when organizational redefinition and redesign prove necessary, all people in all units must concern themselves with all three sets of questions or the changes made will not stand the test of time.

To summarize: Problems may be formulated in terms of "how," "what" and "why" questions. Which formulation is used depends on where in the organization the person posing the question or formulating the problem is situated, and where the organization is situated in its own life cycle.

- "How" questions tend to cluster in core units.
- "What" questions tend to cluster in buffer units.
- People in perimeter units tend to ask "what" and "how" questions.

- "Why" questions are typically the responsibility of top management.

In turbulent times, everyone must be concerned with everything.

Section IV: Skills & Strategies

Managing the kinds of changes encountered by and instituted within organizations requires an unusually broad and finely honed set of skills, chief among which are the following.

Political Skills

Organizations are first and foremost social systems. Without people there can be no organization. Lose sight of this fact and any would-be change agent will likely lose his or her head. Organizations are hotly and intensely political. And, as one wag pointed out, the lower the stakes, the more intense the politics. Change agents dare not join in this game but they had better understand it. This is one area where you must make your own judgments and keep your own counsel; no one can do it for you.

Analytical Skills

Make no mistake about it, those who would be change agents had better be very good at something, and that something better be analysis. Guessing won't do. Insight is nice, even useful, and sometimes shines with brilliance, but it is darned difficult to sell and almost impossible to defend. A lucid, rational, well-argued analysis can be ignored and even suppressed, but not successfully contested and, in most cases, will carry the day. If not, then the political issues haven't been adequately addressed.

Two particular sets of skills are very important here: (1) workflow operations or systems analysis, and (2) financial analysis. Change agents must learn to take apart and reassemble operations and systems in novel ways, and then determine the financial and political impacts of what they have done. Conversely, they must be able to start with some financial measure or indicator or goal, and make their way quickly to those operations and systems that, if reconfigured a certain way, would have the desired financial impact. Those who master these two techniques have learned a trade that will be in demand for the foreseeable future. (This trade, by the way, has a name. It is called "Solution Engineering.")

People Skills

As stated earlier, people are the sine qua non of organization. Moreover, they come characterized by all manner of sizes, shapes, colors, intelligence and ability levels, gender, sexual preferences, national origins, first and second languages, religious beliefs, attitudes toward life and work, personalities, and priorities — and these are just a few of the dimensions along which people vary. We have to deal with them all.

The skills most needed in this area are those that typically fall under the heading of communication or interpersonal skills. To be effective, we must be able to listen and listen actively, to restate, to reflect, to clarify without interrogating, to draw out the speaker, to lead or channel a discussion, to plant ideas, and to develop them. All these and more are needed. Not all of us will have to learn Russian, French, or Spanish, but most of us will have to learn to speak Systems, Marketing, Manufacturing, Finance, Personnel, Legal, and a host of other organizational dialects. More important, we have to learn to see things through the eyes of these other inhabitants of the organizational world. A situation viewed from a marketing frame of reference is an entirely different situation when seen through the eyes of a systems person. Part of the job of a change agent is to reconcile and resolve the conflict between and among disparate (and sometimes desperate)

points of view. Charm is great if you have it. Courtesy is even better. A well-paid compliment can buy gratitude. A sincere "Thank you" can earn respect.

System Skills

There's much more to this than learning about computers, although most people employed in today's world of work do need to learn about computer-based information systems. For now, let's just say that a system is an arrangement of resources and routines intended to produce specified results. To organize is to arrange. A system reflects organization and, by the same token, an organization is a system.

A word processing operator and the word processing equipment operated form a system. So do computers and the larger, information processing systems in which computers are so often embedded. These are generally known as "hard" systems. There are "soft" systems as well: compensation systems, appraisal systems, promotion systems, and reward and incentive systems.

There are two sets of systems skills to be mastered. Many people associate the first set with computers and it is exemplified by "systems analysis." This set of skills, by the way, actually predates the digital computer and is known elsewhere (particularly in the United States Air Force and the aerospace industry) as "systems engineering." For the most part, the kind of system with which this skill set concerns itself is a "closed" system which, for now, we can say is simply a mechanistic or contrived system with no purpose of its own and incapable of altering its own structure. In other words, it cannot learn and it cannot change of its own volition. The second set of system skills associated with a body of knowledge generally referred to as General Systems Theory (GST) and it deals with people, organizations, industries, economies, and even nations as socio-technical systems — as "open," purposive systems, carrying out transactions with other systems and bent on survival, continuance, prosperity, dominance, plus a host of other goals and objectives.

Business Skills

Simply put, you'd better understand how a business works. In particular, you'd better understand how the business in which and on which you're working works. This entails an understanding of money — where it comes from, where it goes, how to get it, and how to keep it. It also calls into play knowledge of markets and marketing, products and product development, customers, sales, selling, buying, hiring, firing, EEO, AAP, and just about anything else you might think of.

Four Basic Change Management Strategies

(See the Bennis, Benne & Chin reference)

Note: The fourth and last strategy in the table below is not one of those presented by Bennis, Benne and Chin. It is instead the product of the author's own experiences during some 30 years of making and adapting to changes in, to, and on behalf of organizations. An excellent example of this strategy in action, albeit on an accelerated basis, is provided by the way in which Rupert Murdoch handled the printers of Fleet Street. He quietly set about building an entirely new operation in Wapping, some distance away. When it was ready to be occupied and made operational, he informed the employees in the old operation that he had some bad news and some good news. The bad news was that the existing operation was being shut down. Everyone was being fired. The good news was that the new operation had jobs for all of them—but on very different terms That there are also elements of the Empircal-Rational and power-coercive strategies at play here serves to make the point that successful change efforts inevitably involve some mix of these basic change strategies, a point that is elaborated on below.

Strategy	Description
Empirical-Rational	People are rational and will follow their self-interest — once it is revealed to them. Change is based on the communication of information and the proffering of incentives.
Normative-Reeducative	People are social beings and will adhere to cultural norms and values. Change is based on redefining and reinterpreting existing norms and values, and developing commitments to new ones.
Power-Coercive	People are basically compliant and will generally do what they are told or can be made to do. Change is based on the exercise of authority and the imposition of sanctions.
Environmental-Adaptive	People oppose loss and disruption but they adapt readily to new circumstances. Change is based on building a new organization and gradually transferring people from the old one to the new one.

Factors in Selecting A Change Strategy

Generally speaking, there is no single change strategy. You can adopt a general or what is called a "grand strategy" but, for any given initiative, you are best served by some mix of strategies.

Which of the preceding strategies to use in your mix of strategies is a decision affected by a number of factors. Some of the more important ones follow.

- *Scope and Scale*. This can vary from the minor “tweaking” of a process within a unit to the complete transformation of the entire organization. The larger the scope and scale, the more likely a broad mix of strategies will be required with Power-Coercive playing a central role.
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- ***Degree of Resistance***. Strong resistance argues for a coupling of Power-Coercive and Environmental-Adaptive strategies. Weak resistance or concurrence argues for a combination of Empirical-Rational and Normative-Reeducative strategies.

- ***Target Population.*** Large populations argue for a mix of all four strategies, something for everyone so to speak.

- ***The Stakes***. High stakes argue for a mix of all four strategies. When the stakes are high, nothing can be left to chance.

- ***The Time Frame.*** Short time frames argue for a Power-Coercive strategy. Longer time frames argue for a mix of Empirical-Rational, Normative-Reeducative, and Environmental-Adaptive strategies.

- ***Expertise***. Having available adequate expertise at making change argues for some mix of the strategies outlined above. Not having it available argues for reliance on the power-coercive strategy.

- ***Dependency***. This is a classic double-edged sword. If the organization is dependent on its people, management's ability to command or demand is limited. Conversely, if people are dependent upon the organization, their ability to oppose or resist is limited. (Mutual dependency almost always signals a requirement for some level of negotiation.)

One More Time: How do you manage change?

The honest answer is that you manage it pretty much the same way you'd manage anything else of a turbulent, messy, chaotic nature, that is, you don't really manage it, you grapple with it. It's as much a matter of leadership ability as it is one of management skill.

1. The first thing to do is jump in. You can't do anything about it from the outside.
2. A clear sense of mission or purpose is essential. The simpler the mission statement the better. "Kick ass in the marketplace" is a whole lot more meaningful than "Respond to market needs with a range of products and services that have been carefully designed and developed to compare so favorably in our customers' eyes with the products and services offered by our competitors that the majority of buying decisions will be made in our favor."
3. Build a team. "Lone wolves" have their uses, but managing change isn't one of them. On the other hand, the right kind of lone wolf makes an excellent temporary team leader.
4. Maintain a flat organizational team structure and rely on minimal and informal reporting requirements.
5. Pick people with relevant skills and high energy levels. You'll need both.
6. Toss out the rulebook. Change, by definition, calls for a configured response, not adherence to prefigured routines.
7. Shift to an action-feedback model. Plan and act in short intervals. Do your analysis on the fly. No lengthy up-front studies, please. Remember the hare and the tortoise.
8. Set flexible priorities. You must have the ability to drop what you're doing and tend to something more important.
9. Treat everything as a temporary measure. Don't "lock in" until the last minute, and then insist on the right to change your mind.
10. Ask for volunteers. You'll be surprised at who shows up. You'll be pleasantly surprised by what they can do.
11. Find a good "straw boss" or team leader and stay out of his or her way.
12. Give the team members whatever they ask for — except authority. They'll generally ask only for what they really need in the way of resources. If they start asking for authority, that's a signal they're headed toward some kind of power-based confrontation and that spells trouble. Nip it in the bud!
13. Concentrate dispersed knowledge. Start and maintain an issues logbook. Let anyone go anywhere and talk to anyone about anything. Keep the communications barriers low, widely spaced, and easily hurdled. Initially, if things look chaotic, relax — they are.

Remember, the task of change management is to bring order to a messy situation, not pretend that it's already well organized and disciplined.

Selected Sources

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