

Unfreeze Your Organization

by Kevin Scheid



In our last article on change we established that change is initiated by either external or internal forces, and organizations which want to change the world are most effective when they are amenable to change themselves. Christian organizations face a special challenge since the external impetus for change is somewhat muted in that organizational survival generally depends more on the approval and loyalty of donors as opposed to the satisfaction and loyalty of customers. Donors are less likely to ask for change and in fact may have more of an affinity to the status quo. Therefore one of the major forces for organizational change in the marketplace, survival, actually compels Christian organizations to resist change. Survey results of Christian organizations from the last several years seem to reaffirm that change is mostly initiated from the inside by good leadership. This leads us to the conclusion that Christian organizations need to be receptive to change in order to be effective over the long run and people whom God has gifted with leadership skills should serve in leadership positions, instituting change where needed, in order to

make their organizations more effective.

It is common for leaders to learn about important components of their organization even if they already appear to be successful. It is likewise wise for leaders to take time to understand the theories and processes which work best to support change as this will help them put their initiatives into action. In other words, it gives them a roadmap of the process which helps them understand where they are and how to get to where they want to go.

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Lewin (1947) first identified the change process in organizations with the broad terms: Unfreezing, Moving and Freezing. Although much subsequent research has added significant detail to this simple process, all the detailed additions

still fit within one of the three major categories. This article will focus on the process of 'Unfreezing' an organization and some of the related research conducted on this phase of change.

Communicate the need.

Establishing a need to change, or unfreeze, the organization is the first step laid out by Kotter (1995) and Galpin (1996). According to Clawson (2007), a critical role of a leader is to anticipate the need for change and motivate people to make the change early so that the change can be productive and not reactive or too late. Since change takes effort and people generally do not like change, Tichy and Devanna (1990) put more emphasis on the importance of leadership to the change process by stating that "One of the most difficult transformational tasks for a leader is to create a sense of urgency before there is an emergency (p27)". Tichy and Devanna illustrate this point further with a vignette showing not only the importance of management completing this difficult task, but the responsibility they own when they fail to anticipate and create that



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sense of urgency:

The chairman of a major American steel company was participating in a seminar about the problems that the industry was facing back in the early 1960s. He attempted to explain the growing dominance of the West Germans and Japanese in the industry by saying that their plants were more efficient because they had all been built after World War II. “Why,” the chairman said, “we would have been better off if our mills had been bombed during the war just as theirs were.” An anonymous response emanated from the back of the room, “I dare say, sir, that would be true only if your management had been locked inside (p27).”



It is understood by the participants in the above vignette that bombing the factories in Germany did not create a competitive advantage for the German steel companies just as bombing the factories in the U.S. would not improve the efficiency. It is also understood that leadership created the competitive advantage

through positive change initiatives. Of course a bombed out factory does create an urgency for change, but it also illustrates the challenge for leaders: how can a leader create the urgency of a bombed out factory to create change without actually bombing or destroying the factory?

Kotter’s eight steps for change.

Change for the most part is directed by leadership with a specific sequence of necessary actions. According to Kotter (1995) there are 8 steps in organizational change:

1. *Create a sense of urgency.*
2. *Create a powerful coalition.*
3. *Create a vision.*
4. *Communicate the vision.*
5. *Empower the people.*
6. *Achieve quick victories.*
7. *Consolidate the positive changes.*
8. *Institutionalize the changes.*

The first four steps in this process correspond to the unfreezing the organization.

After creating an urgency for change, leadership must create a coalition of people to support that change. Selecting the right people for this job is a critical step in the overall process.

Understanding staff commitment.

The level of commitment to the organization may be an important element in selecting the coalition of change supporters. According to

Parish, Cadwallader and Busch (2008) employee commitment to change is more important to successful change than employee commitment to the organization. However there are three levels of employee commitment – affective, continuance and normative. Affective commitment means an employee is committed because he or she believes in the organization and wants to be committed to it. Continuance commitment, on the other hand, means an employee believes they must be committed for their own benefit such as keeping their job. Finally, normative commitment describes employees who believe they ought to be committed because it is the right thing to do. Employees with affective commitment are your best employees, who are fully engaged and share the values of the organization. Normative commitment represents employees who are hard workers and know they should share the values of the organization. However, deep down these workers may have slightly different values, may not really live the values, or may believe the stated values of the organization are not the values lived by the organization. Despite these doubts and differences, the employees remain committed because they think they should. Continuance commitment indicates employees who need a paycheck or something else from the organization. They are not committed any further than the

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paycheck and are not willing to put out any additional effort.

The organizational culture has a significant influence on level of commitment, and thus a leader must understand the culture of their organization to better facilitate change. Rego and Pina e Cunha (2005) suggests that when people experience community at work, when their values are aligned with the organization, when they believe their work is meaningful, when they enjoy work and when they can develop to their full potential and have an inner life, then people become committed to an organization because they primarily want to, because they ought to and not because they have to. This indicates that a good workplace, with a strong Christian culture, will likely have people more receptive to change, and thus the organization is more likely to have successful change. Again, people in community, with shared Christian values which are manifested in the workplace, will likely have affective organizational commitment and thus be receptive to change.

People who want to work for the organization, those with affective commitment, are the people you want on your coalition of people to support change. Affective commitment translates directly to high commitment to change, whereas employees with continuance commitment, those

working for a paycheck, have a negative effect on commitment to change. Normative commitment, those working out of a sense of duty, fall between the two. An organization with all continuance employees will only be committed to change if they understand their job is dependent on the organization changing. If they are unconvinced the change is necessary for them to keep their job, then they will likely fight the change.

Build a coalition for change.

Kotter's (1995) third and fourth steps in affecting change, creating and communicating a vision, provide a goal for people to look forward to and creates hope to counteract the possible negative effects of change. Creating and communicating a vision is an important aspect of many other organizational functions, but having a vision early on in a change process with a committed coalition of employees behind the vision will improve the success of the change initiative immensely.

Just as culture and kind of commitment impact organizational change, the difficulty of creating urgency in an organization depends on organizational contextual issues according to Walker, Armenakis and Bernerth (2007). That is, if the organization has a culture of change, or has a history of successful change, then creating urgency for change is a routine and expected



event. However, in an organization with a culture of defending the status quo, and with prior failed change attempts, creating a sense of urgency is likely to result in resistance and cynicism. Armenakis and Bedeian, (1999) found that cynicism is related to past failed attempts at change and failure to communicate needed information. Cynicism is a significant factor in keeping people from committing to change.

Managing change.

To counteract cynicism and resistance to change, the change process must be closely managed and all aspects of the process must be clearly communicated. Armenakis and Bedeian, (1999) suggests that the change process is primarily supported by effective communications with five important components:

1. *Identifying the gap between where the organization is now and where it needs to be to achieve the vision.*
2. *Convince people that the content of the change is appropriate to fill the gap.*
3. *Convince people that they have the power and ability to effect the change.*

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4. Convince people that leadership is firmly behind the change.

5. Convince people of the benefit the change will have for them.

Communicating values: the key to change. Convincing people of the need to change is a difficult first task. It is made easier with good communication, a coalition of strong supporters and a vision which people can understand and buy into. Positive change is also facilitated by a culture of community where values are shared and people want to work for the organization. Successful past changes and a culture which expects change because change has always been there are other ingredients in facilitating change. If none of the positive supports for change are present in an organization, then change will be more difficult but will still be possible. Clear and effective communication is the essential key to making any change successful, but it is especially important when leading change in an

organization with none of the positive change attributes listed above.

Next month we will cover the component of the change process which entails moving the organization from one point to the next.

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