Approaches to Managing Organizational Change

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ABSTRACT

Much has been written about the nature of change and the best methods to manage it. Based on the research, we now have a better understanding of the steps that must be taken to ensure that change efforts have a significant and lasting impact. In this article, I discuss some of the most well known and popular models of the change process.

After years of failed change efforts, researchers are saying that knowledge of the change process is crucial. To succeed we need to cognize what we know about successful change before and during the change process. To this end, I will examine five of the most well known and popular models of the change process: Lewin's three-step change model, Kotter's eight-step plan, Harris's five-phase model, Fullan's change themes set, and Greiner's six-phase process.

Lewin's Three-Step Change Model

Change involves a sequence of organizational processes that occurs over time. Lewin (1951) suggests this process typically requires three steps: unfreezing, moving, and refreezing (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Lewin's Three-Step Change Model.

This step usually means reducing the forces acting to keep the organization in its current condition. *Unfreezing* might be accomplished by introducing new information that points out inadequacies in the current state or by decreasing the strength of current values, attitudes, and behaviors. Crises often stimulate unfreezing. Examples of crises are demographic shifts in population, a sudden increase in employee turnover, a costly lawsuit, and an unexpected strike. Unfreezing may occur without crises as well. Climate surveys, financial data, and enrollment projections can be used to determine problem areas in an organization and initiate change to alleviate problems before crises erupt.

Moving

Once the organization is unfrozen, it can be changed by *moving*. This step usually involves the development of new values, attitudes, and behaviors through internalization, identification, or change in structure. Some changes may be minor and involve a few members—such as changes in recruitment and selection procedures—and others may be major, involving many participants. Examples of the latter include a new evaluation system, restructuring of jobs and duties performed by staff, or restructuring a department or entire organization, which necessitates relocating staff to different sites within the organization.

Refreezing

The final step in the change process involves stabilizing the change at a new quasi-stationary equilibrium, which is called *refreezing*. Changes in organizational culture, changes in staff norms, changes in organization policy, or modifications in organizational structure often accomplish this.

Kotter's Eight-Step Plan

Building on Lewin's three-step change model, John Kotter (1996) of Harvard University developed a more detailed approach for managing change. Kotter began by listing common errors that leaders make when attempting to initiate change. These included the inability to create a sense of urgency about the need for change, failure to create a coalition for managing the change process, the absence of a vision for change, failure to effectively communicate that vision, failure to remove obstacles that could impede the achievement of the vision, failure to provide short-term achievable goals, the tendency to declare victory too soon, and failure to anchor the changes into the organization's culture. Based on these errors, Kotter proposed an eight-step process for managing change (see Table 1).

Table 1

Kotter's Eight-Step Process for Implementing Change

Step	Description
1. Establish a sense of urgency	Unfreeze the organization by creating a compelling reason forwhy change is needed.
2. Create the guiding coalition	Create a cross-functional, cross-level group of people with enough power to lead the change.
3. Develop a vision and strategy	Create a vision and strategic plan to guide the change process.
4. Communicate the change vision	Create and implement a communication strategy that consistently communicates the new vision and strategic plan.
5. Empower broad-based action	Eliminate barriers to change, and use target elements of change to transform the organization. Encourage risk taking and creative problem solving.
6. Generate short-term wins.	Plan for and create short-term "wins" or improvements. Recognize and reward people who contribute to the wins.
7. Consolidate gains and produce more change	The guiding coalition uses credibility from short-term wins to create more change. Additional people are brought into the change process as change cascades throughout the organization. Attempts are made to reinvigorate the change process.
8. Anchor new approaches in the culture	Reinforce the changes by highlighting connections between new behaviors and processes and organizational success. Develop methods to ensure leadership development and succession.

Note how Kotter's steps build on Lewin's model. Kotter's first four steps represent Lewin's "unfreezing" stage. Steps 5 through 7 represent Lewin's "moving" stage. The final step corresponds to Lewin's "refreezing" stage. Thus, Kotter's contribution provides leaders and change agents with a more detailed guide for managing change successfully

Harris's Five-Phase Model

Ben Harris (1975), formerly of The University of Texas, created a five-stage model for managing change (see Figure 2). He stated that these phases come in a sequential order, but they often overlap one another. Each phase will be discussed briefly.
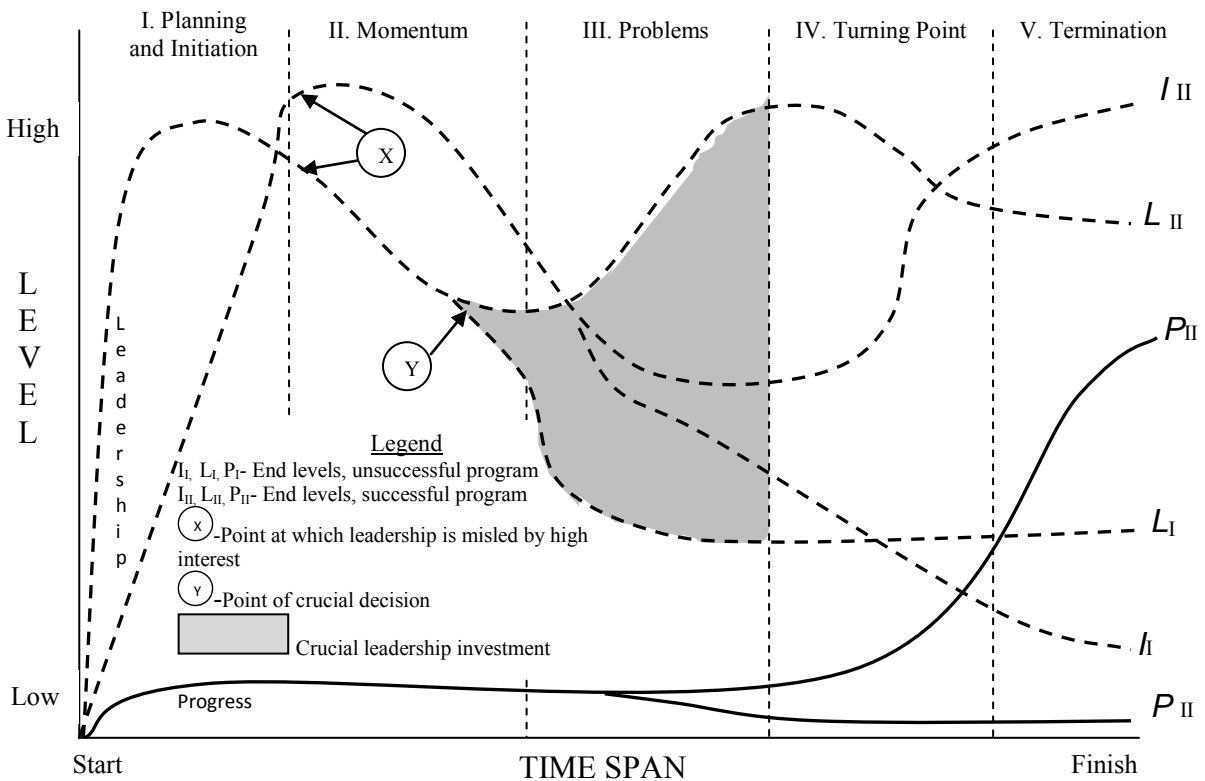
Phases of the Program

Figure 2 - Interest, leadership, and progress in implementing change.

Phase I. Planning and Initiation

The purpose of the program is considered, goals are clarified, activities are selected, and resources needed are considered. Interest mounts as individuals involved sense the relationships between the program and its goals and their needs.

Phase II. Momentum

Goal-directed activities get underway. Resources begin to be used. Interest continues to be high and mounts. Feelings of involvement and personal worth grow. The activities are recognized as potentially satisfying. Leading and organizing processes are most heavily employed in this phase.

Phase III. Problems

Activities lead to unexpected problems. The plans become increasingly complex. Initial activities lead to a proliferation of still more activities. Certain resources are not readily available. Differences in goal perception among group members become apparent. The demands of other responsibilities produce conflicts. The goal seems more remote and more difficult to attain than before. Some participants fail to live up to expectations. Interest levels out and begins a steep decline. A leadership investment is crucial during this phase.

Phase IV. Turning Point

The problem trends described in the previous phase either continue to grow or are overcome and minimized. The momentum the program has gained, the effectiveness of initial planning, and the individuals in the operation are all quite important during this phase. Above all, the amount and quality of leadership continues to be crucial.

Phase V. Termination

Unexpected problems can arise, such as: the task is too complex; there is a lack of resources; there is pressure of other responsibilities; interest is waning, and lack of goal consensus persists. This will result in termination of efforts because goal-directed activities will rapidly deteriorate and come to a halt. If, on the other hand, problems are dealt with promptly; the task is analyzed and simplified; new resources are made available; and goals are clarified, then interest gradually mounts again and goal-directed activities proceed at an increasing pace. Interest is now based on a sense of anticipated accomplishment and personal worth.

This sequence of events points out the importance of leadership at various phases of program implementation. Undoubtedly, this sequence of events will have variations and exceptions depending on the change, activities, and the participants involved.

Fullan's Change Themes Set

Michael Fullan (2011) provides still another model of the successful change process. According to Fullan, seven basic themes derived from current knowledge of successful change form a set and must be contemplated together when attempting change. They are presented here.

Change is Learning

All change involves learning and all learning involves coming to understand and be good at something new. Thus, conditions that support learning must be part of any change effort. Such conditions are also necessary for the valid rejection of changes, because many people reject innovations before they fully understand them.

Change is a Journey, Not a Blueprint

There can be no blueprints for change, because rational planning models for complex social change do not work. The message is not the traditional "Plan, then do," but "Do, then plan, and do and plan again." This perspective rests on the assumption that the environment both inside and outside the organization is often chaotic.

Problems Are Our Friends

We cannot develop effective responses to complex situations unless we actively seek and confront real problems that are difficult to solve. Only through immersing ourselves in problems can we come up with creative solutions. Problems are the route to deeper change and deeper satisfaction.

Change Is Resource-Hungry

Change demands additional resources for training, for new materials, for new space, and, above all, for time. Change represents developing solutions to complex problems, learning new skills, arriving at new insights, which are carried out in a social setting already overloaded with demands.

Change Requires the Power to Manage It

Change initiatives do not run themselves. They require substantial effort devoted to such tasks as monitoring implementation, keeping everyone informed of what's happening, linking multiple change projects, locating unsolved problems, and taking clear coping action.

Change is Systematic

What does it mean to work systematically? There are two aspects: (1) reform must focus on the development and interrelationships of all the main components of the system simultaneously—organization design, professional development, community, members' support systems, and the like, and (2) reform must focus not just on structure, policy, and regulations but on deeper issues of the culture of the system.

All Large-Scale Change Is Implemented Locally

The ideas that change is learning, change is a journey, problems are our friends, change is resource-hungry, change requires the power to manage, and change is systematic all embody the fact that local implementation by organization stakeholders is the only way that change happens.

Greiner's Change Process Model

Another well-known and popular model of the change process emphasizes the role of the change agent (Greiner, 1967). A change agent is the individual, from inside or outside the organization, who takes a leadership role in initiating the change process. As you study this change process, notice that it must involve two basic ideas for the change to be effective. First, successful change requires a redistribution of power within the existing structure. Successful change is characterized by a greater degree of shared power within the organizational hierarchy. Second, this redistribution of power occurs as a result of a developmental change process. In other words, it is a sequential process rather than a sudden shift.

Figure 3 depicts six phases through which change may occur in organizations. In this figure, top administration plays a key role as change agent. The potential for change also exists at all levels of leadership and operating responsibilities in the organization. Figure 3 shows change taking a top-down pattern; it may also occur from bottom-up or middle-outward patterns. In each case, however, leaders play key change agent roles. The following list summarizes the activities in each phase of the total developmental process.
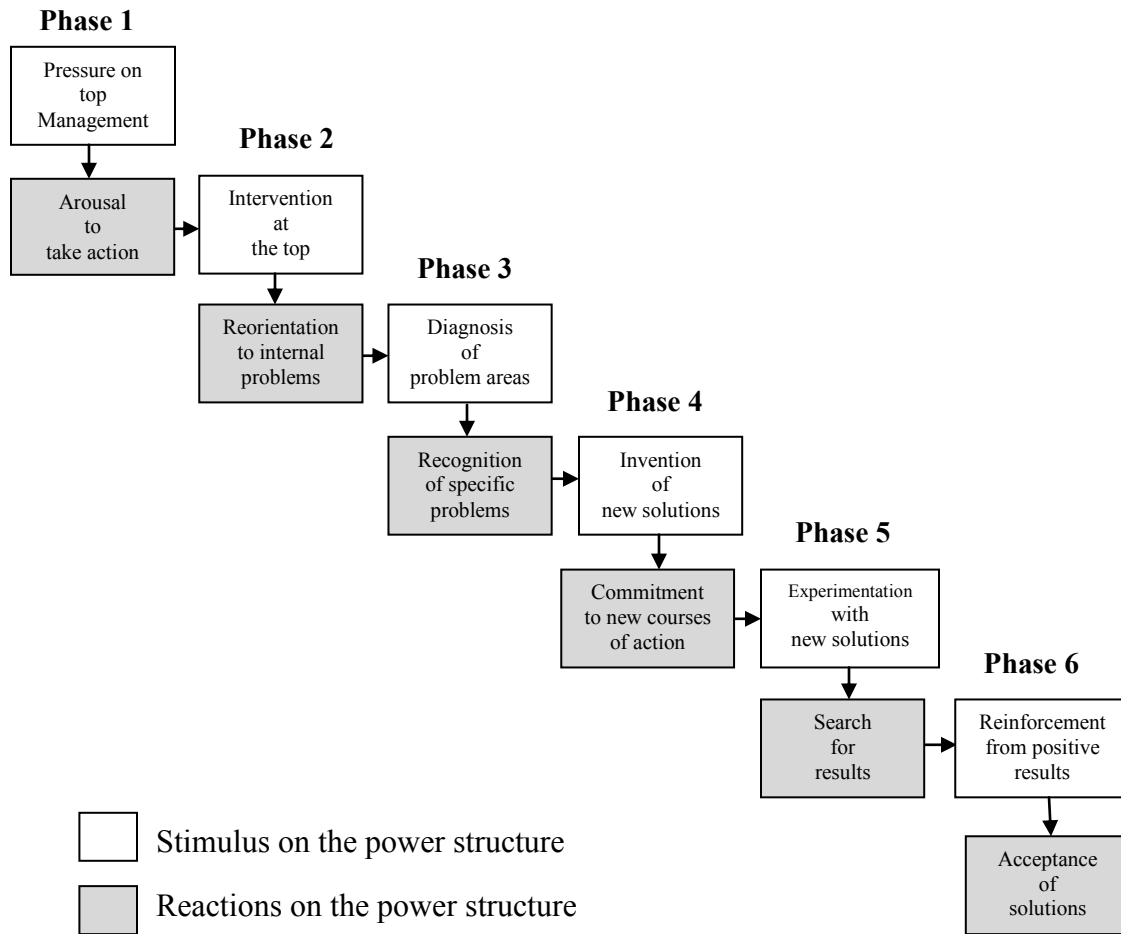
Phase 1

Pressure on top Management

Phase 2

Arousal to take action

Intervention at the top

Phase 3

Reorientation to internal problems

Diagnosis of problem areas

Phase 4

Recognition of specific problems

Invention of new solutions

Phase 5

Commitment to new courses of action

Experimentation with new solutions

Phase 6

Search for results

Reinforcement from positive results

Acceptance of solutions

☐ Stimulus on the power structure

▨ Reactions on the power structure

Figure 3. Model of Successful Organizational Change.

Phase 1: Pressure and Arousal

The process begins when the administration feels a need or pressure for change. This pressure can be exerted by external factors such as increased competition, economic changes, or federal and state mandates. Or it may be felt because of internal factors such as a sharp decline in productivity, high absenteeism and turnover, serious employee unrest, and excessive employee grievances. The need for change is more readily apparent if there are both external and internal pressures that do not offset each other.

Phase 2: Intervention and Reorientation

Although leaders may sense the need for change, they may not be able to analyze its problems accurately and thereby make the correct changes. When under severe pressure, leaders may rationalize its problems by blaming them on another group such as the employee union or the federal or state government. Leaders may be capable of managing the change process if they are perceived as expert and are trusted. If not, an outside consultant or change agent is often brought in to define the problem and begin the process of getting organization members to focus on the problem.

Phase 3: Diagnosis and Recognition

In the third phase of successful change, the entire organization becomes involved in determining the true causes of problems requiring change by gathering relevant information. A shared approach between the leader and staff is common in this stage. The decision-making process has been broadened as the leader shows her willingness to recognize tough problems and to change. Diagnosis of the problem areas leads to recognition of specific problems. This step tends to be avoided in efforts involving unsuccessful change.

Phase 4: Invention and Commitment

After the problem is recognized, the organization moves toward creative solutions to the problems that have been identified. The shared approach again predominates in this phase. If organization members are encouraged to participate in this process, they will probably be more committed to the solutions.

Phase 5: Experimentation and Search

The solutions developed in phase 4 are usually tested in small-scale pilot programs and the results analyzed. For example, in a large organization, one department may try out an idea before it is attempted in the organization as a whole. In this way, the leader can work out the bugs before introducing the change on a large scale. Through control mechanisms, the leader determines to what degree the planned change is succeeding in remedying the problem, how well it is being received, and how implementation can be improved.

Phase 6: Reinforcement and Acceptance

Finally, if the course of action has been tested and found desirable, it should be accepted more willingly. Furthermore, individuals need to be reinforced for making the change successful. The positive feedback coming from the pilot programs in phase 5 add reinforcement to the change process. Other techniques for reinforcing acceptance include praise, recognition, promotion, salary increases, and continued participation in the change process.

Conclusion

Much has been written about the nature of change and the best methods to manage it. Based on the research, we now have a better understanding of the steps that must be taken to ensure that change efforts have a significant and lasting impact. In this article, I examined five of the most well known and popular models of the change process: Lewin's three-step model, Kotter's eight-step plan, Harris's five-phase model, Fullan's change themes set, and Greiner's six-phase process. In sum, the framework for managing change that I have described here provides a powerful and useful overall model for ensuring successful change efforts.

References

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