Four Change Management Strategies

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This paper presents four change management strategies. Three are summarized versions of "classics" from the work of Kenneth Benne and Robert Chin. The fourth is of the author's own making. Most successful change efforts will require some mix of the four strategies; rarely will a single strategy suffice. The paper also provides some factors to consider in selecting a strategy or mix of strategies.

The source for the first three strategies presented here is "General Strategies for Effecting Changes in Human Systems" (1969) by Robert Chin and Kenneth D. Benne, Section 1.3 of Chapter 1 in *The Planning of Change* (2nd Edition), Warren G. Bennis, Kenneth D. Benne and Robert Chin (Editors). Holt, Rinehart & Winston: New York, NY. The fourth strategy is one of my own making.

Change Strategy	Underlying Assumptions	Selection Factors
Empirical-Rational	People are rational beings and will follow their self-interest – once it is revealed to them. Successful change is based on the communication of information and the proffering of incentives. For the most part, people *are* reasonable and they can be reasoned with. In short, they can be persuaded. Value judgments aside, they can also be bought. This is the "carrot" side of carrot-and-stick management. But for reason and incentives to work, there has to be very little in the way of a downside to the change and/or the upside has to greatly outweigh it. If there's a big downside and it's not offset by an upside that is big enough and attractive enough to offset the downside and null out any risk involved, people will indeed be rational; that is, they will oppose or resist the change – overtly or covertly.	Change strategy here centers on the balance of incentives and risk management. This strategy is difficult to deploy when the incentives available are modest. Why risk what we have for an uncertain future that promises to be no more than modestly better than the present? This is especially true when people currently have it pretty good. One stratagem of use here is to cast doubt on the viability of the present state of affairs. You can attempt to convince people that they are on a burning platform (not a good choice if they really aren't) or you can simply try to persuade them that the current state of affairs has a short shelf life. In either case, the story you tell has to convince them, not you. A by-product of this strategy consists of converts, that is, people who buy the story. Some will see the light and want to sign on. These people can be very helpful. However, depending on their stature in the organization, you might not want them. Another stratagem here is to systematically target converts, that is, thought leaders and influencers who, if they buy the story and buy into helping make the change, will influence others.

Change Strategy	Underlying Assumptions	Selection Factors
Normative-Reeducative	People are social beings and will adhere to cultural norms and values. Successful change is based on redefining and reinterpreting existing norms and values, and developing commitments to new ones. For the most part, most people do want to "fit in" and "go along." They will "go with the flow." The trick here is figuring out how to establish and define the flow. Again, set aside value judgments and you will see such commonplace practices such as advertising, positioning, and so on. Central here also is charismatic and dynamic leadership. It is also the case that the influence of the informal organization is felt strongly here, especially in the form of communities of practice.	Change strategy here focuses squarely on culture – what people believe about their world, their work and themselves and the ways in which people behave so as to be consistent with these beliefs. Ordinarily, culture doesn't change quickly and certainly not overnight. This, then, is not the strategy of choice in a turnaround situation on short deadlines. Moreover, an organization's culture is as much in the grip of the informal organization as it is the formal organization. For this reason, this strategy works only when the relationships between the formal and informal organizations are at least cordial and hopefully harmonious. If they are at odds with one another, this change strategy is denied to management. Still, there is an avenue or two open here. Almost all change efforts have long-term as well as short-term goals. To some extent, the long-term change strategy will have to incorporate some normative-reeducative actions. Enlisting and involving the informal leaders of the organization and keeping them involved is one such avenue. (It should be kept in mind that the formal and informal organizations often overlap in the form of people who lead or influence large or important constituencies and who also hold powerful positions.)

Change Strategy	Underlying Assumptions	Selection Factors
Power-Coercive	People are basically compliant and will generally do what they are told or can be made to do. Successful change is based on the exercise of authority and the imposition of sanctions. This can range from the iron hand in the velvet glove to downright brutality – "My way or the highway." The basic aim here is to decrease people's options, not increase them. Surprisingly, in many situations, people actually want and will readily accept this approach, particularly when all feel threatened and few know what to do. This is the "stick" side of carrot-and-stick management.	Two major factors influencing the choice of this strategy are time and the seriousness of the threat faced. If the organization sits astride the fabled "burning platform," the threat is grave and the time for action is limited. The metaphor of a burning platform is useful but only if all concerned can in fact see that the platform is on fire. This is rarely the case in an organization. Few companies are filled with people who understand the way the business works and fewer people still appreciate the threats it faces or the opportunities it encounters. It has been argued that change-minded leaders should create a burning platform. That idea might have merit in extreme situations but it also entails considerable risk – to the organization, to its people, and to the leader who attempts it. A mitigating factor here is the culture. If the culture is basically one of a benign bureaucracy that is clearly threatened, its members are likely to go along with a sensible program, no matter how high-handed. Conversely, if the culture is laced with autonomy and entrepreneurship but has grown fat, dumb and happy, people will resent and perhaps oppose or resist authoritarian moves. In this case, key positions might have to be filled with new people.

Change Strategy	Underlying Assumptions	Selection Factors
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. This strategy seeks to shift the burden of change from management and the organization to the people. It exploits their natural adaptive nature and avoids the many complications associated with trying to change people or their culture. Essentially, this is a strategy of self-cannibalization, that is, you set out to eat your own lunch – before someone else does. Also known as "the die-on-the-vine" strategy, this hinges on the commonplace observation that, although people are often quick to oppose change they view as undesirable, they are even quicker to adapt to new environments. Consequently, instead of trying to transform existing organizations, it is often quicker and easier to create a new one and gradually move people from the old one to the new one. Once there, instead of being able to oppose change, they are faced with the prospect of adapting to new circumstances, a feat they manage with great facility. The old organization, then, is left to die on the vine.	The major consideration here is the extent of the change. This strategy is best suited for situations where radical, transformative change is called for. For gradual or incremental change, this is not the strategy of choice. Time frames are not a factor. This strategy can work under short time frames or longer ones. However, under short time frames, a key issue will be that of managing what could be explosive growth in the new organization and, if it is not adequately seeded with new folks, the rapid influx of people from the old culture can infuse the new organization with the old culture. Another factor to consider is the availability of suitable people to "seed" the new organization and jump-start its culture. Some can come from other organizations but some can come from the old organization, too. In the old culture can be found rebels, misfits and other noncomformists who are precisely what is needed in the new culture. They must be chosen with care, however, because of the politics and the possibility that some will bear grudges against some members of the old culture. Another consideration here is perhaps best termed as "bad apples" (i.e., people from the old organization who simply cannot be allowed into the new one).

Strategy Selection Considerations

1. **Degree of Change**. Radical change or transformation argues for an environmental-adaptive strategy (i.e., "wall off" the existing organization and build a new one instead of trying to transform the old one). Less radical changes argue against this strategy.

2. **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 rational-empirical and normative-reeducative strategies.

3. **Population**. Large populations argue for a mix of all four strategies, something for everyone so to speak. Diverse populations also call for a mix of strategies. This implies careful segmentation.

4. **Stakes**. High stakes argue for a mix of all four strategies. When the stakes are high, nothing can be left to chance. Moderate stakes argue against a power-coercive strategy because there is no grand payoff that will offset the high costs of using the power-coercive strategy. There are no low-stakes change problems. If the stakes are low, no one cares, and resistance levels will be low. Avoid Power-Coercive strategies in low stakes situations.

5. **Time Frame**. Short time frames argue for a power-coercive strategy. Longer time frames argue for a mix of rational-empirical, normative-reeducative, and environmental-adaptive strategies.

6. **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.

7. **Dependency**. This is a classic double-edged sword. If the organization is dependent on its people, its ability to command and demand is limited. On the other hand, if the people are dependent on the organization, their ability to oppose is limited. (Mutual dependency almost always signals a requirement to negotiate.)

Generally speaking, there is no single change strategy. You can adopt a general or grand strategy (say, a power-coercive one) but, for any given initiative (and there will always be multiple initiatives), you are best served by some mix of strategies and tactics. A useful exercise is to queue up the change initiatives and examine each of them in relation to the various change strategies. The end result of this exercise is a filled-in matrix something like the table below.

	Rational-Empirical	**Normative-Reeducative**	**Power-Coercive**	**Enviromental-Adaptive**
Change Initiative 1	*R-E Strategy 1* *R-E Strategy 2* *R-E Strategy n*	*N-R Strategy 1* *N-R Strategy 2* *N-R Strategy n*	*P-C Strategy 1* *P-C Strategy 2* *P-C Strategy n*	*E-A Strategy 1* *E-A Strategy 2* *E-A Strategy n*
Change Initiative 2	*R-E Strategy 1* *R-E Strategy 2* *R-E Strategy n*	*N-R Strategy 1* *N-R Strategy 2* *N-R Strategy n*	*P-C Strategy 1* *P-C Strategy 2* *P-C Strategy n*	*E-A Strategy 1* *E-A Strategy 2* *E-A Strategy n*
Change Initiative n	*R-E Strategy 1* *R-E Strategy 2* *R-E Strategy n*	*N-R Strategy 1* *N-R Strategy 2* *N-R Strategy n*	*P-C Strategy 1* *P-C Strategy 2* *P-C Strategy n*	*E-A Strategy 1* *E-A Strategy 2* *E-A Strategy n*

Related Readings

There are additional articles related to change management on my web site. Links are provided below.

- [Change Management: A Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Change Management 101: A Primer](#)
- [Change Management in Hard Times](#)
- [Embracing Resistance to Change](#)

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