

## Impediments to Organizational Change

A large body of knowledge, theory, concepts, and descriptions regarding organizational change exists for analyzing change in organizations. Change is a constant in organizations, but many times change efforts fail for a variety of reasons. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the impediments to organizational change, address how and why the impediments disrupt change efforts, and analyze the disruptions for opportunities for overcoming impediments to change.

Burns (2003) said that the common cry from orators is “we live in a time of change” (p. 17) and that the orators are correct in their assessment. In this context leadership becomes the central phenomenon because all change is initiated by someone having an intention or taking an initiative to improve something. The circumstances that give birth to someone initiating change provide the elements that leaders must mold into a coherent vision, message, and incentives to influence others to embrace the change. Unfortunately, change may be the one human activity that produces the most adversity in society and organizations. Human motivations such as wants, needs, ambition, culture, creativity, and power are some of the elements that create either a successful mix for transformation and change or organizational chaos and stagnancy (Burns, 2003).

### *Types of Change Impediments*

The mere mention of change can produce stress, anger, fear, indifference and frustration on the part of the employees of an organization. Each of these emotions becomes an impediment to change and the effective operations of the organization. Handy (1993) defined one of the foundational insights regarding change in organizations and the impediments to change in the context of human interaction and politics of an organization. Handy described change as a

“necessary condition of survival” (p. 291) which embodies the differences of the individuals in an organization. The constant search for improvement results in conflict between individuals in terms of different approaches, willingness to change, and relationships between individuals and groups. In Handy’s studies, leaders found that relationships or interactions were the biggest obstacles to success in change efforts. Other impediments closely linked to relationships are poor communications, inter-group rivalries, and power struggles. In essence the impediment to change is conflict. The challenge to leaders is to harness the differences in organization and convert conflict to competition that enhances innovation and the organization’s ability to survive (Handy, 1993).

### *Organizational Games (Politics)*

Impediments to change take on multiple manifestations. Mintzberg (1983) identified impediments from the standpoint of politics in organizations which he called games. The games that Mintzberg identified were games to resist authority, games of counter resistance, games to build power bases, games to defeat rivals, and games to change the organization (Mintzberg, 1983). Each of the so-called games is fascinating to analyze as a group of organizational impediments or enablers, depending on the outcome of the effort or how far each game is allowed to progress by leadership. The difference between categorization of a game as an impediment or enabler is the intervention by leaders and management to avoid allowing competition from becoming unhealthy or counterproductive conflict (Handy, 1993).

### *Self-inflicted Organizational Impediments*

Organizations have self-inflicted impediments based on how the prevalent social virtues are applied in ways to inhibit change (Argyris, 1990). Argyris explained other organizational defenses or impediments such as the avoidance of conflict by putting ourselves or others into

situations which may be threatening or embarrassing, even if a perceived conflict would benefit the organization. Organizations create defensive routines through by-pass mechanisms and informal or underground management practices which are inconsistent with published strategy (Mintzberg, Lampel, Quinn, & Ghoshal, 2003). Organizations create impediments through the documented values and beliefs while operating under quite different values and beliefs and not discussing the inconsistencies (Argyris, 1990). The result of the inconsistencies is that formal and informal operations develop communication obstacles that give people the feeling of powerlessness to change.

The failure to impart information effectively about change produces impediments to change (Wu & Neubert, 2007). Informed employees are more likely to support change efforts when leaders ensure that information that supports the need for change and how it affects individuals as well as the organization is rapidly disseminated. Complexity of change becomes an impediment and is multiplied when information to describe and demystify complexity is unavailable.

### *Examples of Overcoming Impediments*

Bill Gore, the founder of W.L. Gore and Associates, famous for Goretex fabric and other chemical wonders, practiced something called “unmanagement” (O’Toole, 1995).

*Unmanagement* represents a nonhierarchical, non-bureaucratic form of leadership where no titles, no job descriptions, and no supervisors or managers exist. The guiding principle was that all employees had the authority to do anything except ruin the entire organization. Gore overcame impediments by not having any impediments (O’Toole, 1995).

Gordon Forward of Chapparral Steel of Texas created something called management by adultery in which all employees were viewed as adults who could accept responsibilities. Safety,

quality, personnel, training, and research and development were pushed to the lowest levels of the organization. Each person in the organization is a leader and Forward could be found throughout the organization talking technology or in the boardroom discussing corporate vision, values, and philosophy (O'Toole, 1995).

### *Recommendations to Overcome Impediments*

The examples above are simple yet extreme solutions to overcoming impediments to change, however, the unmanagement of Gore and the management by adultery of Forward demonstrate that innovative approaches to leadership and management along with empowerment, trust, motivation, and communication are the impediment busters in organizations (O'Toole, 1995). Overcoming impediments to change requires the skillful use of power, influence, and communication. A constant recommendation to overcome impediments to change is to increase communication and improve the nature of relationships. Anomalies or things that do not fit expected patterns often serve as the basis for new ideas and are best captured when information is widely available through a variety of communications mechanisms (de Jong & Den Hartog, 2007).

### *Choices in Overcoming Impediments to Change*

Non-orthodox approaches work in organizations with skillful leaders who possess charisma, communication skills, and an indomitable personality that empowers people to exercise influence, creativity, and leadership at all levels (O'Toole, 1995). More orthodox methods like the Baldrige assessment described by the National Institute of Standards and Technology [NIST] (2007) provides well-documented examples, questions, and criteria for assisting organizations to overcome impediments to change (Latham & Vinyard, 2007). Specifically, organizations must focus on processes of senior leadership, customer and market

knowledge, strategy, governance, work system design, process improvement, information management, and performance analysis to overcome obstacles and impediments in an organization. Baldrige is not the only framework to assist in the minimization of impediments. Other frameworks include the Capability Maturity Model-Integration, LEAN, Six Sigma, and the balanced scorecard. The frameworks integrate processes in an organization and leave a lasting legacy of leadership which formalized processes and embrace best practice and continuous improvement, innovation, performance analysis, and results (Latham & Vinyard, 2007).

#### *Key Enablers: Listening and Communications Skills*

The listening and communications skills of leaders cannot be overemphasized to overcome impediments to change. The abilities of managers and leaders to listen, understand, sympathize, coach, and mentor employees through change efforts are fundamental for empowering real and lasting change in organizations (Wu & Neubert, 2007). When effective communications occur between leaders and followers, followers are less likely to blame the change agent for being unconcerned and incompetent. Wu and Neubert discussed how inspirational leaders are able to “concurrently communicate information and promote individual worth” (p. 332). Inspirational leaders deliver information about organizational change in such a way that it depicts a clear, vivid picture of the future. The picture provides information as to what needs to be done and why (Bass, 1997). Employees are more likely to feel esteemed and informed and are more likely to support and be a positive contributor to organizational change.

#### *Final Thoughts*

Impediments are temporary setbacks to leaders who provide a vision, strategy, and communications that allow people to devise ways to say yes to change. Any change effort must be built by an understanding of the culture of the organization, the environment, the people of the

organization, and the need to change an organization. Once these issues are known, communicated, and consistently reinforced through continual information by a leader-champion who models the change and promotes the benefits in such a way that resistance becomes counter intuitive. Examples exist in many organizations of effective change that overcame impediments and the common thread seems to be respect for the people of the organization and involving everyone through a comprehensive, yet simple information dissemination (O'Toole, 1995). An organization that identifies a need or requirement to change must use every asset and means available to spread information about how the need or requirement to change affects the organization and each individual (Mintzberg, Lampel, Quinn, & Ghoshal, 2003). The organizational strategy must be adjusted and an effective set of plans which include action plans and communications plans to ensure that everyone understands the change process, goals, and end state (Wu & Neubert, 2007).

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