The Value Proposition for Change

Seth Michael Stone

The concepts of change, change management, and organizations of change have become buzzwords in management and leadership discussions at the academic and practitioner levels. Of course, it is not without good reason; some of today's most successful organizations, those positioned to succeed today and in the long-term are those which have adopted an organizational culture where change is always welcome.

Business and commerce cannot be conducted the way it was ten years ago, two years ago, or even six months ago, because with an ever-shrinking global business landscape, change is ever-present and competition is stronger than ever. If organizations of change are the benchmark for a bright future, why are so many refusing, or at least waiting until they are forced, to adopt a change framework?

The answer may be due to the reality that organizations do not run organizations; people do. Most people fear change, and when we fear something, we dig our heels in and resist with all our might. The problem here, of course, is that "Resistance has been classically understood as a foundation cause of conflict that is undesirable and detrimental to organizational health" (Waddell & Sohal, 1998, p. 543). So the question becomes, how do we overcome human resistance for positive organizational growth, as well as human development?

The purpose of this article is to examine resistance as a root cause for opposing change in today's organizations, both from a fundamental perspective and a Biblical perspective. The objective is to present a solution to overcome resistance and create organizations of change where there is value to the organization, as well as its most critical stakeholders, its human capital. This article will begin by examining the basic causes for change resistance. It will then examine resistance with scriptural examples. A proposal for building sustainable positive change is then presented, with concluding remarks summarizing the article.

Resistance

Where is the resistance in our organizations derived? The fact is, it can arise from myriad circumstances, as "internal resistance is often caused by the surfacing

of past experiences, fears, or worries the individual has experienced" (Bovey & Hede, 2001, p. 536). Fear is often the greatest stumbling block to change, and this fear is difficult for leaders to control on a micro or macro level. In essence, as leaders, we must understand that our followers are bringing their personal life experiences with them to our organizations. These life experiences could have taken place in other organizations, in the home, and in social situations. Inevitably, these experiences have the propensity to be both good and bad. Cumulatively, they manifest themselves inside each of us, which can largely shape our perceptions, beliefs, and value systems.

Fear and anxiety are closely linked terms. While certainly not one and the same, one can be a by-product of the other, which makes anxiety extremely relative to the resistance discussion. Bovey and Hede (2001), state, "Whether the cause is real or imaginary, anxiety still produces the same psychological responses for an individual. Not only does anxiety arise from perceived dangers, but may also be experienced internally within the individual for no obvious reason" (p. 536). While it is beyond the scope of this article to delve into the clinical psychology of the drivers of anxiety, it is critical to understand that anxiety exists and can be a powerful force within people. Moreover, the fact that it can stem from a very real circumstance or be irrationally perceived means that it has the ability to creep into people's lives and our organizations at any given time.

God created us all uniquely; therefore, we process experiences uniquely. This brings significant challenges when working with a larger group of followers to overcome the fear of change. It would be unrealistic to think that we can calm each and every fear of each and every follower as we press on with the strategic leadership goal of organizational change;

only those believing in a utopian state would think otherwise. However, by gaining a deeper understanding of the needs and fears of organization members regarding change, leaders can develop a methodology by which they can find common ground for all to stand on and move forward, even though organizations will never be devoid of resistance on some level.

A Biblical Perspective

Scripture is clear that most forms of human fear are not of God, especially the irrational types we so desperately try to rationalize. The apostle Paul said, "for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control" (2 Tim. 1:7, English Standard Version). In discussing the word fear, MacArthur (2010) states, "The Greek word denotes a cowardly, shameful fear caused by a weak, selfish character"

(p. 1827). Is this not the very type of fear we see penetrating our organizations when it comes to resisting change?

Scripture clearly addresses fear, but this article has also identified the anxiety that can manifest out of fear, which Scripture has an answer for as well. "And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say" (Luke 12:11-12, English Standard Version). Regarding the mention of anxiety in this passage, MacArthur (2010) says it simply means, "do not worry" (p. 1501). This is not to say we are never going to worry about anything; matters in our organizations today cause worry all of the time, but anxiety as it applies to the unknown, or change, is something we must try to temper at every level of our organizations. One might say this is easier said than done. We may cognitively understand that worrying about change does not help our circumstances, but this symptom of anxiety is engrained in the minds of so many that attempting to change this pattern can put people, even Christians, into a form of mental paralysis, even when we see clear evidence from Scripture as to why we should not worry.

Perhaps an example of change in action from a scriptural context will help in this case.

"As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to

him, 'Follow me.' And he rose and followed him" (Matthew 9:9, English Standard Version). Was it as easy as perhaps it seemed for Matthew to walk away from his profession and what he knew to follow Jesus? While Scripture clearly indicates Matthew did not hesitate, could there have, at least, been some sense of trepidation in Matthew? Of course there could have been, and likely there should have been. At the point he was called, Jesus did not outline a plan for what the rest of Matthew's life was going to look like; Matthew had to follow on faith alone. Is this dissimilar to the changes our followers must go through in today's organizations? While not to minimize the leader/follower dynamics between Jesus and Matthew, we, as leaders and followers, often do not know what the net result of organizational change will be tomorrow, much less ten years from now. Therefore, we must consider the human element of change, which any scale or scope presents as an ultimate sense of uncertainty.

With the fundamental understanding that change creates uncertainty, which in turn can breed fear and anxiety, how do we create a willingness among followers to embrace change as a state of mind rather than a singular event?

A Solution for Sustainable Change

With a Biblical understanding of change and knowledge of the human element of resistance as it applies to change, how do we create organizations of sustainable change? This can be accomplished by creating a system of organization learning through communication and information sharing. However, what does organizational learning look like? "Learning occurs when information is questioned and tested with existing knowledge to construct and reconstruct new knowledge. Asking employees to share lessons learnt on a particular project, may mean asking them to reveal their mistakes" (Boateng, 2011, p. 8). This notion of learning brings to light a concept unfamiliar

to many organizations – open communication of successes and failures at every level.

Looking at some of the fundamental research as it applies to change and learning helps provide an understanding of the challenges and opportunities organizational learning presents. While there appear to be numerous experts on change and learning, some of the foundational research was conducted by Kurt Lewin and Chris Argyris. "Previous studies conducted by Kurt Lewin during World War II revealed how allowing input from employees when changes were needed added to acceptance of the changes with a bonus of increased productivity" (Brisson-Banks, 2010, p. 243). This early research began to shed some light on what employees want, and more importantly need, to welcome the change process and move the organization forward. Followers having input simply means communicating information from a particular perspective, which becomes relevant in the communication component of adopting a learning culture.

"Argyris (1976) popularized the term single-loop learning to describe error catching and correcting activities that do not involve a change in foundational assumptions.

Double-loop learning, on the other hand, he says, is that deeper change involving a questioning of the basis on which decisions are made" (Bochman & Kroth, 2011, p. 329). Argyris's differentiation between single- and double-loop learning drills down to the core of organizational change and organizational learning. When organizational leaders stop looking at how to change isolated issues and begin to focus on why things are done the way they are, a genuine change mentality can start to set in and become part of the organizational culture.

"Importantly, Argyris' distinction between single and double-loop learning is a normative one. Not only are single-loop learning processes a necessary but insufficient condition for organizations to produce substantive transformation, but the conditions for double-loop learning do not exist in organizational practice, and conditions antithetical to it do exist in organizational practice" (Bokeno, 2003, p. 639). Thus, the challenge of creating the learning organization arises, because organizational learning will not happen on its own, according to Argyris' research. As leaders, we cannot will this type of transformation to take place; there must be a systematic approach to doing so.

How do we make the shift to organizational learning and move from the single-loop to the double-loop construct that Argyris proposed? It should be said, "A complete assessment of the current situation is necessary to begin the process of implementing any kind of change in an organization. Unfortunately, this kind of assessment may take longer than management or stakeholders have if the situation is very serious" (Brisson-Banks, 2010, p. 242). Learning and communication processes look different for almost any organization, so, if it's the only route to organizational survival, it is well worth the time and resources to investigate and fully understand how it is applicable.

Bochman and Kroth (2011) state, "organizational learning hinges upon the ability to change and adapt. New information re-contextualizes the operational landscape" (p. 329). If we cannot have organizational learning without the readiness for change, how do we implement such a system, knowing the underlying fear surrounding change? This is where the value proposition arrives. Presenting a framework for learning where organizational members can build skills, communicate with other functional areas, and begin to contribute to projects outside of their normal scope deepens their knowledge base, making them

more desirable to their current organizations and other organizations, while giving the follower an identity and sense of value in the learning and change process. A platform for knowledge sharing and learning becomes exponentially more critical than when Lewin and Argyris first introduced their research because our organizational landscape is becoming rapidly more globalized and, in order to communicate effectively across the globe, there must be common ground. "It is especially essential to implement a successful knowledge management environment in order to offer the resources at the right place at the right time to knowledge-workers holding multi-nation and multi-cultural views" (Kuo, 2011, p. 582).

Real learning begins when people are willing to start questioning processes, not just the means to the end, but the desired end itself. It takes a collaborative effort to achieve this mindset. Therefore, if people have the innate desire to have input and communicate, leaders must allow them to contribute to the process. This will provide value for the organization and all of its members, all while imbedding a sustainable model for learning and willingness to change that becomes a rooted component of the organizational culture.

Conclusive Remarks

"Considering that a culture oriented towards learning is essential for promoting learning in and of organizations in a productive and sustainable way, exploration of its relationship with other organizational variables that could interact in its development is an issue that is of interest to academics and practitioners" (Rebelo & Gomes, 2011, p. 174). One cannot just say one wants to build a learning organization. There are many functional components and organizational nuances to consider, which is exactly why this topic deserves further research and practice.

Based on the framework presented, it is evident change does not happen overnight, but as leaders, we should not be dismayed, because just as human experiences build over time causing fear and resistance, change organizations are built over time for the long-term. When merging organizational change and human emotion, perhaps to an extent, it boils down to what Winston (2002) said, "doing the right thing at the right time for the right reason" (p. 5). While this may sound overly simplistic, we will have the ability to create learning organizations that better our organizations and enrich the lives of those who serve within them if we are able to address our followers' needs and fears, while maintaining an appropriate Biblical perspective.

Seth Michael Stone is the program manager for professional development at the Professional & Continuing Education division of Regent University in Virginia Beach, VA. Previously, he spent several years in the financial services sector serving at investment banks, brokerages, and regional banking institutions. Seth is currently a candidate in the Doctor of Strategic Leadership program at Regent University's School of Business & Leadership. He received an MBA from Regent University and a B.S. in Management & Business from Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, NY.

Notes

Boateng, R. (2011). Do organizations learn when employees learn: the link between individual and organizational learning. *Development and Learning in Organizations*, *25*(6), 6-9.

Bochman, D., & Kroth, M. (2010). Immunity to transformational learning and change. *The Learning Organization*, *17*(4), 328-342.

Bokeno, M. (2003). The work of Chris Argyris as critical organization practice. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, *16*(6), 633-649.

Bovey, W., & Hede, A. (2001). Resistance to organizational change: The role of defence mechanisms. *Journal of Management Psychology*, *16*(7), 534-548.

Brisson-Banks, C. V. (2010). Managing change and transitions: A comparison of different models and their commonalities. *Library Management*, *31*(4/5), 241-252.

Kuo, T. (2011). How to improve organizational performance through learning and knowledge? *International Journal of Manpower*, *32*(5/6), 581-603.

MacArthur, J. (2010). *The MacArthur study Bible: English standard version*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway.

Rebelo, T. M., & Gomes, A. D. (2011). Conditioning factors of an organizational learning culture. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, *23*(3), 173-194.

Waddell, D., & Sohal, A. (1998). Resistance: A constructive tool for change management. *Management Decision*, *36*(8), 543-548.

Winston, B. (2002). *Be a leader for God's sake*. Virginia Beach, VA: School of Leadership Studies.