

Organizational Coaching: Reaffirming the Classical Perspective on Organizational Change

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This submission is part one in a series of articles that explores and discusses relationships between coaching, organizational change and strategic leadership. The first article will explore the link between organization-wide coaching and organizational change, with special focus devoted to how the nature of organizational coaching reaffirms the classical/traditional perspective on organizational change. The second article will examine how organizational coaching initiatives integrate with the principles and practice of strategic leadership and organizational change. The second article will examine how organizational coaching initiatives (and coaching competencies) integrate with the principles and practice of strategic leadership and organizational change. The relationships will be examined on micro and macro levels by evaluating alignment between requirements for the implementation of a successfully organizational coaching initiative, and the outcomes of organizational change and strategic leadership. The third article will examine specific cases where organizational coaching initiatives were implemented within organizational contexts and evaluate the effectiveness of the initiatives. Initiatives will be evaluated based on how well the coaching initiative served the client's goals and furthered the objective of strategic leadership, and to what extent it reaffirmed the original suppositions of organizational change and facilitated a healthy balance between leadership and management principles.

Business literature agrees on two things: that the pace of change has accelerated, and that change has become the new norm. While change has become the new norm, the response to change is anything but normal.

Organizational members respond to change in various ways, and their responses can be gauged using a sliding scale that places resistance at one end, acceptance at the other end, and neutrality in the middle (Wittig, 2012). Organizational leaders often view change resistance as something to be overcome (Burnes, Hughes & By, 2016, p. 11). This view points to an underlying belief in management culture of how to view, approach and handle change, and it departs from the classical perspective of organization change.

The most astute leaders approach change, not as an activity imposed on subordinates for sake of the bottom line, but from a participative-democratic ethical approach as developed by Kurt Lewin,

the father of organizational development (Burnes et al., 2016, p. 4). Strategic leaders approach change as a learning opportunity that examines dissent and alternative perspectives, and “promotes honest dialogue and full participation” (Burnes et al., 2016, p. 7). This approach was developed by Lewin and is promoted by organizational development practitioners (Burnes et al., 2016, p. 4).

Christian leaders must take change a step further to venture beyond competitive advantage and humanistic origins. Christian leaders seek after a different competitive advantage – one that ethically pursues godly spiritual values, such as reconciliation and conflict resolution, in the workplace.

The main objective of this paper is to encourage organizational leaders, consultants and coaches to consider organizational coaching, not only as a way to help individual clients and/or employees to achieve breakthroughs, but also as a way to assist organizational clients in experiencing and even initiating breakthroughs to the challenges created by rapidly changing conditions both inside and outside of organizational life. The goal is to recognize and discuss organizational coaching as an initiative that supports strategic leadership objectives and reinforces the classical perspective on organizational change.

A Strategic Leadership Initiative

Organizational leaders and managers employ various initiatives and interventions during an organization’s life cycle to bring about desired people and systems results. Not all of these interventions are strategic, nor are they all aligned to the aim of organization change. In reconsidering the original title for this article which read “Organizational Change and Strategic Change Leadership,” it was necessary to clarify the terminology and purpose of this writing by posing the following questions:

- Is organizational coaching being examined specifically as a change leadership initiative?
- Is this article limited to applying organizational coaching within an organization that has changed the content of its strategy?
- Or is it dealing with a strategic leadership initiative taking place within the context of episodic and continuous organizational change?
- And even more so, is organizational coaching being viewed as a way to return to the heart of organizational change (as opposed to the obsessive focus on strategic change for the sole purpose of making more money?)

Strategic change can be defined as “a difference in the form, quality, or state over time in an organization’s alignment with its external environment...changes in this alignment encompass [...] changes in the content of a firm’s strategy as defined by its scope, resource deployments, competitive advantages, and synergy (Hofer & Schendel, 1978)” (Rajagopalan & Spreitzer, 1996). Strategic change is designed to change an organization to give it a competitive and/or strategic advantage in the marketplace.

While organizational coaching can be employed in this context, the definition of “strategic change” limits an organizational change initiative to the implementation of a change in the actual content of a company’s strategy. The purpose of this paper is not to limit to a specific type of change

activity, but to explore how organization-wide coaching integrates with organizational change. It is not limited to changes in high-level strategy alone, but could also include a change in technology, product-lines, or in the deep structure or culture of the organization. Some organization-wide change initiatives may touch all of the above. An examination of “change leadership” (and “change management”) implied similar limitations. However, an integration of the terms implies that strategic change leadership implies a structured, intentional process of managing and leading change to meet new or existing organizational goals, objectives and mission. More than “strategic change”, this concept more closely reflects the context for organizational coaching.

In the Leadership Experience, Daft (2011) defines leadership as “an **influence** relationship among **leaders** and **followers** who intend real **changes** and outcomes that reflect their **shared purposes**” (p. 5, emphasis mine). Leadership occurs where change is desired. Change and shared purpose are implied in the process of leadership, as is “influence that is multidirectional and noncoercive” (Daft, 2011, p. 6). Conversely, Daft (2011) defines management as “the attainment of organizational goals in an effective and efficient manner through planning, organizing, staffing, directing and controlling organizational resources” (Daft, 2011, p. 15). Though management has periodically been discussed in an unfavorable light, a juxtaposition of both definitions reveals that leadership and management are meant to compliment, and not replace each other. Not only does strategic leadership call for an integrated view of leadership and management, but the word “change” was omitted from the title largely due to the fact that it is implied in the definitions of “leadership,” “management” and “strategic leadership.”

The Thread between Lewin, Burns and Jesus Christ

In an article evaluating the current state of organizational change leadership, Burnes, Hughes and By (2016) found that the current manner in which organizational change is handled (from a “strategic change” or “change management” approach) departs from the original intent of Kurt Lewin, the intellectual father of organizational development, and James Burns, who pioneered transformational leadership theory. The departure from this classical perspective on organizational change can be traced back to Bernard Bass who introduced the modern perspective of organizational change. Bass’ initial statement and preliminary scaffolding called for a “radical shift in attention” away from traditional beliefs about organizational change/transformation, and toward modern approaches that shape organizational change management practice (Burnes, et al., 2016, pp. 11-12). Bass’ approach (not Burns’ or Lewin’s) is the prevailing approach in the current practice of organizational change. Burnes et al. (2016) present a call to action that encourages leaders and practitioners to reimagine organizational change leadership, using the original perspectives of both Lewin and Burns as a lens.

Table 1: Two Perspectives on Organization Change

	Classical (traditional) View	Modern View
Major Thinkers	Kurt Lewin James Burns	Bernard Bass
Commonly Used Terms	Change Leadership Strategic Leadership	Change Management Strategic Change
Beliefs/Principles	Change should be participative Change should be democratic Change is an opportunity for learning	Change has to be controlled Change resistance has to be overcome
Characteristics	People-centered organization Organization as a means to an end Change for the sake of people ¹	Profit or process-centered organization Organization as an end of itself Change for the sake of profit Change for the sake of change

Mark 2 tells the story of when Jesus’ and his disciples passed through the corn fields on the Sabbath day. When the disciples began to pluck ears of corn, the Pharisees took issue with them and asked Jesus “Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?” (Mark 2:24, NIV). Jesus responded saying, “...the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Therefore the Son of man is Lord also of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). Substituting the word “organization” for “Sabbath” and “humankind” for “man” produces a slightly different reading with similar implications: “The *organization* was made for humankind, and not humankind for the *organization*. Therefore, the Son of Man is Lord also of the *organization*.”

Lewin’s and Burns’ organizational change paradigm aligns with the espoused perspective of a Christian leader, which is summed up in Mark 2:27. Aligning with the principle that organizations were created for humans and not vice versa, Daft (2013) states that organizations are “a means to an end...a tool or instrument used by owners and manager to accomplish a specific purpose” (p. 12).

Although organizational change has shifted to Bass’ more modern approach, both Lewin and Burns had a vision for change on the societal level. It just so happened that this vision was applied to organizations, one of the building blocks of society. In any case, Lewin's original vision for change is delineated by Burnes et al. (2016), and characterized as:

¹ Taken from a quote attributed to William A. Hewitt (Chairman of Deere and Co.) that states, “the quality of leadership you will give will depend on your ability to...separate change for the sake of change from change for the sake of men.”

- Motivated by resolving social conflict
- Ethical, democratic, and participatory in nature
- Promoting honest dialogue and full participation
- Intertwined with learning
- Facilitating individual and collective learning
- A means toward "making a positive difference to people's lives and in the wider society"
- Inclusive of, but not limited to organizational challenges requiring the need for change
- Operating in the best interest of the majority, especially "the disadvantaged and disenfranchised"

Burns (1978) adds to this view the leadership dynamic that "emphasized leadership as a symbiotic relationship between leaders and followers" (Burnes, Hughes & By, 2016, p. 7). Unlike in many corporate cultures, Lewin and Burns' theories were "focused not on managers or leaders, but rather leadership at the organizational and societal levels" (Burnes et al., 2016, p. 8). In outlining differences between transactional and transformational leadership, Burns (1978) stressed that "moral leadership emerges from, and always returns to the fundamental wants and needs, aspirations and values of the followers" (Burnes et al., 2016, p. 9).

Organizations can only breakthrough the barrier of change, and the obstacles created by change, by returning to the heart of change. The heart of organizational change is rooted in principles that motivated the major thinkers of organizational change and transformation like Kurt Lewin and James Burns. Because coaching reflects the heart of organizational change, it is well-positioned to facilitate breakthroughs at every organizational level. Given the classical approach to organizational change, it is clear that this vision for change reflects the very nature of coaching.

The nature of coaching is best represented in coaching competencies as delineated by the International Coach Federation (ICF). In addition to examining considering the nature and competencies of coaching, the second article will examine how organizational coaching initiatives (and coaching competencies) integrate with the principles and practice of strategic leadership and organizational change. This will be examined on the micro level by comparing coaching competencies to the classical perspective of organizational change, and desired outcomes of strategic leadership. This relationship will also be examined on a macro level by evaluating the alignment between the requirements for the implementation of a successfully organizational coaching initiative, and the outcomes of organizational change and strategic leadership.

About the Author

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