Navigating Change

We invite you to read this complimentary article co-authored by **Jonathan Hughes** during his tenure with Vantage Partners. Now with BDO USA, Jonathan continues to provide insight on how to navigate change. We look forward to the valuable contributions he will make to our team and clients.

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Navigating Change

Successfully leading change is always a challenge,
but it is a lot easier if you first break the deadly cycle of mutual dismissal.

By Jonathan Hughes and Bridgette Bousquet

The constancy of change isn't a new topic of discussion. Not by a long shot. Back in ancient Greece, the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus called the cosmos "an ever-living fire," one that always changes despite being the constant root of all things. The pace of change, of course, is another matter. Like the cosmos, it is always in flux. And thanks to our current drivers of change—ranging from the COVID-19 pandemic to divisive politics and disruptive technologies like AI—there is no doubt that we are living in a period of unprecedented turbulence and transformation.

For managers, figuring out how our organizations can survive and thrive amid constant and acute disruption can be as confusing as trying to comprehend Heraclitus—who was known as the dark philosopher of his day because many people found it difficult to shed light on his teachings, which Heraclitus reportedly didn't take time to explain because he considered most people unworthy of his intellect. But when it comes to change today, one thing is crystal clear: It is time to change how we view, manage, and adapt to it.

When an organization embarks on a change initiative, diverse viewpoints are key to success. That's why working to create an environment that treats different perspectives as a catalyst for curiosity, rather than a trigger for conflict, is critical. Unfortunately, the typical change management paradigm creates a dynamic where a small number of individuals (usually more senior) work to figure out the path forward, and then seek to explain and justify it to a larger group of others (often less senior). This dynamic often generates conflict because how change looks and feels to someone called upon to lead it differs significantly from how it looks and feels to those who must implement it or simply adapt to it.

Uncertainty and stress, which are inherent in times of change, heighten the risk that people will see things differently while also reducing curiosity. When faced with people who disagree with us, or act in ways that are counter to our preferences, there is a natural tendency to assume that they are ill-informed, selfishly motivated, or both. Like Heraclitus, we tell ourselves that oth-

ers are missing something that we see more clearly or that they just don't have the brainpower to understand. While we often perceive something that others do not, others also often possess information and insights that we lack.

When seeking to initiate change, leaders often become frustrated by what they perceive as uninformed resistance when others raise questions or concerns. This leaves individuals on the receiving end of things feeling unheard or disrespected by "clueless leaders" who seem removed from operational reality. As a result, both camps frequently end up talking past one another. Thanks to this "cycle of mutual dismissal," morale suffers while opportunities for learning are missed, and progress is slowed—if not stymied altogether.

The good news is that this destructive cycle need not derail change efforts. To break it, all concerned must strive to understand and value each other's perspectives, and work in partnership to make change successful. For leaders, this means being more openminded than Heraclitus. Indeed, it is essential to treat everyone involved in any change initiative like they've got a clue from the start.

When someone is charged with leading change, it's often because they are positioned to see the bigger picture. But when distracted by the pressure and status that come with leadership, it is easy to forget that successful change requires the perspective of those working in the trenches who possess the detailed, day-to-day knowledge about how an organization works. Their experiences and associated frustrations, no matter how unconstructively articulated, are a precious asset. Even the most cynical naysaying often contains at least some nugget of insight about an emerging risk or a barrier to success. You can try selling a vision for change created at the top, but without the input of those who will need to implement the change, your vision runs a high risk of foundering as it confronts operational reality.

Taking a top-down approach also saps energy and heightens stress because it leads people on the receiving end of change to feel marginalized and disempowered. Empathy from the top helps, but it is not enough to ensure success. That's why it is better to authentically invite people across the organization to help define the future along with the path forward. This collaborative approach not only helps ensure that the operational implications of proposed changes are properly understood—it also builds buy-in and commitment, effectively replacing the

negative energy created by uncertainty with the positive creative juices produced by engagement.

In other words, change leaders need to understand that the job includes mining the workforce for the invaluable nuggets of insight that exist on the frontlines, no matter how deeply buried or well-disguised they may be. Instead of responding negatively to complaints, leaders need to engage with naysayers to explore their objections. This includes finding constructive ways to challenge "resisters" to help develop solutions that address their concerns.

The first task for change leaders is to efficiently telescope their own process of discovery. Rather than simply assert that change is necessary, they need to lay out the facts and logic that justify this conclusion.

Developing a shared sense of urgency is also critical, and this too starts with leaders. By the time anyone finds themselves responsible for a change initiative, they have typically spent weeks, if not months, going through a process of discovery and learning. By the end of it, the need for change is so evident they often forget how far they have come in their thinking. But others have not gone through this process, which is why change leaders must be patient with those for whom the need for change is not apparent. In other words, the first task for leaders is to efficiently telescope their own process of discovery. Rather than simply assert that change is necessary, they need to lay out the facts and logic that justify this conclusion.

For the rank and file, the first step in breaking the cycle of mutual dismissal requires giving leaders the benefit of the doubt while they make the case for change. We all know leaders are not omniscient, but we should not cynically assume they are clueless. It is also useful to recognize that leaders of change are typically on the lookout for resistance—which often leads them to misread well-intentioned questions as a reluctance to embrace change, and to discount valid concerns.

Asking questions and pointing out risks should be the responsibility of everyone who needs to implement change or who will be affected by change. But if we want to be heard, we need to make our concerns easy to hear. We've all experienced change that was poorly explained, where the vision of the future was vaguely defined or unrealistic. That is undoubtedly frustrating. Nevertheless, everyone always has a choice when responding to something that bothers them. We can nurture our frustration, or we can try to improve the situation. Asking questions or making comments with an accusatory edge only fuels the destructive cycle of dismissal. But introducing questions with an explicit

statement in support of change can help to break it. So, instead of asking, "Have you thought about how disruptive this will be for our customers?" try something like, "I want to make sure this change is successful, and I'm worried about customers getting confused and frustrated. What's our best current thinking on how to ensure that doesn't happen?" Conveying a commitment to support change can make a big difference, helping ensure your concerns are taken seriously.

Beyond asking questions or raising concerns, individuals at all levels can take an active role in defining the ideal future state and the path to get there by offering suggestions, particularly about what the future state should look like for individual departments or teams. Will these suggestions always be adopted? Surely not. But if they are thoughtful, and constructively shared, it is highly likely that they will have a positive effect, helping to shape the thinking of those charged with leading change.

Nonetheless, as Heraclitus pointed out, change is creative and destructive at the same time. Having your job unexpectedly eliminated by a reorganization is painful, no two ways about it. But a degree of acceptance, coupled with a commitment to search out positive opportunities, almost always makes change more tolerable. And anyway, what really is the alternative? Part of what makes change so disconcerting is the sense of powerlessness we feel. But while we may not be in control of things, we often can influence events if we try.

Ironically, change leaders often feel powerless too. After all, they are accountable for change, but ultimately, it is all those at the coal face of implementation who, through their collective actions, determine whether an attempted change will be successful. As a result, a little empathy with those imposing (oops—leading!) change can go a long way. By embracing engagement and collaboration, we can influence how others see us, which can create space and opportunity to exercise greater agency.

Having a well-designed path forward is an important part of implementing change successful, but the path to the future can rarely be mapped in detail at the outset of any change process. Senior executives and change leaders need to guard against becoming overly invested their plans, which is dangerous in an environment where change is constant. Agile thinking, which was developed as an approach for software development, comes with plenty of insider terminology ("scrums" and "sprints") that can make it as difficult to understand as the writings of Heraclitus. But the simple principles that form its foundation can be applied to virtually any change efforts, improving the chances of success by removing rigidity. And yet, even when supported by agile thinking, change entails uncertainty, which creates discomfort

that reinforces the cycle of mutual dismissal.

When unchecked, this cycle creates organizational resistance to divergent perspectives when they are needed most. But when supported by a change in thinking (see sidebar below) and humility on the part of change leaders—along with some acceptance and resilience on the part of those navigating change—an agile approach to change can keep people across the organization working together constructively to test ideas while minimizing costs and risks as they search for a sustainable path forward. Instead of spawning arguments that damage relationships, this approach fosters a constructive discourse that generates valuable insights. Change doesn't get any better than that.

THINKING DIFFERENTLY ABOUT CHANGE

By reframing our thinking about change, we can adjust our behaviour and lead others to change as well. Shift the focus from: "But" to "And"—Instead of making binary assessments of what is true and false, or good and bad, put the focus on understanding complexity

"Prediction" to "Possibility"—Explore what factors might make different outcomes more or less likely, rather than focusing the discussion on what will or won't happen

"Past" to "Future"—Focus everyone's attention on what is possible going forward, not what has already occurred

"Complaint" to "Request"—Instead of getting stuck discussing what is wrong, look at what people think can make things better

"Passive" to "Active"—Rather than highlighting constraints and limitations, focus on what can be done to effect positive change

"Control" to "Influence"—Focus on ways to accomplish things with and through others, versus on what anyone can do or dictate on their own

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