Section: ESSAY
Change Management: COVID-19 and Beyond

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Our COVID-19-dominated world conjures up a wide array of thoughts and emotions. Perhaps no theme is more pervasive, or more consistently discussed than that of change. Each and every one of us is experiencing some degree of change. For most of us, that change is startling, and significant. We are, in real-time, living through the actual creation of our "new normal." We are witnessing all of us being unwilling participants, as human subjects, in a dystopian version of an unauthorized experiment of Harvard Business School professor John Kotter's (1995) theory of change management.

Since the days of 18th century philosophers, the universally accepted societal premise has always been that people really do not like change. John Locke wrote that changing a pattern of behavior is difficult, just as it is hard to step off the beaten path into the scrubland around it. He added that we all have in our thinking and behavior a touch of unreasonableness so profound that one might properly call it madness. Once our mind has established and reestablished links between concepts or experiences, those links become unconscious and difficult to break (Wootton, 2018). Shaftesbury (1711) added that the task of a system of rewards and punishments is to lead men into that path which afterwards they cannot easily quit. "It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the most adaptable to change," is a statement that is often attributed to the famous scientist Charles Darwin. While said to appear in his 1859 epochal tome on evolution, "On the Origin of Species," further research suggests this remark to be apocryphal, with no specific matches in that book, and no substantive evidence Charles Darwin ever actually said or wrote the statement. Yet, it is a statement that foreshadowed our current situation.

As profound and thought-provoking as these insights are, the broad concept of challenges to change responsiveness and a general disdain for change may not be entirely accurate. It seems that people have no problem at all with change. That is, as long as it is change that they asked for. What they do not like is change that was forced upon them; change that they did not request; and change that occurs on a timeline that they did not participate in formulating.

The "standard playbook" on how to champion a change initiative has traditionally been one of "top-down," transactional, old-school leadership. Often, this exists together with paternalism. We have all likely heard "this is progress and it will be better for you." However, one person's "new and improved" may actually be perceived by others as being neither new nor improved. This is especially true if the new mandate is suddenly bestowed upon them without their input. Much more so than the "how" or the "when," people like to know; they need to know, the "why" of any decision that directly affects them. People want their voice to be heard.

For many, better is not always necessarily what they are looking for. Sometimes, what many people want most of all, what stands highest on their value chain, are familiarity and consistency. People are invested and familiar with how things are, how they have been, how they are doing it, and what has been "working just fine, thank you very much!" How often is this heard in organizations: "That's how we do things around here, that's our culture." It is a phrase that I consider to be among the most pervasive innovation killers of them all.

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Of course, sometimes the harder you push certain people, the more they will resist and push back. They are proud of their heritage, their roots, and their culture. And so, leaders must be ready to hear and respond to: What did you do? Why did you do that? I liked it how it was. Things were working great as they were. Change it back! This need for some degree of familiarity and consistency is especially true during times of upheaval, unprecedented circumstances and crises. A global pandemic would clearly be one such example.

Even the most successfully implemented change management strategies are burdened by a multitude of challenges potentially hampering their efforts. People have distinct personalities. We are all wired differently. We can look at the same situation and yet come to vastly different conclusions. These idiosyncrasies of human nature make disrupting the status quo with unwanted changes fraught with landmines – whether related to politics or pandemics.

So, what is change management? Initially, leadership strategically determines that a change is needed. Alternatively, as we are witnessing with COVID-19, inevitable changes are thrust upon us. Subsequently, change management refers to the successful implementation of a transition or transformation from the status quo of the current state to a new desired future state. This may refer to either an individual or to an organization.

Successful change initiatives begin with a "burning platform" followed by implementation of Kotter's (1995) classic eight-step process for leading change. The chain Kotter proposed, and others expounded upon, generally proceeds as follows. Establish urgency: this is your burning platform. It is a compelling argument supplying information about the urgency of why a move from the status quo is needed and needed right now. Next, build your team that is to be tasked with implementing this change. Create the vision for what the new state will look like, and why it is preferable to the old. Develop a strategy on how to get there. Communicate regularly and transparently in order to keep all stakeholders aware of the situation. Empower and enable your employees to be able to implement your strategy. Create and celebrate small, short-term wins and milestones. Do not let up. Consolidate all small gains in order to help you create even more change. Anchor the new and make it stick as the "new normal." Sustainability requires that there be no reverting back to the old (Kotter 1995; Battilana and Casciaro, 2013).

People need goals, but not just any goals. They need to be S.M.A.R.T. (Doran, 1981), that is, they must be: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. Even before that, however, people must believe that there is a compelling need to change. This is the all-important "why?" of change management. They must believe that being anchored with the familiar of the status quo is worse than going through the change process. They must believe that the benefits of change and the hope of the new future state outweigh the risk of change (Conner, 1998).

In addition to the concept of the burning platform (Connerpartners, 2012), an interesting change management metaphor is that of the Boiling Frog experiment (Inam, 2013). As the fable goes, if you put a frog into boiling water, it will jump out. However, if you put it into cold water that is then brought to a slow boil, it will not sense the danger, will stay in the pot, and die. The message is that we are unable or unwilling to react to, or be aware of, threats that arise gradually leading to undesirable consequences. It is the idea of the "slippery slope." The converse is that if you want change to be accepted, you should make it gradual (Volokh, 2003).

Of course, a major determinant in successful change initiatives, even more so than the strategy or the operations, is the organizational culture. We can think of culture in many ways: it is the local environment and behaviors, the employees' values, and traits, as well as their attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs. Perhaps more simply, one can think of culture as "the way we do things around here." Depending on the specific philosophy and nature of senior leadership, strong cultures can make it difficult to change. Resistance to change comes from many sources and creates many negative emotions. Do not underestimate the resistance to change. The old-school mantra of "well, that's how we've always done it here" is a common refrain justifying this resistance. Trustworthy, passionate, and enthusiastic leaders are committed to elicit positive rather than negative emotions from their change projects (Sirkin et al., 2005). Modern leaders are aware that disruptive innovation is desirable, and in fact necessary, in order to create new opportunities, and to maintain a sustainable competitive advantage for their organization.

There is clearly a difference between fundamentally routine, gradual well thought out strategic incremental change efforts versus driving rapid change during actual emergencies. In these unprecedented times, there is no "standard playbook" for how to proceed. People's priorities appropriately shift to ensuring that their families feel safe and stay healthy. The wide-reaching economic impact makes financial stability a significant appropriate priority as well. No MBA programs teach pandemic change theory!

Once the personal and economic volatility are somewhat managed, employees will be willing to be more flexible during "once-in-a-lifetime" emergencies. We all witnessed how complete strangers came together during the 9/11 attacks. With excellent leadership, organizational response during this COVID-19 crisis will be received by your employees with striking resilience. Presented with a burning platform and a well-crafted change management strategy, your employees will respond to changes with flexibility. They will proudly be guided by your organization's mission, vision and values as their "North Star" in order to best serve your customers.

Human Resources (HR) will play a pivotal role in any organization's response to the COVID-19 crisis. HR and other members of the executive leadership team will collaborate to develop and implement strategies for quick and dramatic changes to the status quo. First and foremost, will be the priority to keep employees and their families

healthy and feeling safe. The second priority will be helping employees with their financial questions and concerns. These will both require regular, transparent communication. While some components of the workplace may return to normal, more will likely evolve into a "new normal." This will give rise to many HR related issues that will need to be addressed well beyond any initial crisis period.

As organizations move past the appropriate priority for concerns regarding health, safety, and finances, perhaps the most evident and pressing topic will be the potential issues arising from the inevitable rise of remote work. Many employees and organizational leaders will want to continue this remote work pattern indefinitely. It is likely to become a permanent feature for many more employees, in many more organizations. Our unprecedented crisis has revealed that while the technology needed for successful remote work is available, HR will need to adapt existing rules and regulations, or develop new ones to accommodate for the expanded role of remote work. Potential issues will include defining what work can and what cannot be done effectively offsite, work hours, benefits, compensation, maintaining morale, keeping the remote workforce engaged and productive, and encouraging close communications with on-site colleagues and managers. Despite, or because of, the perceived perception of informality that working from home may project; formal processes will need to be created. Legal issues arising from remote work are sure to keep HR lawyers busy for the foreseeable future.

Business pundits have long recognized that organizational culture is vital to sustainability and success. Culture represents the values and traits that subsequently establish the mission and vision. These then determine the operations and strategies that follow. After an initial in-person on-boarding process, maintaining a consistent, distinct, well-defined desired culture may be more challenging while so many work remotely. Even in times of crises or, especially in times of crises, culture must be maintained. Decisions must be made rapidly, often with incomplete information or knowledge. More than ever, everyone must remain committed to the culture, which will be the "north star" that continues to guide employees on the requisite long-term path of sustainability and competitive business advantage.

Employee wellness has become a significant priority for organizations. Physically and mentally healthy employees are more likely to be retained, are more engaged, more productive, do a better job taking care of customers (and attracting new ones), and are less likely to experience the symptoms of burnout. HR can and should play a crucial role helping employees make the necessary changes to maintain their well-being during particularly stressful and confusing times.

The economic impact of COVID-19 has required many organizations to mandate lay-offs, furloughs and hiring freezes. The financial changes, questions and concerns including detailed information on potential options will be an HR mainstay. Despite the uncertainty and upheaval, it behooves organizations to maintain their talent pipeline including, whenever possible, honoring their prior hiring commitments.

Effective strategic planning and thoughtful operational decisions will rely heavily on advice and insight provided by HR professionals. Long after the acute crisis has resolved, employees will remember much more than the HR policy and procedure changes. They will remember how they and their colleagues were treated by a loyal organization. Your responses now will impact your organizations brand and reputation for years to come. HR can significantly smooth the way for employees to remain loyal and remain dedicated to the culture and the mission, despite the drastic changes occurring almost daily.

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