

TRANQUILITY WITHIN CHAOS



Real Solutions for Building a Change Management Culture

By Dr. Chance Eaton

Introduction

An important aspect of leadership development is recognizing and owning your past mistakes. A fault in my personal leadership path was not identifying how to manage the change process. Some time ago, I worked for a small business unit that had been in business for 30 years and had failed to adapt to the changing environment. My executive told me that the business unit had become “stale” and needed to “get with the times.” Over the next year the nucleus of the team and I laid out a blueprint for change and proceeded with making all the necessary changes to be relevant for the 21st century. For several months, our primary team basked in the positive changes we were making. Then it hit us. We began to notice that the supporting team members were becoming very frustrated, and it resulted in a pronounced layer of conflict. We fell into the trap of “us versus them” mentality. Why did this happen? We were asked to change, and we did just that, very successfully, in fact. The problem was that despite how rational or logical the change was seen from our administrative level, we failed to capture the hearts of the individuals, and resulted in temporary active disengagement, which is extremely expensive.

Why is Change Hard for People?

What is it that makes change so difficult for people? Quite simply, change takes us out of our comfort zone. Our comfort zone is where our environment is perceived to be predictable, safe, controlled – where I belong. Outside our comfort zone lives the unknown, unpredictability, lack of safety, mystery and fear. Further, when we move outside our comfort zone, our mind activates the body’s sympathetic nervous system – also known as the fight-or-flight response.

The mind is well designed to aid in survival by the activation of the stress response. When low to moderate stimuli hit our brain’s thalamus, which sits on the top of our brain stem and is responsible for sensory distribution, information flows to our higher cortical areas for logical processing and then travels to our amygdala for an emotional response. But when a stimulus is high, our brain contains neural bundling that bypasses our cortical area and sends it directly to the amygdala. If this is perceived as danger, a distress signal is sent to the hypothalamus, the brain’s command center. From here the brain communicates with the rest of the body through the nervous system the fight-or-flight response.

Change, in and of itself, can act as a strong stimulus that unconsciously activates the stress response. In the workplace, something as simple as changing seat assignments to something complicated like total company reorganization can activate the stress response for many people.

People Don't Like Change...But Companies Have to Change!

Though change can create distress for the people involved, it is the fuel that keeps businesses nimble for in an ever-changing environment. Organizations that fail to see the need for change succumb to the competitive forces and eventually lose out to competition. A classic example is the newspaper. Publishers that didn't move news publication to electronic formats were gobbled up through mergers and acquisitions. So, here lies the problem that organizations continually fail to understand; organizations have to change in order to be viable and healthy, but people (who inherently have comfort zones that seek predictability, safety and control), are the ingredients that allow for change to become a reality. Bridging this divide is the secret to successful change management.

The Anchor Effect – Creating Tranquility Within Chaos

Growing up as a farmer and rancher, I've always been fascinated with how natural systems operate. As a result, I often look to how natural systems deal with challenges. In the case of change, one can't help but look at chaos theory to help understand the change process.

Chaos theory contains two components: One is that chaotic systems are extremely complex and unpredictable yet stay within certain parameters and actually contain order, and the second is that small changes to initial conditions can cause drastically different outcomes. The theory was first discovered in the early 1960's by meteorologist Edward Lorenz. While running weather-pattern predictions, he changed the initial parameters ever so slightly, and the outcomes were drastically different. Many systems contain chaotic aspects, including economic systems, global weather and even the traditional workplace. I became well aware of this phenomenon years ago in my coaching practice. I saw from my clients that personal life events would appear random and chaotic, but when you stepped back you see repeating patterns and recurring life patterns.

The one fascinating characteristic of chaotic systems is something called the "strange attractor". This is a deeply encoded structure within the chaotic system that allows for self-organization to occur. When you

experience weather, the economy, day-to-day work or life in general, you are truly witnessing what appears to be a random chaos, but there is something hidden that allows for self-emerging patterns. The strange attractor acts as a space of tranquility within chaotic systems that allows for permanent patterns to emerge. Since this is true to life systems, it is therefore true to the workplace since it, too, is a life system. Where this becomes extremely helpful is when organizations go through the change process.

The anchor effect, as I like to call it, is nothing more than creating a strange attractor for the change process. What is the strange attractor in change management? It is deliberately stated and practices purpose and meaning. When I consult, I quite simply help the work group or organization identify the purpose and meaning of their own unique change. To be more specific, I have them answer a few easy questions:

1. What is the mission and purpose of your work group?
2. What is the change that is occurring?
3. Why is the change occurring – what purpose does it serve?
4. Who will this effect, and how do they contribute?
5. How do we create and prepare for the appropriate solutions to the change as it occurs?
6. When will this change and solution steps occur?
7. Where in the organization will the change have an effect?

Further, I recommend that they increase their communication on these very questions frequently until they move through the change.

The what, why, who, how, when and where questions I pose help establish a strange attractor within the chaotic change process and anchor the chaos to a place of manageability. Now back to my original error in my path to leadership, where I was asked to bring a "stale" and "out of date" business unit into the 21st century. I was well aware that the business unit had to change, but I failed to capture the hearts of the employees it was affecting by not asking and answering the what, why, who, how, when and where. As a result, I was unintentionally contributing to the team's activated stress response because I was moving them out of their comfort zones.

I have since had many opportunities to practice this method of creating strange attractors, or anchors, to the change process. Time and time again I find

success in calming the employees' need for safety and comfort around the ensuing chaos. They report feeling prepared, informed, acknowledged and have a general sense of ownership to the process.

So the next time you are preparing for an organizational change, a family change, or even a personal life change, establish a change attractor. Identify the purpose and mission, and continuously communicate the what, why, who, how, when and where questions. When this becomes a business and cultural habit, you have successfully developed a change culture. And, finally, change tends to come in waves, so once you conquer a change, reflect and celebrate your accomplishments. This reinforces that change is safe, and even sometimes fun!

Dr. Chance Eaton has over a decade's worth of experience working in the field of education & organizational development. Due to his unique educational and work experiences in business, finance, psychology, leadership & management, education and noetic sciences, Dr. Eaton provides his clients with relevant business solutions grounded in theory and research. To learn more about Dr. Eaton's services, please visit www.HRSolutionsInternational.com.