



Proven Principles for Change Leaders and Managers

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Change is the game today, and organizations that can't deal with it aren't likely to be around long.

— William Bridges

The future ain't what it used to be.

— Anonymous

Permanent whitewater. Perpetual fluidity. Semi-permanent transitionality. These and a host of other colorful metaphors and descriptions reflect what Heraclitus knew all too well 2,500 years ago: all is flux. In fact, to leaders and managers experiencing a virtual avalanche of change through minds already reeling from future shock, even “constants” are likely to be increasingly dynamic.

It would be safe to say that more scientific and technological change has taken place in the last 100 years than in all of previous human history combined. What's more, for thousands of years change was merely incremental and for millions of earth's inhabitants this change was so slow as to be imperceptible. One's world was often indistinguishable from the world of one's grandfather, great-grandfather, or even great-great-grandfather. Not so today.

In recent years, not only has technology dramatically changed the texture of our lives, but change on numerous fronts has ceased to be incremental and has now become radical, discontinuous change. Burt Nanus (1989) cites the current and future impact on our lives of the convergence of “accelerator technologies” including computers and communications, genetic engineering, space sciences, superconduc-



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tivity, laser and holography techniques. Other authors speak to the impact of the doubling of human knowledge every four to five years, the globalization of markets, unprecedented interdependence and competition, world population, and far-ranging ecological distress. Conners (1992) notes that not only is the volume of change increasing, but so is its momentum and complexity.

Only a generation ago, corporate workers may have experienced perhaps one major change initiative in their careers. Today, they are likely to experience as many as five or six simultaneously. Initiatives like quality circles, empowerment, TQM, reengineering, benchmarking, strategic planning, visioning, delayering, customer satisfaction, zero defects, and teams are only a few of the change initiatives that have swept the face of corporate America in recent years, and more are clearly en route. A survey by ODR suggests that most organizations are facing several, if not all, of the tasks listed below:

- Initiating major reorganization plans
- Improving competitiveness through the implementation of total quality management processes
- Incorporating information systems as an integral part of business and production strategies
- Integrating customer-service mentality and behaviors throughout the organization
- Redefining the organizational culture to be more supportive of corporate business objectives
- Initiating cost-containment mechanisms
- Rightsizing the work force
- Establishing employee-involvement programs to generate a sense of empowerment and commitment
- Establishing new markets and products
- Adjusting to the changing profile and needs of today's employees
- Complying with new government regulations. (Conners, 1992)

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In fact, according to management consultants, only 5 percent of managers saw change as continuous and overlapping 20 years ago, while today 75 percent express that view (Carr et al., 1996). So great is the pace of change that management guru Tom Peters admonishes us to "Eradicate 'change' from your vocabulary." In its place, he encourages us to substitute 'revolution.'" Truly, the future ain't what it used to be.

What does this “permanent whitewater” environment mean to those leading and managing Christian organizations? Let’s look at some pervasive myths regarding change, then some helpful principles for those “dancing with dissonance.”

MYTHS

1. Christian change is an oxymoron. While it’s true that Christian organizations are far from immune to psychosclerosis (aka “hardening of the categories”), organizational dry rot or a host of other transformation resistant pathologies, Christianity at its core is about change. As Christians, we should be strategic masters of change, not reactive victims.
2. People always resist change of any kind. The truth is that people understandably resist being changed. They will often enthusiastically embrace change that is in their best interest or the best interest of their organizations.
3. Change will always be mismanaged. It is true that roughly 80% of change initiatives fail or fall short of their objectives, but that’s largely because leaders and managers don’t understand the dynamics of change. They are simply ill-equipped to deal with the changes that confront them.
4. All that’s needed for change is a powerful vision. While it’s true that deep change without a compelling vision is extremely difficult, a compelling vision without organizational alignment is merely a wish.

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PRINCIPLES

As a consultant and change agent who has worked internationally with a great many ministries over several decades, I’ve distilled a number of principles that guide my approach to change initiatives. Hopefully, they can serve as trustworthy guides to you as well. Keep in mind here that “Methods are many, principles are few. Methods always change, principles never do.” Although effective change interventions and methods will need to be tailored to the uniqueness of each organization and the specifics of a given situation, the value of principles is that they are typically timeless and universal. Because of their universality they can inform the approaches to any change project or program.

1. **The Prayer Principle** – If “Quality” is Job #1 for Ford, prayer should be Job #1 for Christians. If prayer is indeed the slender nerve that moves the muscles of Omnipotence, it is folly to undertake significant change efforts

without the wisdom, discernment, insights, courage and power that come through prayer.

2. **The Principle of Disequilibrium** — Although the statement “No pain, no gain” is often true, change initiatives don’t have to be painful. However, organizations must be destabilized or “unfrozen” to some degree before significant change can take place. Effective change agents are highly skilled at knowing how to introduce the right amounts of disequilibrium to an organization to bring about change. (Remember, you can’t steer a parked car.)
3. **The Principle of Urgency** — Generally, a degree of urgency must characterize significant change initiatives. Parkinson’s Law states that “a task will expand to fill the amount of time allotted to it.” If people feel they can take forever to bring about change, that’s exactly how long they’ll take.
4. **The Vision Principle** — a down and dirty version of the Vision Principle says, “If you can’t see it, you can’t be it.” True vision has nothing to do with popular vision “statements.” Just like “calling” is a “hear” word, “vision” is a “see” word. Those involved in significant change must have a clear, compelling, attractive image of the new state of affairs the change effort will make possible. Until you can communicate the vision in compelling images (not abstract words) that are attractive to followers, your change plans are likely to be dead on arrival.
5. **The Involvement Principle** — Here’s a shorthand formula: “No involvement, no ownership. No ownership, no commitment.” Understand that there is a huge difference between compliance and commitment. If you want commitment, involve people in the change who will be affected by the change.
6. **The Principle of the Whole** — a great many change efforts fail because they are piecemeal; they focus on one or two aspects of an organization rather than taking a holistic or “systems” approach to change. Significant change initiatives must recognize critical interdependencies between strategies, structures, systems, culture, etc. or they will likely be “snake bit from the get-go.”
7. **The Alignment Principle** — this principle relates to the Principle of the Whole above (see model). For vision – the centerpiece of the model and the driving force for change to become reality – it must be reflected in sound, viable, achievable strategies. Furthermore, these strategies must be supported

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by the right organizational competencies, structures, systems and culture. By way of illustration, we frequently encounter visionary and entrepreneurial CEOs and executive teams saddled with “custodial” boards of directors. Until these critical misalignments are corrected and new alignments created, the organization’s “vision” is likely to remain little more than an idle wish.

8. **The Principle of Resistance to Change** — this principle states that “The greater the proposed departure from existing ways, the greater the degree of resistance.” Although some deep or radical changes must be made quickly, other changes are best made incrementally, thus minimizing the degree of resistance leaders and managers will face.
9. **The Measurement Principle** — this time-honored principle states “What gets measured gets done” (aka the Principle of Inspection: We get what we inspect, not what we expect.”) Because organizations will likely get what they measure, it is vitally important that key metrics be used wisely and consistently to track the progress of change initiatives.
10. **The Reward Principle** — Just as people tend to do what is measured, people also tend to do what is recognized and rewarded. To sustain the energy and motivation needed for significant change efforts, be sure to recognize and reward the right kinds of behaviors as well as “wins” along the way.

It’s true that most change efforts are challenging if not downright formidable. When people must move from the predictable to the unpredictable, from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from the known to the unknown, from within their comfort zones to outside their comfort zones, being smart isn’t enough. We must also be wise.

Because “To change or not to change” isn’t the question for today’s donor supported organizations. As Robert Quinn has stated poignantly in his book, *Deep Change*, “We must continually choose between deep change and slow death.”

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