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The Anatomy of a Successful Learning-based Change Initiative

By Greg Robinson

TIMES HAVE CHANGED and those changes have exposed the weakness of old paradigms. Enduring success will require that organizations and all human systems within them become more adept at learning and changing in response to an increasingly unpredictable environment. To do otherwise will certainly mean difficulty if not demise. Such conditions also continue to challenge organizational consultants to find innovative responses to these organizational dynamics. One way to assist organizations in finding the needed innovations is to combine new ideas and concepts together in ways that provide opportunities to learn to work differently.

The purpose of this article is to explore the experience of one change initiative involving the Safety/Loss Control organizations within a large established Fortune 500 company. I will define the organization context that stimulated this change and define the philosophy of learning-based change that has guided their effort. The change approach used in this situation combined principles of organizational learning (Senge 1990 & Sugarman 2000), the methodology of action learning (Revans 1998) and the design principles of the chaordic organization (Hock 1999). I will include time lines, a description of the inter-

vention, the infrastructure for sustained collaboration that the intervention created, a description of observable results and a list of key learnings and implications for other organization development practitioners that emerged from this experience.

THE BEGINNINGS OF CHANGE

The impetus for the Safety/Loss Control change initiative came in the form of an external audit of the company's safety practices. An item of particular importance was the lack of coordination among at least 13 different groups managing loss control issues across the organization. The result was a fragmented effort. Senior managers, and in particular the Board of Directors, had a most difficult time obtaining information. In addition, there was no way to provide assurance of the effectiveness of the organization as a whole to achieve its objective of "...protecting the public, the environment and our natural resources by operating in a safe, reliable manner" (company core values & beliefs document).

I was asked to join a collaborative effort with the corporate

director of Health, Safety and Environmental Affairs and a member of the internal audit group in April of 1999. The objective of the project was to implement a common management system for safety and loss control across the entire organization. In addition, we were also tasked with creating a greater ability and willingness to share information across functional groups. Like many corporate mandates, this one came with no formal authority to reorganize or to change reporting relationships. As it has turned out this lack of formal authority was a gift, for it forced the group to look for more creative solutions. The task itself, however, was not an easy one. We were operating in the wake of years of business unit autonomy that promoted a lack of coordination and trust. We were also following several years of poorly designed cross-enterprise change initiatives.

A LEARNING APPROACH TO ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

In order to ensure an effective change process, we approached this effort from a learning-based change perspective. The first of the three critical concepts that provided a framework for the learning-based change approach used in this project was a philosophy grounded in the principles of organizational learning (Senge 1990). Sugarman (2000) defines the approach as follows, "In its simplest terms, the Learning-Based Change Model relies on an approach of introducing the germs of new ideas, then nurturing and protecting them while they grow stronger, propelled largely by their intrinsic appeal."

Learning-based change is based on completely different form of change leadership than more traditional approaches. It is most effective in social networks where trust and communication are high and learning is the desired outcome. Rather than beginning with "the answer", learning-based change begins with a series of questions. It is assumed that there may be many needed answers. These answers emerge from the interaction of

Table 1		
	Authority based change	Learning based change
Structure	Hierarchy	Networks
Primary Goal	Control	Learning
Primary Tactic	Power	Trust and Communication
Sustained by	Compliance	Learning and Adapting
Change	Imposed from outside	Emerges from Interaction
Basic Trait	Rigid	Flexible
Cost	Initially quicker, but more resistance in the end	Initially slower, but less resistance in the end

organization members as they seek to understand their current issues from new perspectives. The underlying belief is that the only change efforts that truly succeed are those that increase the capacity of the organization to continue to learn and adapt in the future. No matter how good an idea may be today, it will be obsolete someday and the organization will need the ability to find the next necessary step. This requires high levels of interpersonal skill.

In applying this approach with the Safety/Loss Control change initiative, the leader and I believed that because change was not being imposed from the outside, but would be discovered in the process of learning together, there would be much less resistance in the end. It took great courage and insight from the leaders of this change effort to choose the sustainable path. They believed their continued success lay in the ability to cultivate change rather than impose it.

Though there was a temptation to do the easy work first, namely change structures and titles, the leadership group believed that such superficial change would not have much impact. They could have, for example, attempted to muster support for a reorganization in order to consolidate power into one center. Even if such an effort had been achieved, they believed that we would have alienated the rest of the safety groups. They feared that forcing compliance might result with sharing information and enforcing the "right way" being a never-ending battle.

Instead our first priority was to change the **mindset** of the groups. Mindset is the shared way in which a group thinks about their work, the relationships to one another and their accepted way of interacting together. Working with a small group of the functional managers from each safety group, our success would lie in changing the way these managers interacted. They had lived in an environment of autonomy and mistrust for years. If the safety function were to achieve a new and integrated form, the leaders of those groups would be required to embrace a new way of working. They would never be able to conceive of a new way if they could not learn to interact without posturing, debating and resisting each other. That type

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of interaction was bred in the competitive world of an enormous hierarchy and could only create more of the same.

We kicked off the change initiative by gathering the relevant functional managers together. We spent the first half-day offering a new way of talking in order to learn together. Our objective was to develop the capacity to learn collectively. Collective learning seeks to develop a broader and more complete perspective through dialogue and inquiry. Rather than prove who had the best individual approach, we wanted the group to develop the ability to challenge their assumptions and create an atmosphere where differences were explored rather than stamped out (Robinson 2002).

Though they were not enthusiastic, the group did agree with the premise of learning-based change. The next challenge would be to change their **practice**. Even if they had completely internalized the ideas of collective learning, they had a lifetime of habits that served them well as they attempted to protect their turf and win their point. Asking questions, self-awareness, and critical reflection were things that did not come naturally. It was painful at first. Debate, hypersensitivity and frustration dominated the conversation. However, by the second day, the beginnings of interactions that promoted learning were taking root. True to our assumptions, they did better work in less time. The first day they had spent nearly two hours debating one principle. They worked through nine more principles and planned the next meeting on the second day in less than five hours. They left early.

Learning-based change recognizes that if we can think differently we can begin to act differently (Sugarman, 2000). New possibilities emerge in the space of intentional listening and active trust. Changed behavior is the desired outcome of any learning effort, but changing the actions does not mean that change has occurred. Sustainable change, i.e. change that endures over time, comes from the inside out.

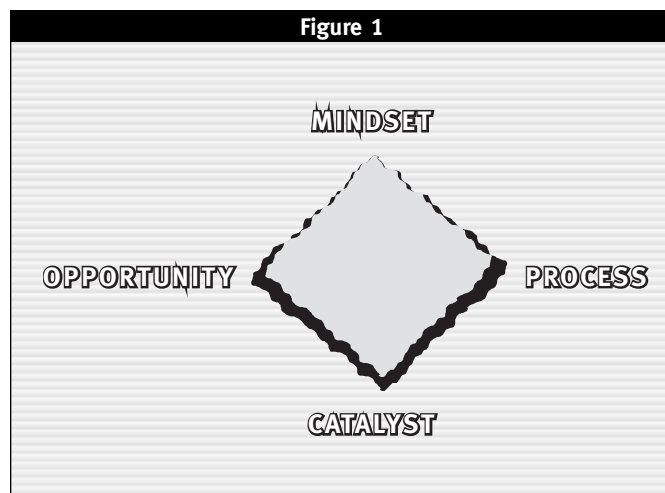
Once a new mindset has been accepted by the individuals and practices become consistent with the newly adopted mindset, then a new **culture** can emerge. Culture refers to the “employees’ day-to-day belief systems and attitudes, and the norms that define acceptable behavior” (Juechter, Fisher, & Alford 1998). Schein (1996) suggests a similar definition. He describes culture “as the shared, taken-for-granted implicit assumptions that a group holds and that determines how it perceives, thinks about and reacts to its various environments.” Research suggests that there is a strong correlation between organizational culture and the ability to achieve sustainable success. Kotter and Heskett, for example, found that those cultures with an embedded capability to manage change improved net incomes by 756 percent compared to 1 percent for companies that did not over the same 11-year study (Juechter, Fisher, & Alford 1998).

Culture and the importance of reflection were critical components of the change initiative for the Safety/Loss Control group. By examining together what was working well and what was not working so well, both in their safety programs and their

group process, a new culture emerged among the leaders. Rather than avoid each other, they came together and learned to share knowledge. Not only was information shared, but the new mindset of collective learning led them to share their assumptions and thinking processes as well. They were becoming smarter together than they were individually.

We entered the process with the foundational priorities aligned. However, there was one more piece that would determine how sustainable this effort would be. We needed to embed an infrastructure that would create and support conditions conducive to collaboration and organizational learning. The architecture of this collaborative infrastructure would include mindset, opportunity, process and a catalyst.

Mindset refers to the mental models that define for individuals how the world works (Senge 1990). It is the mindset that defines how members of the organization will interact and accomplish their work. For the Safety professionals, this meant first getting to know their colleagues. It also meant learning to interact differently. Learning together would become a priority.



Another crucial component of mindset for this project was to develop a new understanding of how to function as an organization. The second critical idea informing our approach was the chaotic organizational design described by Hock (1999). According to Dee Hock (1998), “...the success of any healthy institution has infinitely more to do with clarity of shared purpose and principles, and strength in them, than to all assets, technology or management practices.” *Purpose and guiding principles* form the shared understanding of what the organization is about and how each person will pursue that purpose. These act as a stabilizing force that allows for high levels of cohesive action and yet protects the need for autonomy. Principles are not prescriptive in that they define specifically what each person will do, rather they help to prioritize actions and act as criteria in decision-making. Over time, purpose and principles are enduring.

Principles were a critical component of the Safety group’s new organization. Remember, their original goal was to imple-

ment a common management system across groups that served very diverse business units. The businesses that this group supported ranged from a refinery in Alaska, to natural gas pipelines from the Gulf of Mexico, to convenience stores in Tennessee. There was little hope of establishing one way to do their work. The solution we arrived at was a set of principles that they all could use to guide their work. These were not policies or procedures. Rather, they were principles that defined what was important to have a good safety program. How each business would enact the principles would be the decision of that organization, but looking over all the safety groups there would be a set of common factors to which all would adhere. The principles provided a common language around which the Safety managers could learn. Having them in place allowed an atmosphere of trust to emerge, and helped foster a clear sense of cohesion for those within the Safety organization and those business leaders looking in from the outside.

Opportunity is the second piece of the infrastructure. If change is to be effective members of the organization require opportunities to interact. Too frequently people in organizations spend time defining new ways of working together but allow that work to die because it goes neglected after the initial off-sight meetings. Teams that struggle are fragmented and lack enough opportunities for connection to remained aligned and allow for mutual adaptation. To avoid these issues, we provided ongoing opportunities for the safety managers to continue to build upon what they had begun. They meet together once a quarter for two days. After a year and a half, the core purpose of the meetings has remained learning.

Having regular meetings is not unusual in organizations. What is unique here is that there was a clearly defined **Process** that promoted learning. Understanding the process of collective functioning, recognizing what is occurring and having some ability to influence the situation is essential for effective organizations. Yet, what often hinders initial progress for organizations is a limited understanding of a method for interaction that will facilitate learning. The final building block of this learning-based change approach was the introduction of a formal process built upon an action learning methodology (Pedler, 1991; Reavans, 1998).

Action Learning uses the diverse perspectives of the group to understand and reflect on the issue of a single member. The intent is to help the presenter broaden his/her perspective concerning both the definition of the issue and possible solutions aimed at resolving it. It is the responsibility of the presenter to determine what actions will be taken. It is the responsibility of the group to help the presenter reflect on the actions taken.

The Safety managers used an action learning process in their meetings. Each meeting, individual participants present their situation and ask team members to help them solve any problems they may be facing or identify other issues with their programs. It was critical that the action learning process for this group required strong personal accountability. In the beginning this prevented the other members from trying to make every

one else do things a certain way. It also helped establish a clear set of boundaries and generated energy in the group. The process allowed for the pursuit of individual interests but did so in a collective manner. Ultimately, this approach has contributed to the high attendance and continued enthusiasm for the process.

The final piece of the infrastructure is a **Catalyst**. Learning-based change is a long-term process. Unfortunately, it is often easy for groups to lose their momentum. In order to assist those pursuing change to maintain their sense of direction, it is important to set goals that are consistent with the purpose of the organization. In addition, it is necessary for the group to have some information about how they are doing. Measures that indicate how much or how little progress has been made act as external disturbances that serve to energize the learning process. The purpose of the catalyst is to continue to introduce new energy into the effort. There may be multiple catalysts.

In this case, the Safety managers included a concrete mechanism that has acted as a catalyst. They begin each meeting by first populating their learning scorecard. The concept is simple. Each meeting starts by asking those who took an idea away from the last meeting to identify the idea, who it came from, what they are doing with it, and any outcomes that have resulted from implementing the idea. This mechanism has helped discipline the group to record their actions and relate their stories to others. It also provides a way for the group to evaluate the effectiveness of the learning meetings.

OBSERVABLE RESULTS

Regardless of how well a change initiative can be described, if there are no observable results, how successful can it be? According to the client, the observable results from this effort have included:

- Increased comfort and trust among the managers
- Knowledge sharing outside of the meetings
- The introduction of the learning scorecard
- Managers replicating the effort with their own staffs
- Senior management of the Energy Services businesses asking for help in creating a similar type of effort among themselves
- A successful common management system
- In the first 18 months, nearly \$100,000 in savings from collaborative sharing.

KEY LEARNINGS

Leaders learn first. The role of the leader is critical, not because of position authority or perceived power to enforce compliance, but because the presence of the leader can set the tone early as team members become comfortable with a new way of working. The leader also provides the needed continu-

ity for learning to take root. It is important to note that this role requires a great deal of courage and emotional stamina from the leader. Moreover, it is more important for the leader to muster the resolve to stay with the process than it is to know exactly how the change will work out. Ultimately, if the leader is willing to be vulnerable and open himself/herself to being influenced, learning should come easier for the group.

Teach the process not the results. Too often OD consultants become greatly invested in a particular solution. Consequently, they expend a great deal of energy getting their clients to follow a given prescription with the end-result being either confrontation or dependency. In a post project interview with the client, I asked him his opinion regarding what made this process successful. His response was that the consultant did not pretend to be an expert in their business, telling them how to do things. Rather the consultant shared his expertise in group process to help the group find their own solutions. The result was a group that could facilitate its own learning. This supports the research of Priest and Lesperance (1994) who found that teams who learned to facilitate their learning continued to improve long past their interaction with a consultant.

Balance the team/individual polarity. Johnson (1992) describes polarities as two seemingly contradictory ideas that over time are both required for success. Organizational change work often focuses on getting individuals to buy into a shared vision and work together to achieve it. What can get overlooked is the need for individuals to take responsibility for themselves, to clarify their thinking and show the initiative to act accordingly. Action learning as a method or process creates this needed balance. Healthy team dynamics are required for members to influence one another's thinking, but in the end, the person who owns the problem must take their own action. Beyond identifying the solution to any particular problem, this form of collective learning enables the organization to mature and increase its capacity to learn more in the future.

Develop cohesion not compliance. The chaordic concept of organization design recognizes the nature of living, complex systems (Hock 1998). One of the more important concepts is that organizational governance should value free and informed participation. Building the organizational concept on the foundation of purpose and principles allows for the autonomy and cohesion, stability and continuous learning, freedom and responsibility. By not forcing compliance to one way of working, the safety professionals were not forced to choose between being a cohesive team and doing the right thing for their businesses.

CONCLUSION

Sustaining change in organizations is a daunting challenge. In our complex world, one leader with all the answers is a myth. But by starting with mindset, learning-based change enlists everyone in creating a new future. This equips the organization

to continue to respond rather than react to its ever-shifting environment. New practices naturally follow the new way of thinking and understanding. Over time collective reflection can help establish a new culture that is more comfortable with the continuous change of the contemporary world. ■

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