Dealing with and Adapting to Change

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Dealing with and Adapting to Change

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the first paragraph of the paper.

Complexity can be found in any type of organization or business. I always compare complexity to a living organism that grows and transforms through time. Organizations have to learn how to manage complexity in efficient ways, so as to ensure their portion in the market and to be competitive with other companies in the same industry. The only way that the companies can adapt to the constant shifting environment is to follow the growth of the living organism and grow with it. Leadership, on the other hand, is coping with change, and change - just like complexity - can be found in any type of organization or business. I think that change is the motivating power that makes complexity grow and transform through time. Organizations that know how to handle and deal with complex issues find different ways to develop techniques that can challenge this motivating power, and therefore create and facilitate change. This research paper will be focusing on how individuals and organizations cope with and adapt to organizational change.
Dealing with and Adapting to Change

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Introduction

Complexity can be found in any type of organization or business. I always compare complexity to a living organism that grows and transforms through time. Organizations have to learn how to manage complexity in efficient ways, so as to ensure their portion in the market and to be competitive with other companies in the same industry. The only way that the companies can adapt to the constant shifting environment is to follow the growth of the living organism and grow with it. Leadership, on the other hand, is coping with change, and change - just like complexity - can be found in any type of organization or business. I think that change is the motivating power that makes complexity grow and transform through time. Organizations that know how to handle and deal with complex issues find different ways to develop techniques that can challenge this motivating power, and therefore create and facilitate change. This research paper will be focusing on how individuals and organizations cope with and adapt to organizational change.

The Opposite view: Resistance to Change

The book “The Heart of Change” talks about transformational changes in the organization, such as “...adoption of new technologies, major strategic shifts, mergers and acquisitions, process reengineering, restructuring into different sorts of business units, attempts to significantly improve innovation, and cultural change” (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, ix). As we all know though, most of the time, people don’t handle change very well. The managers and executives of an organization have to stay up to date with the ever-altering economy, technology, law and surroundings of that firm. Therefore, they have to control, maintain and administer the functions of the firm, so as to prevent chaotic situations and to achieve the expected results; most of the time these results consist of maximum profitability. Kotter and Cohen state:

Our main finding, put simply, is that the central issue is never strategy, structure, culture or systems. All those elements and others are important. But the core of the matter is always about changing the behavior of people, and behavior change happens in highly successful situations mostly by speaking to people’s feelings. (2002, x)

De Jager believes that when we implement change we leave yesterday behind and we start a new tomorrow. Change occurs when we replace the old with the new, although we are at risk of failure. Implementing change is very hard, because, often, people do not like to leave the familiar and go outside their comfort zones in order to learn something new and different. “Resistance is simply a very effective, very powerful, very useful survival mechanism” (De Jager, 2001, 24). Individuals are scared of paradigm changes and they usually avoid unnecessary changes in their lives. However, one should value the people who resist change because they help clarify the problem and they act as devil’s advocates thereby identifying other problems that may need to be solved first.

Human Nature and the Character of Change

In his book, Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle talks about ethics as the study of the character of the human beings. The ideal example of an ethical man is the one who lives with his parents, children, a wife, friends and, generally, with fellow citizens. Every individual has a moral obligation to participate in the existing society and community by respecting his/her ancestors, parents, institutions and laws of the community. Aristotle states: “There are some who tend to stand by their beliefs and whom we call obstinate, in that they are hard to persuade of anything and not easily persuaded to change their minds” (2000, 1151b). Some believe that, Nicomachean Ethics is a guide to the parents, to help them raise responsible children and shape their character based on certain ethical norms and values, and therefore, shape and improve the character of the community for a better society. Education can influence the children’s lives and form their perceptions and attitudes, and therefore their personalities and characters. The goal of education is to learn how to make sense of the complexity of the world as each person lives and experiences it.

In Lindeman’s “The Meaning of Adult Education”, there is a section of the book that talks about learning through change.

Psychologically speaking, intelligence is the ability to learn, the capacity to solve problems, to utilize knowledge in evolving, continuing accommodations to changing environment. Intelligent persons are teachable, adaptable. Since life is growth – continuous change – and since environments...
are never static, new situations are forever arising, and each new situation confronted makes fresh demands upon intelligence.

(Lindeman, 1961, 17)

Continuous education leads to continuous adult learning which consequently would lead to a higher intelligence. The power that education has transforms the individual’s life, and change is a major part of it. “Education is the process and experience is the means for achieving evolutionary intelligence. The end is life transfused with meaning” (Lindeman, 1961, 18). Finding a meaning in life would be the perfect eudemonia (εὐδαιμονία, which is happiness and good life) as per Aristotle.

According to Peter De Jager, “We all have to change, because the world around us is ever changing, altering the conditions of our existence. The problem today is not just that we have to change, but that there is so much change attempting to blow us in conflicting directions” (2001, 25). This is when emotions come into the picture. All of the possible different directions make individuals nervous about the reality of it, causing them to want to deny change. Consequently, they prefer to stay stagnant and not alter the norms. People find comfort in being able to maintain their psychological well-being and control over their lives. When change threatens people’s capacity to envision their future, they become uncertain, insecure, confused, fearful, anxious and even depressed. When people first hear of an approaching change, they want to see a clear picture and they want to see how their lives will be affected in the future because of it.

“People change what they do less because they are given analysis that shifts their thinking than because they are shown a truth that influences their feelings” (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, 1). They also point out, “Both thinking and feeling are essential and both are found in successful organizations, but the heart of change is in the emotions” (2002, 6). It is interesting how the human mind works. When one feels that change is jeopardizing one’s life, one feels that problems are inevitable and out of control. Therefore, not only does one act in less effective and efficient ways, but one may not even try! Pessimism, frustration, anger and no faith to act, are not acceptable by Kotter and Cohen, who reveal that everybody can learn how to handle change (2002, 10-11). In their book “The Heart of Change”, they introduce the “see-feel-change” model, which is a guide for the organizational leaders so as to implement change within their teams and the organization as a whole.

Why Teams are an Important part of Change

According to Strachan, “Overall, team learning is vital because teams and their organization members are the key learning components in contemporary business organizations” (1996). The author outlines “the role of teamwork in building a sustainable learning organization” (Strachan, 1996).

According to Kotter and Cohen, people find ways to help others. They see the problem or the solutions and present them in ways that can influence feelings and emotions, not just thought. “Feelings then alter behavior sufficiently to overcome all the many barriers to sensibly large-scale change” (2002, x). The “see-feel-change” model focuses on the “soft” side of people and appeals to their emotions. Today, change leaders use several mechanisms to influence feelings and change behavior. Those mechanisms usually stimulate one or all of our senses: sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell. Transformational leaders implement change through transformational learning and one’s own process of knowledge-building. Organizations can acquire complex and diverse knowledge through a diverse workforce.

The article, Coaching Teams for Emotional Intelligence in Your Diverse Workplace, mentions that “Teams as well as individuals need to develop emotional intelligence skills that help enhance teamwork, improve group dynamics, and ultimately increase performance” (Gardenswartz, Cherbosque, & Rowe, 2009, 44). The article promotes the idea of the “groupthink” as a group dynamic, as well as analyzing and understanding the cultural whys behind behavior. Change advocates can help the team see the upsides and downsides of all the cultural norms, and consequently help the team adopt the new behaviors. “Team performance is enhanced and relationships can be strengthened when team members increase their sensitivity to the impact of their behavior on others in the group” (Gardenswartz, Cherbosque, & Rowe, 2009, 48). Moreover, the article states that “interpersonal understanding is essential”: it builds bridges among the members of the team. Team leaders are the change facilitators and they can help the group to “structure synergistic and compelling environments” so as to engage the team in real and substantive conversation and to enhance effective communication.

Under good leadership the team can develop a high morale and positive attitude, which can facilitate grounds for a more efficient and a
more productive team. Leaders can establish an emotional link with the team, as well as initiate new goals and strategies. Finally, introducing change through leadership can be a friendly method of achieving higher motivation and more individual responsibility, which could lead to more personal growth and greater ultimate production.

Good leaders use adept methods, such as setting a direction for the team to follow, aligning people, as well as motivating and inspiring the team, in order to help the firm make a paradigm shift and challenge the status quo. Paradigm paralysis can blind business people to new opportunities. Blindness by the old paradigm leads to a closed-minded environment that does not facilitate or accept change.

**Actions for Introducing and Leading Change**

According to Talbot, “the interrelationship between training and change management is very underexplored... yet, most organizations actually use training in various forms as a primary tool in cultural change” (1993, 2). The author also mentions:

If new knowledge and skills are required by the change, training activities should be designed and implemented... such training should not only prepare each person to carry out his responsibilities more effectively, but it should also help him to reduce any fears and doubts about his ability to cope with his new responsibilities. (1993, 3)

This passage verifies the interrelationship between training and change management. The goal of training is to help with adaptive changes by obtaining and acquiring new skills. People that go through formal or informal training feel more confident about their new responsibilities, and therefore, they adopt change with fewer doubts and less fear.

The book, *The Heart of Change*, introduces the "see-feel-change" model, which contains eight steps for successful large-scale change within an organization. These steps help leaders to achieve a change of behavior, and therefore transform their organization into a successful entity (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, 7-11). The authors summarize those steps in the beginning of the book, before analyzing each step at a more profound level. "The core issue [in step one] is the behavior of people who are ignoring how the world is changing, who are frozen in terror by the problems they see, or who do little but bitterly complain" (2002, 6). Therefore, step one requires the management to impart and increase a sense of urgency so as to deal with the big challenge of changing people’s behavior. Then, in the steps to follow, Kotter and Cohen introduce concepts regarding team-building mechanisms (chapter 2), vision and strategies (chapter 3), communication (chapter 4), empowerment (chapter 5), short-term wins (chapter 6), “not letting up” (chapter 7) and making change stick (chapter 8).

*Turbulence will never cease. The best evidence says that winning organizations will continue to deal with this formation. The single biggest challenge in the process is changing people’s behavior. The key to this behavioral shift, so clear in successful transformations, is less about analysis and thinking and more about seeing and feeling.*

(Kotter & Cohen, 2002, 179)

The book also mentions that tradition is a powerful force. Leaps into the future can slide back into the past, which can cause huge damage into the organization. Change can be fragile and all eight steps should be completed to achieve a change of behavior within each of the steps. The leaders should help people see the problem or the solution to the problem. Seeing something new can strike the emotions, and therefore, “emotionally charged ideas can change behavior or reinforce changed behavior” (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, 11).

**The Learning Organization and the Challenge of Change**

The notion of the learning organization has been quite vague. Watkins and Golembiewski (1995, p.99) declare that they like that the learning organization is “a tentative road map, still indistinct and abstract” and a “never-ending journey” (as cited by Ortenblad, 2004, 130). In addition to that concept, Ortenblad adds that “Many scholars agree that the learning organization cannot be precisely described because the situation of each single organization is unique and that each organization therefore should be given the necessary flexibility to develop its own, unique version of the learning organization” (2004, 130). Based on this concept, Ortenblad introduces four aspects of the learning organization: organizational learning, learning at work, learning climate and learning structure.

One can argue that people learn when they are ready to learn, and it might not be in a classroom setting. According to Goldwasser, "As the value of knowledge grows by the minute, companies are beginning to appreciate the power of informal training — these days, everyone's a trainer" (2001,
In addition, the author mentions that "Workers must continually update their skills and knowledge to keep the business competitive, but sometimes there simply isn't enough time for formal or structured training" (Goldwasser, 2001, 62). Learning can be enhanced by informal training.

Instead of learning at formal course, the employees learn on-the-job...This aspect of the learning organization views learning and knowledge as context-dependent; formal courses should play a limited role in learning because it is difficult to apply learning from formal courses into work practices." (Ortenblad, 2004, 133)

In order to promote easy and natural learning, and consequently transformational change, leaders and trainers have to create and maintain positive attitude and atmosphere within the organization.

In general, people like their comfort zones, and change disrupts their ability to predict the future with certainty. Reframing one's experience is a challenge in itself. The book Developing Adult Learners: Strategies for Teachers and Trainers mentions that “Another way to conceptualize developmental change is in terms of how adults perceive and reframe their life themes. Life themes refer to beliefs that guide an individual’s choices and self-understanding, such responsibility, success, competence” (Taylor, Marienau, & Fiddler, 2000, 5). Therefore, one would say that those life themes are the experience one has acquired from childhood to adulthood. They influence one’s perceptions and attitude toward life. As the authors of the book state: “How people interpret and reinterpret these themes affects their engagement with and perceptions of new experiences” (2000, 6).

Implementation and Analysis

Thinking of my past, I have come to the conclusion that I have been dealing with change since I was a child. Born into a persecuted democratic family in the communist country of Albania, it was essential for me to develop certain skills, so as to endure all kinds of obstacles related to health, financial, social and political situations. After the fall of communism in my country, my family and I migrated to the country of Greece in the search of a new future, full of hope and peace. It’s not easy to leave your home, migrate in a search of a better life and adapt to a new environment, a new language, and a new culture. However, I believe that children can adapt more easily to major changes like this.

I arrived in the United States three years ago trying to get away from my past and start a completely new life. Being an international student though is not as easy as it looks. You have to be willing to work hard and to be more than you can be. I came to the US to extend my studies, and for me it has been the most rewarding experience in my entire life. It is amazing what you can do when you are far away from your family, by yourself in a foreign country. You learn to be more responsible, organized and especially to appreciate and take advantage of the opportunities that life brings, because an opportunity like this one only comes once, and it is up to you whether to accept it and take advantage of it, or reject it and let it slip. I came to the US, knowing that I would be on my own and that the regulations for international students were very specific and strict. Although sometimes the law is difficult to follow, I have found good people within our Greek Community who have helped me throughout these difficult changes.

I feel that I can’t control the behavior of the people surrounding me, but I truly believe that I am in control of my life and my own attitude, which is always positive. I like being different from others, I really do! What I like the most is that I can adapt in any new environment, by working hard and having a positive attitude about everything that I want to accomplish. I find change appealing, because it makes me grow and learn through my experiences. After all, if all people were the same, I think that life would be boring!

Conclusion

Dealing with and adapting to change is not easy. Leaders and trainers have to focus on making people see the problem or the solution to the problem, influence people’s emotions, and therefore change their beliefs and behavior within the organization. Without change there can’t be growth. Change is essential in people’s lives. In order to adapt to change, people have to be prepared to give up what they are for what they can become in the future. The world is not about competition but collaboration. We always have to think that we all have to live together in peace and harmony.

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