Implementing Change
A Seven Phase Methodology

How should we implement Change? It's a simple enough question, surely there's a simple answer -- especially since we get to do it so often. Every time we implement a new system or install a new process, we're implementing Change. Surely there are some things that work, and some things that fail? Surely we're intelligent enough to sift out the good from the bad? Perhaps.

We have a problem. We need to understand the deep mystical secrets of Change Implementation.

We know some of these secrets involve the target audience;
>   making it their change not your change; providing support during transition;
>   celebrating small successes etc. etc.

Sounds like motherhood and apple pie. Perhaps that's why we ignore them so often. But Robert Fulghum was very successful with a simple little book entitled 'All I really need to know, I learned in kindergarten'. Perhaps we need to follow his advice and pay attention to the obvious and the simple.

Perhaps when it comes to Change, all we really need do is paraphrase Fulghum and state "All I really need to know about Change, I learned in my last failed implementation!" and add this commentary as a warning... "I ignore them at my own peril!"

When faced with Change, any Change, our immediate response is "How will it affect me?" Will it destroy a way of life, or just disrupt a sense of comfort? Will it threaten jobs, or will we merely perceive it as threatening jobs? Does it matter if it is a perception rather than reality?

Everyone shares these simple, personal, self preserving questions. Answer them and you've solved the problem of implementing Change. Ignore them and you guarantee yourself a difficult, if not impossible, transformation.

There are no Silver Bullets in Change Management. No guaranteed, money back solutions. Your Change strategy will depend on the present situation, your past history, the future you're trying to create and how difficult you make the journey from here to there.

The bottom line is, there is nothing you can say to someone you're about to layoff which will make them feel better. If you're looking for such a solution, then you're looking for the Holy Grail, it doesn't exist.

On the other hand, if you're trying to get a target audience to accept a new way of doing things, a new system or a new set of standards, then there are partial solutions. Solutions which allow the target audience to gain some control over their destiny, while implementing the necessary Changes.

The following list of questions and suggestions are intended to entice you to think about the whole situation, past and present, not just the uncertain future you're trying to build.

Phase I
Understand the Change

Before we implement Change, it's imperative we understand all the reasons for it. We must become experts in the Change being proposed or reacted to, because people will look to us for answers. They might even look to us for guidance. At the very least "Is the Change necessary?" will be asked by everyone impacted by it. It would be nice to have an answer.

- **What/Who is the Foreign Element?**
  The foreign element is the event, or person, which will disrupt the 'way things were" otherwise known as the Status Quo. It's dangerous to assume that the 'Foreign Element' is obvious to everyone. If the Foreign Element is misidentified, then the Change will be more difficult to manage. This is sometimes another way of asking "What's the real agenda?" If assumptions are made about why this change is being made, and these assumptions are wrong, it is likely the type of change implemented will not address either the real issue or that hidden reason for the change.

- **What happens if we don't Change?**
  What are the consequences if nothing Changes? How certain are we that these consequences will take place? If the target audience does not believe the consequences will occur, or if the consequences have no noticeable positive or negative impact on them, they will not be motivated to move forward. People need to understand the real necessity for the change. Most people, when they understand the need to change is real, are unlikely, for reasons of self preservation, to resist the change as strongly as those who believe the change is unnecessary.

- **Who is affected by the Change?**
  Closely tied to the question of consequences. Will *I* be affected? If I'm not affected? Why should I Change? It's possible, and it happens often, that one way to reject change is to live under the belief that it doesn't affect me personally. Identifying the 'target audience' is crucial to any change project.

- **When will the Change take place?**
  The more imminent the Change, the more people can relate and respond to it. Sometimes the only way to get people to accept that a change is 'real' is to attach a firm date for implementation. We're all busy, our plates are filled with projects and important to-do items. If a change doesn't have a deadline, if a priority has not been assigned, if budgets are nonexistent, then the change itself doesn't really exist and it will be ignored. Distant Change is less 'real' than imminent Change.

- **Why now?**
  What forces this Change upon us at this point in time. Why not next year? Why not last year? What makes it important that we act now? What is it about this Foreign Element that causes it to affect us today? If this change was really important, why didn't we address it sooner? All of these questions, if answered properly, provide justification for the change. They legitimize it. If the answers aren't readily available, you're communicating to the target audience that this change is arbitrary.

- **How will the Change affect us? Today? Tomorrow? In the long run?**
  This is another key question. Another version is "What's in it for me?"

Phase II
Establish Rapport

As someone involved with 'selling' the Change, remember the lesson from sales. People buy from people they like. Do they trust you? Change Management is an exercise in diplomacy.

- **Don't have all the answers.**
  Change 'agents' have a tendency to outline the entire Change. They see the Change as something they 'own' and must therefore dictate the exact 'solution'. A system written with the users input, will ALWAYS have a better chance of success than a solution foisted upon them by an isolated IS. The role of a 'change agent' is to make change possible, not to define the change to be adopted.

- **Support empowerment.**
  Empowerment means giving the target audience the option to make decisions. The flip side is that you, the Change 'agent', must give up the desire to make all the decisions. The more you leave in the hands of the Target Audience, the more you build their sense of ownership.

- **Don't ask for 'Buy in'.**
  When you ask for 'buy in' you've already failed. It means you're presenting them with both a need to Change... and the 'solution.' To be more precise, you are presenting them with your solution. You've invalidated any empowerment you may have created.

- **Seek out their 'Vision'.**
  Again, this meets their need for ownership in the Change. We resist Change most when it leaves us powerless, when we have no control over our future.

- **Identify Influence leaders, Early Adapters & Resistors.**
  Influence Leaders are those whom others look to for guidance, they are not necessarily those Early Adapters who take to a new Change first. Your time is best spent getting Influencers to Change, rather than catering to the Early Adapters or Resistors. (Of course, sometimes you'll be in a situation where the biggest Resistor is also the biggest Influencer.)

- **Change thinking: 'Change Agent...' vs. 'Inflictor of Change'**
  The term 'Change Agent' creates an image of a person on a mission. Another phrase more in keeping with the reality that 'Change Hurts', is 'Change Inflictor.' It forces you to keep in mind your primary task is to disrupt the Status Quo. When you think like a 'pain inflictor' then you have one strong objective -- reduce the pain. Consider your local dentist, his single goal is to minimize the pain experienced during a specific 'change'. By showing concern for people's reluctance to leave their Status Quo behind, you also reduce their resistance to the proposed Change.

Phase III
Understand Status Quo

Creating something new, is always an act of destruction. When implementing Change you replace the old Status Quo known to everyone, with a mere vision of a goal in the future. Having respect for the existing Status Quo, builds respect for you.

• How long did it take to establish?
Some Status Quos have been around for only a few months, others for years. The older the Status Quo, the more likely it will be difficult to remove. The older a Status Quo, the more it's been proven as being valid. It's easier to buy a new car, than it is to buy a new home. It's not because of the smaller financial cost, it's because of the larger emotional investment.

• What investment/sacrifice did people make to achieve it?
How much have people invested in this Status Quo? Did they build it on their own time? Was it something that 'cost' them personally? The more they've invested in the past, the more difficult it will be to move them forward.

• How many people subscribe to it?
Is this a corporate wide 'Status Quo' or is it something that only a handful of people share? Is it a part of the corporate culture or just a local way of doing things? One of the measures of the size of a Change is how many people will be affected by it.

• What Values does it encompass?
If the Status Quo is also a part of personal values, or beliefs, then it may pose additional challenges. Example: Getting rid of the Corporate Christmas Turkey may be more difficult than changing the accounting system, because the Turkey connects with ideas of gift giving, Christmas, bonuses and friendship. Culture is supposedly something difficult to identify, if you examine an organization in light of relationships, then culture becomes more visible. It also becomes visible of course... when you inadvertently try to Change it.

• What Mythologies support it?
Each Corporation re-enforces its beliefs/Status Quo through stories. e.g.. Nordstrom's and the late night delivery of a customer's parcel through snow etc. etc. re-enforces the concept of a certain level of Customer Service. IF your goal was to change customer service levels, then that particular story would have to be addressed somehow. Even if only because the staff would remember and look to that story for support of the Status Quo.

• Who are the Heroes & Heroines?
Who are the people in the history of the corporation who have become major influencers... Even if they are no longer around? What stories are connected to them? What were their beliefs regarding Change?

Phase IV
Create Desire to Change

"A body at rest will remain at rest until acted upon by an outside force." That's as much an observation about people as it is about Physics. If there are no outside forces, then nothing changes. Sometimes the 'key' to change is nothing more than making people aware of the outside forces. One of the downsides of the status quo is that it lulls us into a false sense of security and we need to be shaken awake in order to Change.

• What Problems exist in Status Quo?
Nothing is ever perfect, that includes the current Status Quo. The imperfections in the Status Quo, create points of leverage that can help move a Change forward. What is it about the current situation that has been a well known hindrance in the past? How dissatisfied is the Target audience with the Status Quo? What exactly causes that dissatisfaction? If you don't know the answer... ask the target audience... they do, in great, exacting, painful detail.

• What are the alternatives?
What alternatives are there to the current Status Quo? There is always more than one way to do things. Why did we choose this particular Status Quo? What other options did we have? What other options can we create? Does it really matter, in the long run, which option we choose? If not, if they are all relatively equal... why can't the target audience choose which one they should move to?

• What are personal Benefits to Changing?
Just as there are always problems with the current Status Quo, there will also be benefits in any new situation. It's a useful exercise to help the target audience to list those personal benefits.

• What problems would Change Solve?
Will the Change being proposed, solve existing problems? How? If not, why not? It is a mistake to think everyone involved in the Change sees all the benefits of the change. It's perhaps a tedious task to list the benefits, it's also very beneficial to those who may not fully understand all the implications of the Change. It's difficult to communicate enough during Change; it's impossible to communicate 'too much'.

• What core values would Change reinforce?
What, out of everything the current Status Quo provides, will be reinforced by the proposed Change? This is another way of communicating what will stay the same, only more so. This is surprisingly, a very powerful bit of information. People need stability, and knowing what won't Change in the coming months will offer more solace in the face of chaos than you might expect.

• What opportunities would Change Create?
Change is not just about escaping problems in the existing Status Quo. It should also be about creating an environment of new opportunities. Do not assume the Target audience can see those opportunities without being told, informed, communicated to etc. etc. The primary task of the Change Inflictor is one of a communicator. Informing and re-informing people of what is going on and why.

Phase V
Desire becomes Action

The only person who likes Change is a wet baby! A wet baby is aware of the imperfections of it's current situation and will cry and scream until a Change is brought about. This analogy is a simple one, but it does contain a core of truth. If your Target audience is dissatisfied with their Status Quo, they will be willing to Change to something else.

• What is their Vision of the Future?
Where would they like to be in 1 year, 5 years? Can they define what they would like their future Status Quo to look like? The better they can define it, the more detail they can describe, the more tangible it becomes.

• What solutions can they suggest?
Here is where empowerment comes into play. If they can describe a future Status Quo, then they can suggest ways to get there. Describing how to get there becomes not only possible, but if they're sincere about their vision being a solution, then they're highly motivated to come up with a transition plan. In all of this implementation plan, there is a key assumption being made... that you have competent, intelligent, rational people in your organization. If the answer is no, that you're surrounded by 'incompetent fools', then the next course of action is to find out why management hiring practices need so much improvement... <grin>

• What can they do to achieve it?
How can they become involved in their vision? What can they do to move towards it? Surprisingly enough, they have answers to these questions. And those answers can become a plan of action... if we let them.

• What commitment will they invest?
Change is never easy... What will they contribute to get to the future they've described? If the answer to the question "What's in it for me?" is satisfactory to them... they'll be willing to contribute more than we expect.

• What do they need from you?
Staff need management support. This is what is meant by the phrase 'Top Down Support' and it is crucial to successful Change. IF top management does NOT believe in the Change, then it becomes very difficult to achieve... not impossible, just needlessly difficult. Before going to the troops with a Change, make sure the political battles in the upper ranks have been resolved.

• When will their 'Transition Plan' be ready?
Set a date for the completion of the Change. Nothing happens without a deadline. Deadlines, especially deadlines offered voluntarily, with eyes open, become a commitment.

• What will NOT Change?
Very important. People need to know what parts of the old Status Quo will remain. Even if it is only small things which will remain constant, don't underestimate their value.

Phase VI
Reinforce New Behaviours

Doing something new means you'll do it wrong at first. You'll do it wrong until you learn how to do it right. This is period of low morale for most people. There's a sense that despite all the effort being invested, very little progress is being made. Being told you're making progress motivates you. Even if it's only a matter of learning what doesn't work, that's still an important form of progress.

• Reward All Successes.
   We all like to know our efforts in any endeavour are being rewarded with progress towards a goal. During the first stages of Change, when we are learning to do new things, there is very little progress. Watch someone learn a new system and you will see them make error after error after error. At the bottom of the learning curve, progress comes slowly. At the bottom of the learning curve we make very few correct choices and many errors.

• Reward All Attempts... and Failures.
   During Change, management needs to change their behaviour from rewarding only 'success' to rewarding all attempts at progress. People need to hear their attempts to learn the new way of doing things are seen and appreciated.

• Reward All Questions.
   When people ask questions during Change, they are demonstrating involvement in the Change process by seeking out additional information. Take the time, make the time, to answer those questions, no matter how busy you are. It does not take many instances of management not being around to answer questions, for people to get the message that management does not really care about the successful implementation of the Change. Even, if that was not the message you intended to communicate.

• Acknowledge those who Resist!
   Sometimes the question will be 'Why is this Change necessary?' This is NOT an indication of a bad attitude, nor is it an indicator of someone who is out to scuttle the Change. The question 'Why is this Change necessary?' is a legitimate question, by someone who is protective of the Status Quo they've already invested in. Do not mistake natural, normal, healthy resistance, as a subversive attempt to destroy what you're trying to accomplish.
   Sometimes, a question is just a question.

• Don't Ignore those in Denial.
   Denial can be defined as 'the continued use of solutions, once appropriate to the task, no longer useful due to the introduction of the Foreign Element.' It takes time for people to change old habits. Punishing people, because they learned the old lessons well, is not exactly a compelling incentive for them to learn new ones.

Phase VII
Create Closure

Getting to the beginning of the new Status Quo is a long and difficult journey. It deserves celebration. Both to say good-bye to the past, and hello to the future.

• **Celebrate Achievements.**
No organization today, is undergoing only one Change. Every organization is undergoing a storm of Changes. It is unreasonable to expect that one day soon, every thing will settle down and you'll get back to a sense of calm. This makes it all the more important to recognize when a particular Change has been accomplished and completed. The celebration can be a major party, a trip to a foreign land... or just a team meeting with coffee and doughnuts. Celebrating does not require a huge financial budget. It does require an attitude, an understanding that people work better when their efforts are appreciated. People also just like to 'party'.

• **Hold a Good-bye party for the passing of a Status Quo.**
People also like rituals. They enjoy burning the mortgage papers... or the source code for the system they've just replaced. Saying good-bye to the old Status Quo in some formal, pompous manner, puts it behind us, allows us to seal it off in our memory and accept the New Status Quo with no reservations.

• **Funerals respect the dead... they also allow the living to move ahead...**
Sometimes a Change generates casualties. It's all too easy to try and hide the fact that 20 people were laid off in a Change. It's healthy to find some way to talk openly about the past, in order to get it 'out of our systems'. Do this carefully. It's possible to reopen old wounds.

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The above list of steps, questions, strategies, suggestions and guidelines are independent of any particular Change. They are useful if you are considering to move your family from one city to another, or implementing a set of Policies and Procedures for PC usage, or automating some accounting process, or changing the E-mail system throughout your organization, or moving from one location to another. Change is Change.

These tips are also, by the very nature of Change, incomplete. They address some key concepts and ignore others. They are mere sketches of what should be taken into account during any Change, to get the full picture of what is required during a Change, you must be involved in that particular Change.

It has been said that Change Management is an Oxymoron. Hopefully, the above list will suggest to you that while Change Management is difficult, it is not impossible to have some positive impact on the process. Good Luck in your next project.

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