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Stop Designing Change & Start Designing Conversations

"...Our work, our relationships, and, in fact, our very lives succeed or fail gradually, then suddenly, one conversation at a time." — Susan Scott in *Fierce Conversations*, 2004.

When change is designed in an organization, there is an assumption that someone somewhere knows better or more than someone else. On the other hand, when we design conversations, we create the space for change to emerge without directing it. Generative change occurs when there is ownership derived from knowledge and connection to what really matters. Change actually emerges from a third space. This third space, or what I refer to as *coachspace*— not mine, not yours, but ours— is less threatening, less directive and more representative of a mutual ownership and commitment to what is required.

No one knows more about change and the consequences of change initiatives than the people inside the organization. In order to create continuous learning, we need a stable platform to process complexity and ambiguity. This platform is created through *strategic conversations* which form the foundation for organizational agility. Such conversations increase the capacity, capability and potential to adapt readily and willingly to rapid change and uncertainty.

Strategic interactions can be differentiated from other conversations because they contain what's important, motivating, urgent, leveraging and the low-hanging fruit that can be gathered to produce adaptive responses to business reality in real time.

Everyone in organizations today needs to be involved in strategic conversations— conversations from and with all perspectives— 360° conversations. The person professionally trained to create those conversations is a business coach. The business coach helps forward the integration of personal and business reality and facilitates the ongoing development of strategic interactions.



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An Elegant Model of Directed Change

A change design model used in organizations today was constructed by John Kotter of the Harvard Business School in his book *Leading Change*, 1996.

His steps for successful change are:

1. Establish a sense of urgency
2. Create a guiding coalition
3. Develop a vision and strategy
4. Communicate the change vision
5. Empower a broad base of people to take action
6. Generate short-term wins
7. Consolidate gains
8. Produce even more change
9. Institutionalize new approaches in the culture

The Integral Path

An integral or systems approach is required when dealing with differing levels of complexity and leadership. Change must be understood from an individual and collective viewpoint and must be viewed simultaneously from internal and external perspectives. However, to produce organic change— which is far less costly over time than inorganic or event-sponsored change— we must allow leadership (teaching and coaching systems) to carry the weight of change through effective conversations and interactions.

The design is not about change. The design is about creating a system to carry the weight of continuous natural adaptation— to support discontinuous change—through connected conversations around what really matters.

Natural Design or Change Design?

One of the foundational principles of systems, according to Gene Bellinger, is “Don’t fight the system; change the rules and the system will change itself.”

Designed change, even when well thought-out, is still nothing less than a “top-down” initiative being “directed into” the organization by external forces. People in organizations have worked their entire lives to arrive precisely where they are. Now all of sudden by edict from above, change must take place! It is always interesting to look at the change process in the way that organizational change artists paint the picture. John Kotter of Harvard provides one such elegant model of directed change (see side-bar).

In his truly elegant model of directed change, it seems like nothing is missing. Yet, what is clearly not mentioned is a reference to appreciative interaction, dialogue and support— the process is directive and not iterative. This change model is a derivative of mechanical and not biological or natural change.

Natural Change is Simple – Consciously

An interesting quote paraphrased from Peter Senge’s *The Dance of Change*, 1999, puts in perspective the true nature of a change model derived from an organic design: “Nature doesn’t measure— nature connects patterns....”

In essence, the key missing ingredient in models derived from mechanical, inorganic methods of viewing business reality are the connections that must occur between the component parts. Change doesn’t occur because of design. Change emerges in response to connections and patterns, which serve the people, the organization and the environment more efficiently.

Structural Change Is an Evolution of Connectivity

What changes structure at the base level is the language with which reality is described and the resulting connections that are facilitated. Change requires a different map of reality and consequently a different pattern of connections. These connections are created through a combination of people, structure and technology. If the people, structure and technology affecting connections are to be changed, then the maps of reality (mental models, Senge) must be changed.

However, if we seek to change an organization without honoring a change in how connections are made—through a conscious recognition of these connections—then we sub-optimize the organizational agility. In the same way that our neurophysiology requires us to examine the precursors to knowing, we discover the ability to move from unconscious incompetence to conscious competence.

Consider Damasio in his book *The Feeling of What Happens*, 2000:

It is through feelings, which are inwardly directed and private, that emotions, which are outwardly directed and public, begin their impact on the mind; but the full and lasting impact of feelings requires consciousness, because only along with the advent of a sense of self do feelings become known to the individual having them.

Viewing this statement of connections figuratively, if we impose an emotion of change on an organization without first involving the organization in the feeling of what happens, we are blocking the connection between the emotion of change and the knowing that change is necessary. This block prevents the movement from unconscious resistance to change (fear) to conscious acceptance of change (power). The resistance (fear) cannibalizes the necessary energy for overcoming the current state of homeostasis that is required for profound change.

Often, we confuse our ability to act our way into feeling with the more generative path of acting as a result of feeling, or knowing the feeling. In other words, we look at two approaches. One approach has us changing our behavior without changing the reason for our behavior, as is often the case in fear-driven change. The other approach is to change as a result of a shift to conscious competence. We know before we change, and why we change is directed by the ownership in the knowing.

Aligning Change

If we involve the stakeholders of the organization in the emotional aspects of change (because we connect the antecedents of change to the feelings of ownership of the current state through strategic conversations), then change emerges as a response to understanding the need to adapt by the people involved. The felt need or ownership is created through conversations and new connections begin to foster movement (change) to a new state as a result.

However, the manner in which the change evolution occurs is not by designing change but through designing strategic conversations—connecting the emotion of change to the knowing of the feelings requiring change, as Damasio states. Natural design emerges through strategic interaction around how we see the world and how the world really is—“business reality” as Jack Welch noted. We test those underlying assumptions to language them through dialogue and we create the opening for new patterns to be reinforced and for old patterns to be weakened or limited.

Strategic Conversations FIRST!

“What folly to think of developing the learning capabilities of organizations independent from the learning capabilities of the individuals within them.” — Peter Senge, Director, Society for Organizational Learning

Yet, why do most change models fail to discuss conversation (through connections) as the essential aspect of all change? Because, it is assumed that people know what is going on. Very few change models discuss how conversation (current patterns of connectivity) plays a prime role in organizational change. It is because we fail to understand that at the essence of our current reality is the language and patterns of behavior described through conversation.

Strategic conversations of behavior occur in four ways:

- Conversations with self
- Conversations between others
- Conversations among others
- Conversations in spirit (collective unconsciousness, God, soul, etc.)

Out of these conversations arise all emotion, feeling, behavior, motivation patterns, change and reality. What is missing in mechanical change models is an emphasis on the natural design occurring NOT FROM DESIGN, but from connected conversations.

David Whyte, a corporate poet, once described a situation while speaking to telecommunications workers where he made the statement, “that no one had to change.” He went on further to state that while “no one has to change, everyone has to have the conversation—change comes from that.” I believe that this short phrase encapsulates everything I want to say in this discussion.

Strategic Conversations Carry the Weight of Change

The connection to conversations is critical to facilitate before, during and after the change process. Such conversations are important, motivating, they identify a sense of urgency, and they create leverage to get the low-hanging fruit that supports the organic nature of change. These interactions are facilitated through strategic interactions with coaches, managers and leaders in coaching leadership style. Not just managers, labeled as coaches using prescriptive coaching, but coaches and leaders who utilize developmental interactions to identify business reality.

Conclusion

Developmental coaching is designed to create appreciative, supportive and results-oriented interactions around what really matters. Coaching as a leadership style drives positive effects in climate directly correlated to results. (Daniel Goleman, "Leadership That Gets Results", *Harvard Business Review*, March 2000).

Coaching systems are created in organizations in order to create a system of strategic interactions based on conversations that are designed to carry the weight of change. The natural design that emerges is far more effective— and far less costly— than inorganic or mechanical change programs designed around events. While most organizations respond to environmental change with wave after wave of events, coaching connects organizations with reality. Strategic conversations lead to change occurring in real time in advance of our response to personal and business reality, rather than in reaction to it.

It may seem that organic change models are more expensive in the short term. Coaching systems— systems of ongoing and structured interactions that connect, clarify and commit resources to what really matters— are not inexpensive and can carry heavy upfront investments.

However, what has to happen is the appropriate analysis and comparison that follows failed event-sponsored change initiatives. The composite effects on people, structure and technology (profitability) must be compared with the investment required to establish longitudinal organic change systems designed around coaching systems that promote a continuous state of organizational alignment and agility.

Everyone in organizations today needs to be involved in 360-degree conversations— conversations from all perspectives (not necessarily 360 assessments that are copiously supported through event-sponsored change programs). A business coach trained in using the COACH2 Model of generative change helps to forward the integration of personal freedom (solo agendas) and business reality (organizational agendas) from multiple strategic perspectives.

An integral or systems approach facilitated by regular, frequent and ongoing strategic interactions promotes developmental change required to support profound change. To produce organic change (which is far less costly in human as well as environmental terms over time than inorganic or event-sponsored change), we must allow coaching systems to carry the weight of change.

It will be through effective conversations and interactions, in a psychologically safe, learning environment that human potential is finally realized as an integral approach leading to awareness, purpose, competence, well-being and results. The design is not about change. The design is about creating a system to support continuous natural adaptation. This system will align transformational or discontinuous change requirements brought about by shifts in business reality through connected systems of conversations that support continuous, albeit incremental responses in real time through natural emergence.

This article was adapted from *Coaching as a Transformational Leadership Competency*, a 2002 book by Mike R. Jay, Master Business Coach. Visit www.coachingedge.com/ctlc to purchase the book every business leader must read. Visit www.coach2-the-bottom-line.com for Mike's coaching guide.



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