

When engagement

Making changes within an organisation can bring about feelings of distrust, discomfort and unrest among those affected. With the correct implementation, however, organisational change need not be so painful, argues **Richard H. Axelrod**

ONLY ONE IN THREE organisational change efforts succeed! This startling statistic is cause for reflection. Would we tolerate one in three automobiles working properly, one in three medical procedures being successful, or one in three aeroplanes landing safely? Of course not. Then why do we tolerate this success rate when it comes to organisational change? If we are to make a change in this alarming statistic we must understand why, despite the best intentions of leaders and consultants, organisational change efforts often end up disengaging the very people they are designed to engage.

Change strategies that disengage

The inherent design flaws of today's most popular change strategies produce dissatisfaction instead of an engaged organisation ready to act. It's not that people are predisposed to resist; rather, the very process used to bring about change creates unnecessary resistance. Here are the reasons why:

• **Allowing the few to decide for the many**

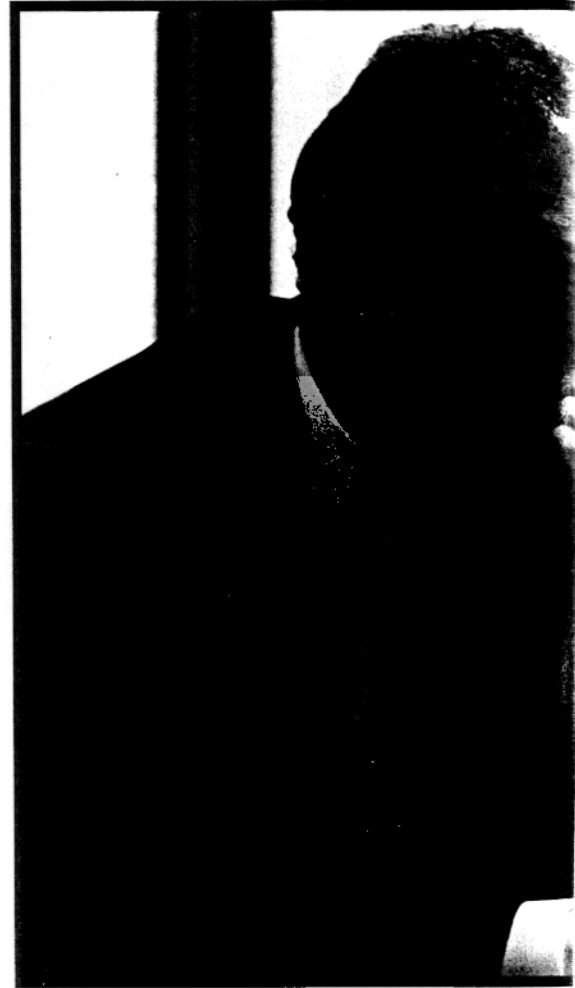
The way we manage change is symbolised by a kind of parallel organisation with sponsor groups and design teams. This is intended to be highly participatory. In fact, it relies on the few developing solutions for the many, thus guaranteeing that the implementation process will be more difficult than it need be. An 'engagement gap' occurs between those who are actively involved in the change process and those who are outside.

• **Unclear decision-making rules**

A clear understanding of the rules by which decisions are made and adopted is essential for successful engagement. What I hear over and over again from people is their sense of outrage; they are led to believe that they have an equal voice in the decision-making process; they discover later that the process was designed to win them over to the leaders' point of view. Predictably, feelings of anger and betrayal from those involved emerge and disengagement follows.

• **Unclear boundaries**

Those who develop engagement strategies are sometimes reluctant to set limits on the process. This gives a false sense of openness. When asked whether they want to impose limits or boundaries, their immediate response is that there is none. They fear that creativity will be limited, or overreact to



feelings in the organisation that there is already a preconceived solution; they embark on the change process without mapping the territory. In doing so, they foster further disengagement.

• **Selective information sharing**

Limited information sharing creates distrust. The anxiety that accompanies most change processes produces an increased demand for information. Unfortunately at the very time when more information is needed, organisations choose to limit it. They fear contributing incomplete information to an already-overflowing rumour mill. Our experience is that the information in the rumour mill is far more damaging than anything that could possibly be shared by the organisation.

• **Violations of democratic principles**

Change processes without an egalitarian spirit create cynicism and doubt, and ultimately lead to failure. Here are four essential questions to consider when dealing with this important issue:

- Is your change process equitable and fair?
- Are the leaders asking one part of the organisation to change while they themselves remain immune from the change?
- Is there widespread information sharing and high-involvement decision-making?
- Do people have the freedom and autonomy to

Richard H. Axelrod is the author of *Terms of Engagement: Changing the Way We Change Organisations* and founder of the Axelrod Group

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take action, or does a bureaucratic mindset thwart action?

Towards a new paradigm

There is an alternative to change strategies that disengage: a principle-based approach that I call the 'engagement paradigm.' Because it is principle-based, it gives leaders the flexibility they need to adapt their change process to ever-changing conditions. These principles represent a new way of thinking about change that leaders can apply, whether they are working with a group of four or 400. Let's now consider these principles in more detail:

• Widening the circle of involvement

Mere buy-in is no longer an acceptable goal. Engaging people deeply in the change process itself creates a critical mass of energetic people who design and support necessary changes. Widening the circle of involvement means going beyond the dozens that are typically involved in current change practices, to involving hundreds, even thousands, of employees. In practical terms, widening the circle of involvement means expanding who gets to participate in a change process in three critical ways: first, by including new and different voices; second, by expanding the number of people, the few no longer deciding for the many; finally, by

widening the circle of involvement enhancing innovation, adaptation and learning.

Recently, as part of an effort to reform healthcare in the United Kingdom, the National Health Service designed processes based on the engagement paradigm to involve communities in improving their healthcare. One of the topics was diabetes management. Where earlier conferences involved only healthcare providers – doctors, nurses, and nutritionists – this conference included patients from ages five to 80 and their families.

A stunning result of the conference was the discovery that the reasons diabetic children in schools were not following their diets was not that they didn't know what to eat. Rather, the 'dinner ladies' were preparing unhealthy food. Where professionals previously thought that the solution to the issue was educating children, the real answer was in educating the 'dinner ladies'. This discovery could not have occurred if the conference designers had not believed in everyone's ability to contribute and widened the circle of involvement.

• Connecting people to each other

When people connect with each other and to powerful ideas, creativity and action follow. As people forge links barriers to the flow of information and new ideas are lowered. Work also flows more smoothly; people learn how what they

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do fits into the larger whole, and how to access needed resources.

When people connect and become known to each other they stop being stereotypes, roles, functions and members of that hated ‘other’ group that only causes problems.

Here is how one organisation used storytelling to increase connection between the old-timers and newcomers. At a large group conference designed to create an organisational vision for the future, participants began by telling the story of their first day in the job. As the stories unfolded, an oral history of the organisation was created linking those who started the company to those who had been with the organisation for only a few days. By storytelling, they learned that throughout the organisation’s history it had successfully changed with the times; out of that knowledge came the courage to deal with the changes ahead.

• **Creating communities for action**

Meeting today’s challenges cannot be done by any one person single-handedly. We need a community of people who willingly provide their talents and insights to deal with increasingly complex issues. Community is important because no single person has the answer. Answers reside in all of us.

The former head of Hewlett-Packard’s Microelectronic Operation, Mike Freeman, describes the benefits of creating a community that resulted from a series of large group conferences whose purpose was to integrate five different manufacturing units into a single facility. ‘What we created was an environment that values learning through exploration and enquiry; an organisation where we feel free to examine roles and responsibilities and where there is a free flow of information; an organisation that responds and adapts more quickly to constant turbulent change.

The quality of working life has significantly improved as measured by an employee survey’.

• **Embracing democracy**

Democracy is the most successful form that the human race has developed to enable people to come together, to discuss and resolve issues and to act. Through the democratic process, issues of self-interest versus the common good and minority versus majority opinion can be dealt with. Thus support and follow-through for the chosen action is assured. Today there is more democracy, more freedom of information and more freedom of expression internationally than there has ever been. Imposed change is no longer acceptable in today’s world. Change based on democratic principles of equity and fairness, freedom and autonomy, and open information and decision-making has the best chance for success. The power of these principles engages people and becomes the guiding light. Working together produces an innovative set of initiatives and a critical mass of people behind them. All this develops performance standards.

Conclusion

Despite the best of intentions, leaders are still employing change processes that produce disengagement. Creating an engaged organisation requires leaders to choose a strategy that, by its very nature, engages people. The principles of widening the circle of involvement, connecting people to each other, creating communities for action and embracing democratic principles, are the foundation for such a strategy. The next time you meet in a group, small or large, begin to consider the questions outlined in this article and apply the principles. You will be surprised how quickly you can transform your organisation into a cohesive, purposeful community. ^{abc})