

# Making Change

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## **Making Change**

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*Everyone recognizes that change is going on all around us; but this doesn't make it any easier. This white paper explores why it is so hard to make changes within organizations. The author offers practical tips about how to make change happen. The paper concludes with a mini case history illustrating how changes were made within a county government advisory board.*

**The reason that men oppose progress is not that they hate progress but that they love inertia.**

*Ellert Hubbard*

**It's hard for me to get used to these changing times. I can remember when the air was clean and sex was dirty.**

*George Burns*

A popular definition of the word “crazy” is a person who keeps doing things the same way and expecting the results to be different. A more clinical definition of crazy is being out of touch with reality. By either definition, most of us trying to promote change within our organizations are certifiably nuts.

### **Isn't Change What America is All About?**

For centuries, our country has prided itself as the bastion of invention. We have led the world in changing social norms, inventing new technologies, and introducing global fads. America has an incredible number of small nonprofits and for-profit businesses popping up with creative new concepts, and each year thousands of innovative services and products pour forth from those sources to an eager group of consumers.

For those of us working in larger, well-established organizations, however, the world looks different. There is a reason why innovation comes overwhelmingly from small, newly established groups rather than from those that are larger and older. People are creatures of habit. We find it too easy to fall into comfortable patterns of thought and behavior and we hate being challenged to do things differently. Even while we wish we could break free of our ruts and overcome our familiar obstacles, our human nature makes us inherently distrust and resist anything that intrudes into our world from outside of our comfort zone.

In almost any American workplace, though, it is unreasonable to think we can continue being successful using the methods we used just five years ago. If you're in touch with reality in today's world, here is what it looks like:

- We are entering a global workplace and economy. In 1900, it shocked people when they lost jobs to the latest round of immigrants coming into our country. In 2000, it shocked us

that people were losing jobs to folks halfway around the world – in China, India, and Mexico. Progressive companies today are hiring employees and conducting business throughout the world. Nonprofit organizations are raising money worldwide and promoting programs with worldwide impacts.

- The pace of change in technology is dizzying and not expected to slow down anytime soon. As children, baby boomers experienced the invention of high fidelity music. As young adults, they proudly put together their stereo components. In their prime earning years, they labored to figure out how to integrate television and later digital movies into their home systems. Approaching retirement, they have struggled to understand how to further hook in their computers, digital cameras, internet services, and home security systems. Today, they are simply baffled by their grandchildren who nonchalantly carry all this functionality around in their pocket PDAs (personal digital assistants).

For those of us in well-established organizations, these are today's facts:

- Customer requirements change faster than we can respond with new products and services. In nonprofits, we constantly search for new funding sources and new media for our appeals; we cope with changing demographics among our service constituents, evolving roles for our Board, and a never-ending array of new laws and regulations.
- The workforce doesn't stay the same. Employee and organizational loyalty are gone. Job turnover is commonplace.
- Competition is overwhelming, even in the world of nonprofits. No matter what we are doing, another organization is busy figuring out how to do it faster, better, and for less money. We can't stop them; we can only hope to get better ourselves.

### **If Change is So Ubiquitous, Why Don't We Do It?**

We are undeniably in a world that demands change. Undeniable, too, is that if we continue to do things the same old way we will continue to have the same old results. If we want things to change -- to improve -- we must face reality and start doing things differently. So why don't we?

Introducing change turns out to be a two-pronged problem. Obviously, you must introduce new ideas and approaches; but you must also wean people away from their old habits. You cannot do the former without simultaneously doing the latter. People resist change largely and simply because they cling to their old, familiar ways. People won't adopt new ideas just because an innovation looks inviting. They need reasons for, and assistance in, giving up what they are familiar and comfortable with. Innovation is as much psychology as technology.

When people are faced with change, any barrier becomes a convenient excuse to keep things the way they are. To overcome this, an organization must go the extra mile to communicate new standards, provide training in new methods, and supply new equipment and tools. Although every group has a handful of so-called "early innovators" (people who like to be first to try out new ideas), the majority of employees will not adopt new ideas until the organization actively promotes and sponsors them.

We generally assume our managers will be part of the solution. More often, managers are just another part of the problem. Alas, managers are people too. Like everyone else, they fall into comfortable ruts. Frankly, managers are paid to guard the organizational status quo; that is what

the traditional manager's job is – making sure jobs are done “the way they're supposed to be done.” In most places, “managing” the system means ensuring that people follow plans, enforce procedures, and meet standards. Only those managers who are truly leaders understand their responsibilities to change plans dynamically, improve procedures, and constantly strive for higher standards.

Even in organizations with the best of intentions, another barrier to innovation is the "not invented here" syndrome. Employees seldom trust or understand outside techniques. For this reason, the successful dissemination of new ideas often depends upon having an advocacy group within the organization. The people in the advocacy group act as early innovators, often re-inventing an innovation to give it a spin that uniquely suits their organization. These advocates then spread the home-grown version of the innovation to other progressive employees within the organization.

### How Can We Make It Happen?

**The pessimist complains about the wind; the optimist expects it to change; the realist adjusts the sails.**

*William Arthur Ward*

Based upon many years of experience and research on change management, here are some tips for introducing innovative ideas into your workplace.

1. Expect resistance to new ideas, procedures and technologies. People tend to resist change, not embrace it. Resistance should neither surprise nor discourage you.
2. Give people the greatest possible opportunity to participate in and be informed about the decision-making processes leading up to changes. People accept change more readily when they feel ownership in it. People will be more willing to try things that are new when they understand the shortcomings of what they used to do.
3. Demonstrate how changes will be beneficial to the group, rather than simply mandating change by force of authority. No one wants to change just because they are told they should or they must.
4. Form an innovation diffusion group of forward-thinking people who are well respected by their peers. Let this group act as pioneers and advocates to lead the rest of your department into adopting new ideas.
5. Provide support for training people to use new tools and technologies. Don't expect people to just learn by doing. Follow up formal training immediately with opportunities to exercise new skills on the job. Just-in-time training communicates to employees that management has planned carefully for change, that management is willing to invest in it, and that someone therefore must truly believe this innovation will have beneficial results.

6. Explore how to introduce change. Decide whether to implement change a piece at a time or as a “big bang.” Sometimes, innovation comes easier as a succession of small changes rather than as one dramatic event. This allows people to adjust, adapt and learn without wildly disrupting their normal habits. Other times, however, incremental change invites people to linger in their old ruts and resist each element of change as being inconsequential. In that event, one dramatic change revolution may have a more positive result in the long run, even while being more traumatic for a short period of time.

7. If a group wants to promote change, the costs of introducing innovations should be borne as high up in the organizational hierarchy as possible. The more these costs are pushed down to small departments and individual people, the less likely it is that people will adopt an innovation. Early in the change process, increased cost is a great excuse to avoid changing. Taking on the costs at the highest budgeting levels sends a clear signal that senior managers support the innovation.

8. Finally, if you are introducing change in an organization, don’t expect to win any popularity contests. Even if what you are doing proves successful in the long run, change is a painful process that few people enjoy. After all, it’s true that after your root canal your mouth is healthier than when you started, yet no one looks forward to seeing their dentist.

### **Mini Case Study**

I recently chaired the advisory board for a department within a county government. Our board reported to the department’s director who, in turn, reported to the Chairman of the County Board of Commissioners.

After 10 years of this advisory board functioning successfully, major changes were made in the County’s governance structure. For our advisory board and the department director who oversaw us, it became clear that our board needed to change: a) our position within the county government hierarchy; b) the types of issues we addressed; and c) the channels through which we reported our recommendations. If we did not – if we kept working as we had for the last decade – our influence would be totally lost.

The major obstacle to this change was the Chairman of the County Board. He was comfortable with the niche our advisory committee had filled over the years. Without his agreement and support, though, we could not possibly make our desired changes, in which case organizational irrelevance was our obvious and only destiny.

Using many of the principles in this article, we fabricated a successful organizational change. Here’s how.

1) We demonstrated how our old organizational definition potentially would create conflicts with the County’s new governance structure. This gave the Chairman a reason to be unhappy with the existing situation.

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- 2) We demonstrated the potential benefits of our proposed changes, which would bring greater synthesis of opinion among the County's departments and a better medium for citizen involvement. These factors thus demonstrated good reasons for making the change.
- 3) We took the original advisory board charter, which the Chairman helped draft many years ago, and demonstrated how our "new" solution helped accomplish the intent behind the original charter. Thus, the "new" idea could be viewed as an "old" idea simply being brought up to date.
- 4) Rather than presenting our solution in final form, we presented it as a draft recommendation and asked the Chairman to help us fashion it in a manner that would be most compatible with the County's new governance structure. By drawing in the Chairman's participation, we reduced his defensiveness and resistance. As a bonus, he had several excellent ideas about to make our suggestion work even better.
- 5) We recognized a potential problem in selling our new advisory board process to the managers in the other county departments. By getting the Chairman on board first, it was easier to convince the other managers.
- 6) The Chairman agreed to institute the change quickly. It was not the type of idea to delay by subjecting it to committee votes or feasibility studies. We resisted the temptation to think through all the permutations of possibilities, and simply took the approach that seemed most likely to succeed. The Chairman directed us to start using the advisory board with the new structure and, as we encountered problems, confront and overcome them on the fly. This approach avoided the chance for other people in the government structure to discover (or create) reasons why the new solution would not work.
- 7) Although the change was successful, it was not without differences of opinion, internal politics, and second guessing. Our original department chairman took political heat from some of his department chair peers. This was predictable and inevitable, but it's all in a day's change.

*For further information about Strategic Planning or CDR's Management Consulting services for nonprofit organizations, feel free to contact Dr. Zimmerman at Creative Direct Response, Inc. or read his book on Strategic Planning: **"Management Walkabout: Discovering Your Organization's Strategic Readiness."***

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