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Change (Can Be) for the Good

How active change management optimizes outcomes
BY VERGIL METTS, PHD

Whether it's something you embrace or something you'd rather avoid, there's no denying change is a fact of our personal and professional lives. Managing change is something many people struggle with in many cases because the managing part so often goes neglected. Change isn't something that just happens—it requires skillful, active stewardship, especially at the institutional level.

Today's most successful companies don't just understand change is necessary, they make it central to their strategy and actively manage it at every turn. Steve Jobs had Apple running on all cylinders five years ago after completely revitalizing its Macintosh franchise, yet Apple circa 2010 is a very different company, reinvented around digital entertainment and hitting new highs. The removal of "computer" from the company's name a few years ago turned out to be much more than semantic downsizing.

Much closer to home (yours), hospitals evolving from predominantly physician-centric acute care delivery to a more team-centric model, in which nurses and case managers play a vital role, is a well-known example of change praised as effective, playing out right now.

What makes some organizations and people great at change, while others stagger along? Having studied and counseled on the topic at length, I'm the first to admit change isn't easy. But it needn't be as wrenching and fearsome as we make it. Some of the difficulty is rooted in the fundamental, misguided belief that change is a technical issue, not an emotional one.

To help you avoid some of the most common mistakes we see in change management, I'd like to share our list, *The Seven Deadly Sins of Change*:

(1) Complacency. Identified as a barrier by John Kotter, the prominent Harvard leadership expert, this sin embodies satisfaction with a current situation, regardless of the results or environment they create, or relevant external factors. Complacency is often marked by a sentiment like "we've always done it this way," when change is imminent or in process. Avoid it by communicating compelling reasons for the change, whether avoidance-based (change "x" is happening so "y" won't occur) or attraction-based (changing "x" will make "y" even better).

(2) Reactivity. Attempting change without a clear, compelling vision and conscious, long-term plan of action, or continually reacting to the crisis of the day. Articulating a sound vision simplifies decision-making, motivates people to act and creates a powerful sense of shared purpose.

- (3) Technocentrism.** Mistakenly and commonly treating change as a technical issue, not an emotional one. Change is inherently stressful, producing physical, emotional and mental symptoms. There are four distinct, personal phases of change: *denial*, *resistance*, *exploration* and *commitment*. Good leaders can help people manage each phase effectively.
- (4) Arrogance.** Underestimating human potential to effectively contribute to the process. Creating a change management structure, involving all employee levels and inviting informal involvement are ways to avoid this sin.
- (5) Manipulation.** Using the change process as an opportunity to grab turf. Net results include hostility, cynicism and a failed transformation.
- (6) Isolation.** Failing to maintain or build a strong team during the change process, pursuing it solo rather than with others. This sin is borne of poor planning and communication and persists through subpar leadership unity.
- (7) Mushrooming.** The sin of keeping people in the dark and feeding them garbage (i.e., conditions where mushrooms thrive), committed when there's no communication plan for the change process, when jargon is used instead of clear language, and when it's assumed communication from the very top is all that's needed. Being consistent in all messages, establishing two-way communication, and tapping the power of the grapevine are some ways to avoid mushrooming.

Note the central role communication plays throughout the list. For good reason: Harvard's Kotter found that during change processes less than 1 percent of communication to those affected is about the change itself.

Strategic communication fuels successful change processes, empowering staff, and pre-empting or overcoming resistance by laying out a clear vision and action steps. Here is where anyone in an organization can contribute to the process. If you don't understand what is changing or why, speak up and demand clarity. Chances are, you're not alone, so engage colleagues who feel the same way. You'll be doing a huge service to your organization and the changes it's working to implement. On the other side, keep an open mind about what you learn.

My advice does *not* include a warning to avoid resisting change for its own sake. People don't actually resist change; they resist negative affective states like discomfort, incompetence and uncertainty that often come with it. In teaching settings, a question I often pose to illustrate the distinction is, "If I changed the class rules tomorrow so everyone who shows up 15 minutes early gets \$100 on the spot, how many of you would resist that change?" As long as a person doesn't feel scared, unappreciated, unable—or any of a long list of other separating emotions associated with change—they are not likely to resist it.

As case managers, you constantly grapple with change fraught with emotion, encountering and advising people whose world can look very different than mere days or hours earlier. Using principles of emotional intelligence can help them adjust to the change they're experiencing and help them make sound decisions. Ask four basic questions:

- How does my client (and family) feel?
- How do I want them to feel (to get the best outcome in this situation)?
- Why do they feel the way they do?
- What actions must I take to help them feel the way they must to effectively facilitate thought and make decisions?

The Seven Deadly Sins list can work like a change management checklist. A few items are universally relevant. For example, ask if you've helped create a vision for a patient and their family; avoid reacting to events they may perceive as crises that your experience dictates are just bumps in the road.

Also, are you working in tandem with a patient and their support team, or do they perceive you as an island apart? Take an honest look, and if you see "me" versus "them," take steps to change the dynamic.

Is your good advice being heard loud and clear? Avoid "mushrooming" by monitoring your own language. Are you speaking clearly and avoiding jargon? Repeat critical information as many times as necessary to resonate, and err on the side of "too much." If you can, tap the power of a group's mini-grapevine by providing critical or difficult information to the person or people you deem best to share it with others.

The irony is that we are all born as eminently change-capable beings. There was a time in all of our lives when everything we experienced was new and represented a change from the world as we formerly knew it. We ravenously embraced change, somehow innately knowing it was the only road forward. We'll never again be so brilliantly innocent, but with the right tools and perspective, we can indeed manage change brilliantly.

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