Positive Organizational Change – A New Approach to Managing the Change Curve

By

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Introduction

In the past, organizations enjoyed a sense of stability. Through increased market transparency, instantaneous communications, and a global market, organizations are now forced to concentrate on something in the past they happily avoided, change.

Change practitioners are regularly faced to help organizations implement changes needed to stay competitive. The general aim of organizational change is to adapt to the current environment (Leana & Barry, 2000) or to improve performance (Boeker, 1997; Keck & Tushman, 1993). A successful change within an organization is largely based on employee acceptance and behavior modification. It is important that we, as change practitioners, understand how psychology can help individuals tackle change and overcome potential obstacles.

It is important to understand that “organizational change” may not be the most accurate terminology; rather, change is an individual emotional and psychological matter for all of us (Haines, 2012). A large organization poses greater risk for individuals to get on board with change and to focus on their daily services; employees focus on how change affects them individually. To try to lessen the learning curve, a focus on the psychological process is required.

While much of the literature and professional focus has been how to overcome resistance to change, the role that positive employees may play in organizational change has been largely ignored (Avey, Wernsing & Luthans, 2008). As a result, this paper is used to demonstrate how to approach the change curve and change management using positive psychology and techniques, such as appreciative inquiry and positive emotions. By using this approach, organizations will be able to leverage the benefits of positive organizational behavior such as more positive employees, organizational commitment, citizenship behaviors, and engagement.

Current Perspectives of Change

There are a number of change models used in organizational research. Some of the most common being the ‘change curve’ (Kubler-Ross, 1969), Lewin’s three-stage model (1951), Kotter’s 8-step change model (Kotter, 1996) and Lippit’s phases of change theory (Lippitt, Watson, Westley, 1958). The theories of change demonstrate that individuals experience change at different rates, and as a result, some employees may not accept the change the organization introduces.

Several of these change models state that the primary obstacle for effective organizational change is employee resistance (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; O’Toole, 1995). Change tends to present to individuals a risk or some level of a threat, even if the outcome of the change is positive. Research suggests that these intense negative emotions experienced by employees are at the heart of employees’ low commitment to change (Seo, Taylor, Hill, Zhang, Tesluk, & Lorinkova, 2012). Although resistance to change is known, many organizations fail to plan for the human side of change, often resulting in a failed change. While the hard and objective approach is easier to measure, it is more important to focus on the soft side of change, specifically, how change affects people.

Many authors of organizational change research state that the main reason many change initiatives fail is due to resistance to change (Maurer, 1996; Strebel, 1994). Resistance to change is a common response to change, and
the idea of having to “overcome resistance” may be part of the problem to begin with. What is important to recognize is that working with, rather than trying to defeat, resistance will lead to increased results (Ackerman Anderson & Anderson, 2011); Rather than trying to overcome resistance, a tactic tried by many, you should nurture resistance, use it, and benefit from it.

**Using Appreciative Inquiry to Overcome the Change Curve**

All too often organizations focus on what is wrong, what are the problems, or what needs fixing. This deficit based approach can lead organizations into a path of focusing only on what is wrong with the organization; this may lead to dysfunction and a failure to recognize their strengths and how to capitalize on them to get better. A more effective approach would be to focus on what is right in the organization, an asset based approach. Appreciative Inquiry (AI), is a great asset based approach for organizations to determine why they need change and focuses on what can be further developed.

AI is a process for facilitating positive change in human systems. It is the positive way to embrace organizational change based on one simple assumption:

“Every organization has something that works right – things that give life when it is most alive, effective, successful, and connected in healthy ways to its stakeholders and communities. AI begins by identifying what is positive and connecting to it in ways that heighten energy and vision for change.” (Cooperriger, Whitney, & Stavros, 2005).

AI is used to identify this positive core and connecting it in ways that increase energy, vision, and inspire action for change (Center for Appreciative Inquiry). By using AI within an organization, as Bernard J. Mohr stated, “problems get replaced with innovation as conversations increasingly shift toward uncovering the organization’s positive core.”

AI is a highly interactive process which aids in building relationships across functions, business units, and levels within and outside the organization (Trosten-Bloom & Whitney, 1999). These relationships are built without the use of explicit communications or training. By pairing this method with organizational change management best practices (e.g., manager and supervisor support, constant communication), one can assume that the relationships and positive core would increase.

By using AI in organizational change management, a large platform for discovery is initiated. To follow the change management practices, it is important to include employees at all levels of the organization throughout the AI process; this will help to engage the organizations informal leadership. This strategy aligns very well with creating change leaders and change agents to promote the change the organization is trying to implement. These change agents are crucial for success as they will increase communication and buy in from other employees.

AI has also been cited to enhance people's capacity for change (Trosten-Bloom & Whitney, 1999). In order to change, we are required to be curious and open to new possibilities. Some of the older models of change suggest that to introduce change again, we must “unfreeze” the system first. This freezing and unfreezing leaves employees feeling unmotivated to change; appreciative inquiry, on the other hand, allows employees to be inspired by the possibilities a change promotes, rather than be resistant to the problems a change may create. AI encourages employees to continuously seek changes or improvements to the organization as a whole.

The AI process involves four stages: discover, dream, design, and destiny known as the 4-D Cycle. A diagram of the 4-D Cycle can be seen in the figure below.
The first phase of the AI method, the Discovery phase seeks to understand the “best of what is” and “what has been”. It provides time for employees to collaborate and craft questions around the organization’s positive core.

The Dream phase is an exploration of “what might be”; a time where individuals explore their hopes and dreams for their work, working relationship, organization, and world at large. Here employees can think big, and think outside of the box; here they can spread hopeful images of the future.

The Design phase involves making decisions about “what should be” within the organization. It looks at recreation or transformation of parts of the organization (e.g., system, structure) to align with the organization’s past and their highest potential.

Finally, the Destiny phase begins inspired actions to support ongoing learning and innovation, insight to “what will be”. While the other phases lay the foundation, this phase focuses on personal and organizational commitments needed to result in successful future change and development.

AI has been as a powerful tool for organizational change because it can build collaboration. Employees work together to collaborate about the vision of the organization, discover how the vision will be achieved, and take steps toward how to bring change. It provides employees with a vision on how change will benefit the organization, an important aspect to any change management initiative. AI could be a new approach to overcoming the change curve, and the benefits, as discussed above will make change more appreciated and accepted within the organization.

By using AI within an organization, it helps to build innovation within employees; they will continue to build ideas of how the organization could further build off its positive characteristics. This involvement and collaboration will make the stakeholders more engaged in the change process. With employees having the opportunity to dream up possibilities to better the organization, they are developing engagement, hope, optimism (by focusing on the positives) and inspiration, something that is needed within organizations everywhere.

**Impacts of Positive Employees on Change**

Through using the AI method, employees can begin to develop positive emotions and positive psychological capital (i.e., hope, optimism, efficacy, resilience). Employees who have higher levels of positive emotions and capital will experience higher levels of engagement and organizational citizenship behavior; these behaviors facilitate positive change within the organization (Avey, Wernsing, & Luthans, 2008).

Fredrickson’s (2001) broaden and build theory of positive emotions predicts that positive emotions “broaden people’s momentary thought-action repertoires, widening the array of thoughts and actions that come to mind” (p. 220). This theory also states that these resources developed during the states of these positive emotions are durable, and will last over time. One can assume that the resources generated by employees who experience positive emotions may lead to positive employee attitudes such as engagement (Avey et al., 2008). Having employee engagement does not only impact those specific employees, but it may also impact
others’ motivation and emotions. Positivity is contagious, and with a number of employees demonstrating positive emotions, other employees may see the benefit and work towards experiencing the same emotions. Employee engagement in organizational change is required for employees to buy in and support the change. Thus, it is evident that helping to develop these positive attitudes through methods such as AI will have a positive impact for organizational change.

Along the same lines, positive emotions may play a role in influencing negative emotions employees may have towards change, such as cynicism or deviant and resistant behaviors. According to the undoing hypothesis (Fredrickson, 2001), employees who have high levels of positive emotions are less likely to have cynical attitudes regarding organizational change. The more employees within an organization who demonstrate these positive emotions will facilitate the change process as other employees may also develop this positive mindset. This positive approach will facilitate and enhance organizational change.

Positive emotions can also be beneficial in terms of overcoming change. Positive emotions promote an individual to maintain and prolong the current state of happiness (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). When looking at organizational change, a joyful or optimistic employee may still encounter the same problems after the change is introduced; however, these positive emotions will make these employees more understanding and resilient to the change, while also seeing the potential the change has to offer (Fredrickson, 2000).

By using AI to help to increase these positive emotions, the organization is also engaging employees and allowing them to witness and develop the new dream and vision for the organization. This will promote commitment to the organization because employees are more accountable for success; employees with positive emotions will also have the understanding that the upcoming changes are necessary to further build on the organization’s potential.

**Conclusion**

The topic of organizational change has been an area of interest for many years. Despite its interest, much attention has focused on the impact of employee resistance and the negative impact of employee attitudes toward change. However, a change in mindset is important both for the future of the field, but also to understand how we can build on what employees offer to make organizational change a greater success.

Through using AI during a change initiative, or to brainstorm about a change initiative, success is increased due to several reasons. First, AI encourages employees to be involved in the decision making process; this will help them feel more responsible and accountable for the change at hand. This accountability is an important factor for a change initiative to be accepted and promoted within an organization.

AI will also be beneficial, because, in alignment with organizational change management best practices, AI enhances communication throughout the change. By communicating with employees and receiving employee feedback they will understand that their voices are heard, acknowledged, and appreciated. Employees will feel more positive and reassured with the change when they know that their input and involvement have an impact on decisions. Also, when employees are kept up to date with the changes and plans that will affect them personally they will also have a more positive attitude towards the change.

Using AI has also been associated to increase positive emotions in employees, which also have a number of large benefits to the organization as a whole, as mentioned above. These positive emotions will increase employee acceptance and engagement to the change; and will also promote employees to recognize and understand the need for change.
This positive core of organizational life is one of the most unrecognized resources in the field of change management today. When it comes to tools for working with and implementing change, we, as change professionals, often forget to use those skills and abilities we have at our fingertips. Through focusing on what we are doing right and engaging the positive employees, we will have the opportunity to build an organization where employees are motivated to seek change to better the company and where the company seeks to better its employees.

When thinking about change and using positive psychology to overcome and approach the curve, perhaps Albert Einstein’s words clearly demonstrate why we should do focus on the positive, “There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.” You decide which of the two sound more likely to promote the desire to change.
References


