

“What does it take to make fundamental, lasting, deep change? I have long wondered if there are some identifiable conditions that distinguish successful change efforts from unsuccessful ones—some key success factors.”

Successful Change

Paying Attention to the Intangibles

By John D. Adams

FOR THE LAST 35 years, I have been involved in promoting and leading changes—both individual life style change and organization systems change—almost constantly. However, I am sad to report, the percentage of completely successful change processes that I have had a direct involvement with has been extremely low. And, I am finding, my experience is not at all unusual. Michael Beer has estimated that 50% of all intentional organizational change projects fail (Beer and Nohria 2000, p. 430). Similarly, Maurer (1996, p. 18) suggests that a majority of organizational change efforts fail in their early stages due to insufficient “buy-in.” And clearly, a large percentage of those changes that do not fail outright come up far short of their original goals or visions.

This article is about my journey to date to find out what it takes to make successful, enduring changes—both individual and organization changes. I have been collecting stories of successful changes on both of these levels for over 10 years. This article is a summary of what I have found out so far.

For many of the years between 1975 and 1995, I spent most of my professional time teaching, coaching and consulting about issues of stress management, health protection, and work-life balance. Also, between the late 1960s and the present, I have almost always been involved in some sort of large-scale organizational change project, sometimes as an internal OD consultant, and more often from an external position.

I have worked with thousands of people in the organizational stress and health arena, and more often than not, intentions such as losing weight, starting an exercise program, or getting more relaxation have faded away rather quickly. As a result, a few people changed their life styles radically, and the rest achieved little or no long-term individual change. Likewise,

organizational commitments to alter corporate cultures to produce less unnecessary pressure and stress have foundered more often than not.

I know that saving one life makes an expensive corporate wellness program cost effective; and I am confident that my work has prevented a lot of heart attacks. But the *majority* of the people I’ve worked with haven’t sustained the changes they promised to make.

I have worked on large-scale transformational change teams in large government agencies and health care systems; and in a variety of high tech, manufacturing, and insurance companies. I must admit that I have never seen *any* of these change projects even approach the original goals and visions for transformational change. And it has long seemed to me that the reason for these shortcomings is almost always due to insufficient attention having been paid to the people factors—the “intangibles of change.” So, one burning question I have been living with throughout my career is “What does it take to make fundamental, lasting, deep change?” I have long wondered if there are some identifiable conditions that distinguish successful change efforts from unsuccessful ones—some “key success factors.”

Why do change efforts fall short of the mark? The usual story is that individuals who had worked with me on stress and well being “couldn’t” live up to their agreements to change when confronted with the pressures and deadlines of everyday life. They also frequently pointed to others in their inner circle who chose to continue engaging in the habits they wanted to end—peer pressure. It is very difficult, for example, to stop smoking if one’s significant other is steadfastly puffing away. It is equally difficult to switch suddenly to a low fat diet if one’s family members don’t want to change how they eat.

And yet a few people have succeeded in transforming their lives. I have long been eager to find out what makes the difference.

On the organization level, equivalent “reasons” for coming up short of the change targets abound. I suspect that every OD consultant can tell stories of times when a team they were consulting with returned from an off-site with a set of action agreements that never get implemented as the challenges of everyday work reasserted themselves. Frequently, the off-site gets assigned to “unreal” status, as the team members point to “the real world” as the reason they have not followed through on their commitments.

In one case I was involved with, the highly visionary CEO of a large service company sponsored and championed a very expensive and complex transformational change project. Two big external consulting firms sent in teams of “Change Management” consultants to totally redesign both the data base management system of the company and the entire way in which customers and the company would relate to each other. A team of about 15 quite senior internal and external OD consultants were facilitating and guiding the “people aspects” of this enormous project. Over 100 people with project management skills were either hired or reassigned to six process design teams. Approximately 30 new processes were designed by these teams that would require extensive cross-functional collaboration (i.e. tearing down silos) to implement.

After spending tens of millions of dollars on this project, the CEO unexpectedly announced that he was retiring and that the COO would be moving up to take his place. The new leader had been neither a sponsor nor an advocate for this project. Further, key senior level stakeholders had never been meaningfully engaged. After settling into his new position for a

few months, the new CEO announced that he had selected three of the new processes (of 30) and assigned them to three business units for implementation. Processes that require several functions and units to work together effectively aren’t easy to implement from within one unit, and so the whole project essentially died, with no evidence of improved customer relations and service. The number of customers actually declined precipitously over the ensuing 12 months.

As was mentioned above, a few organizational transformation efforts DO realize incredible success. What are the essential differences?

WHAT DO WE ALREADY KNOW ABOUT SUCCESSFUL CHANGE IMPLEMENTATION?

While in graduate school in the mid 1960s, I was exposed to three sets of criteria for successful change. The first was Herb Shepard’s “Rules of Thumb for Change Agents” (1975); the second was Kurt Lewin’s three phases of change (Weisbord, 1987); and the third was a simple “resistance management” formula devised by David Gleicher at Arthur D. Little, and popularized by Dick Beckhard (Beckhard and Harris, 1987). All of these sets of change “success factors” were derived from years of early “change management” experience, and were largely based on the human factors—the intangibles of change.

Shepard first unveiled his factors at Case Institute of Technology in a consulting class in 1966. Herb’s list included the following “rules of thumb” which he had drawn from his experience during the early days of OD, but never subjected to any research scrutiny. His “rules of thumb” are still today a wonderful set of self-guidance principles for the change consultant.

Rule I: Stay alive: This rule is a *double entendre*—Herb advised us both to avoid “self-sacrifice” and to be “fully alive” in our work.

Rule II: Start where the system is

Rule III: Never work uphill

Corollary 1: Don’t build hills as you go

Corollary 2: Work in the most promising area

Corollary 3: Build resources

Corollary 4: Don’t over-organize

Corollary 5: Don’t argue if you can’t win

Corollary 6: Play God a little

Rule IV: Innovation requires a good idea, initiative, and a few friends

Rule V: Load experiments for success

Rule VI: Light many fires

Rule VII: Keep an optimistic bias

At Case, we were also exposed to Kurt Lewin’s (Weisbord, 1987) classic three-step model for successful change of “Unfreezing” the present equilibrium, “Moving” to a new state, and then “Refreezing,” or stabilizing the new state. Lewin’s three phases of change also apparently were never subjected to

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research testing, but did provide the context for the eternally useful Force Field Analysis diagnosis and planning process.

In 1967, while working on an internship project, I met Dave Gleicher at Arthur D. Little, who shared with me his formula for successful change—also derived from experience and untested—that was later popularized by Dick Beckhard (Beckhard & Harris, 1987), Kathie Dannemiller (Dannemiller Tyson Associates, 2000), and others:

$$C = (DVF) > R.$$

In this formula, **C**hange is possible when the level of **D**is-satisfaction with the status quo, the clarity of **V**ision, and the grasp of the **F**irst Steps to be taken can combine to be greater than the existing **R**esistance to change.

More recently, Kotter (1996) has suggested that there are eight factors that must be in place in order for a change to be successful:

1. Establishing a sense of urgency
2. Creating a guiding coalition
3. Developing a vision and strategy
4. Communicating the change vision
5. Empowering employees for broad-based action
6. Generating short term wins
7. Consolidating gains and producing more change
8. Anchoring new approaches in the culture

And, of course, there have been many others who have contributed to our understanding of the “people side” of change. But the fact remains; most organization change efforts continue to fail or fall far short of their goals. Could it be that none of the historic or current sets of qualities contain all of the necessary success factors? This is the question I have attempted to answer in my research on the “intangibles” of change.

METHOD

I have approached my data collection for this study very opportunistically. Whenever possible, over the past 10 years, I have invited individuals to tell me their success stories if they have undertaken major personal changes or if they have been key members of organizations that have successfully completed significant transformational changes. Open Space conferences that are open to the public and do not have a fixed theme have proven to be an ideal venue to find such people. In these settings, my open space offering has been to listen intently to people while they tell me their accounts of a truly successful (their subjective opinions) personal or organizational change they have experienced.

As a result of these invitations, I have so far had the opportunity to listen to 31 stories of major *individual* change successes and 15 stories of *organizational* transformation successes. Each story took about 90 minutes to tell. I did not ask questions other than for clarification, once the person began relating his or her experiences. I have also recorded six individual and four

organization stories of failures to reach the change goals, in order to see if the qualities always present in the success stories are generally missing from the failure stories (they are).

In qualitative research, when no new themes are emerging, it is a good indication that enough information has been collected to be able to reach some useful conclusions. This appears to be the case in this long-term qualitative research effort.

One limitation of the findings described below is that the people who self select to attend public Open Space conferences may not be representative of the population at large. On the other hand, one may assume that this subpopulation is more self-aware and more willing to take responsibility for its own learning processes than the population at large. A further limitation is that the sample of people who actually volunteered to tell their stories of change success and change failure is also a self-selected group and there may be many reasons for a person to decide to tell these stories.

A third limitation was in my ability to make objective assessments of the story transcripts as I became increasingly aware of the emerging themes. I attempted to mitigate this by asking a colleague to read the transcripts and verify (or refute) that the emergent themes were central to the stories.

FINDINGS

I found that there were eight themes that were virtually always present when individuals related their stories of personal success in making deep pattern changes. These eight themes were mostly or entirely missing in the cases of failure that I collected. A very interesting development in my story collecting and analysis was that these same eight themes were also present in some form in most of the organizational success stories. In addition, four additional themes emerged as essential to the success of organizational changes, which were also absent by and large when organizational changes fell short of what was originally expected. These 12 themes are described next.

It will be obvious in reading the following 12 qualities that some, but not all, are present in each of the aforementioned lists of qualities essential for successful changes (Shepard, Lewin, Gleicher / Beckhard, Kotter). Overall, I was pleased to note that the 12 success factors that I identified do a pretty good job of “covering” these earlier models.

I have been finding that when I focus my coaching or consulting attention on whichever of these 12 factors is missing, the change work proceeds much more effectively.

Individual Change Success Factors

1. Understanding and acceptance of the need for change:

It seems quite straight-forward that if I don't understand a recommended or announced change, or if I don't think there's a need for the change, I probably won't get very enthusiastic about making the change—neither individually

nor organizationally. Without enthusiasm, I won't make the change a priority.

2. **Belief that the change is both desirable and possible:** If I conclude that the change is impossible to undertake, or if I don't think it's the "right thing to do," then I am not likely to give it my full attention. If this judgment prevails, I will certainly resist attempts to push me towards engaging with the change process.
3. **Sufficient passionate commitment: Changing habits—**especially habits of thinking (mental models)—is especially difficult. In order to "stay the course," a person will need to have very strong commitment to being successful. In organizations, there seems to be a need for a critical mass (25%?) of people to hold a heartfelt commitment to making the change a success (see #9 and #11 below).
4. **Specific deliverable/goal and a few first steps:** Even if one believes it's necessary, desirable and possible to make the change, and one is incredibly committed to it, the person still needs to have a clear picture of the outcome and a doable first step in order to build momentum. No one in my story-collecting ever mentioned following a plan; but virtually everyone knew the outcomes they were committed to and also knew what they were going to do next.
5. **Structures or mechanisms that require repetitions of the new pattern:** Habits reach "autopilot" status through many repetitions. When a new habit is called for, there are relatively few repetitions of the new behavior in the new habit's "memory account" and a great many repetitions of the old behavior in the outgoing habit's memory account. In order to add the needed number of repetitions of the new behavior to cause a new habit to be formed, mechanisms or structures need to be created that require practicing the new behaviors.
6. **Feeling supported and safe:** Many have argued over the years that changes are not resisted *per se*, but that people resist the unknown. People intent on making changes seem much more willing to dive into the unknown when they feel that they are in a safe environment. Having a support network that unconditionally accepts the person emerged as being important to successfully making deep personal changes. Culture (shared mental model habits) change in the workplace is especially difficult in environments in which job security is in doubt.
7. **Versatility of mental models:** "If the only tool one has is a hammer, then everything becomes a nail!" If one's autopilot mental models are limited in scope and flexibility, change becomes very difficult. Successful accomplishment of significant changes, both individually and organizationally, seems to be more likely when the scope of one's thinking reflects long-range, deep, and self-reflective perspectives. "Versatility" means an appropriate amount of flexibility in how one mentally "holds" a situation.
8. **Patience and perseverance:** Establishing significant changes often takes a great deal of time and effort. Most frequently

there are steps of progress and there is backsliding. In order to "hang in there," both a sense of patience and a drive to be persistent are apparently essential. As noted above, a great many repetitions of the new habit need to be added to the "account" and these qualities are needed to ensure that enough repetitions of the required new behaviors are generated.

Additional Change Success Factors for Organizational Changes

While the previous eight factors were present in both individual and organizational stories of successful changes, the following four seemed to be additionally necessary at the level of organizational changes that included significant organizational culture (shared mental models and shared behaviors) change.

9. **Clear accountability:** visible, vocal, consistent, persistent sponsors and stakeholders: The absence of clear accountabilities for implementing and sustaining organizational changes was a very frequent reason for falling short of the change goals. When the sponsors and the stakeholders are truly engaged and accountable in ways that organizational employees experience in no uncertain terms, then, there appears to be a greater chance for success. This can be related to the Sufficient Passionate Commitment (#3 above) factor—are the key change leaders regularly demonstrating their commitment to the success of the change in an unambiguous manner?
10. **Explicit "boundary management"—the role of other people:** Every change has some identifiable boundaries around it. The people at the boundary of any significant change need to be considered carefully. Do they represent resources to be engaged? Might they become stakeholders in the foreseeable future? Do they need to be kept informed? Is it advisable to keep them "out of the way"? Open Systems Analysis and Planning appear to be highly important as regards the key relationships at the boundary of the change.
11. **Critical mass in alignment:** Conventional wisdom has it that when 25-30% of the members of a system are overtly supporting an idea (visibly, vocally, consistently, persistently), success becomes inevitable. If this percentage is at all valid, there is a "race" of sorts involved here. In order to be successful in a complex organizational change, we need to develop an aligned support base of 25-30% of those affected faster than a critical mass of those in opposition fall into alignment against the desired change. Early adopter models (Adams, 1988) tell us that for any significant change, we can count on starting out with around 10-15% of the affected population being wildly supportive of the change idea; and another 10-15% being equally wildly antagonistic towards it. Whichever end of the new idea adoption continuum doubles in size first is likely to "win out." What this suggests is focusing primary attention on those in favor of the idea and encouraging the next level of acceptors to join

in rather than trying to “fix” the hard-core resisters’ “erroneous stance”—which may only drive the skeptics into more vocal resistance!

12. Rewarding the new behavior & withdrawal of rewards for the old behavior: This factor should be self-evident, but is too frequently overlooked by change leaders. The adage that “you get what you pay for” is almost always true. If the change goal includes enhancing teamwork, but annual bonuses continue to acknowledge “individual heroics”, then teamwork is likely to suffer when opportunities for individual achievement present themselves.

CONCLUSIONS

I suspect that these 12 factors are not a complete list of everything that is needed on the “people” dimension of change, but I do believe that they are highly important and that they are frequently overlooked completely in change planning and change implementation. Further studies could easily be done that would support and/or add to this list. What is most important is that we pay more attention to the people undergoing changes—the intangibles of change—when we are in a change leadership role or are coaching leaders of change.

I recommend that a matrix such as *Table 1* be used as an intervention guide by change leaders and consultants, to assess

what is needed to keep complex individual and organizational changes on track. Of course, new essential “success factors” can be added at any time as they present themselves in the course of implementing changes. ■

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Table 1: TRACKING CHANGE IMPLEMENTATION SUCCESS FACTORS

Change Success Factor	Sample Focuses of Change Project					
	Database Software Design	Database Implementation	Process Design Team A	Process Design Team B	Process Design Team C	Integration
Understanding and acceptance of the need for change						
Belief that the change is both desirable and possible						
Sufficient passionate commitment						
Specific deliverable /goal and a few first steps						
Structures or mechanisms that require repetitions of the new pattern						
Feeling supported and safe						
Versatility of mental models						
Patience and perseverance						
Clear accountability: visible, vocal, consistent, persistent sponsors and stakeholders						
Explicit “boundary management” – the role of other people						