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By Gerard H. Seijts and Grace O'Farrell

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# Engage the heart: Appealing to the emotions facilitates change

*Reason and logic may be fine, but when it comes winning commitment to organizational change, the facts alone won't win people over. As these authors point out, employees also need to be fired up by leaders who recognize that both the heart and the mind matter.*

By Gerard H. Seijts and Grace O'Farrell

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“Change is the only constant.”

“Change is occurring at an ever accelerating rate.”

“Some people change when they see the light; others when they feel the heat.”

The fact that most of us have heard at least one variation of the above statements over the past few years only underlines the fact that organizations today must change if they are to remain competitive and meet the changing needs of their customers. Executives, managers and academics alike have spent considerable time planning change initiatives and determining which strategies are the most effective for facilitating change. Academics have written countless articles on organizational development and change; business schools offer courses to executives on how to lead organizational change; and CEOs have begun to disseminate the knowledge they acquired during transformation efforts undertaken to save their organizations from extinction.

Yet despite all the public discussion, the success rates

for major organizational change initiatives have been rather dismal. For example, Clay Carr notes that less than one-third of the TQM and re-engineering programs met their planned goals (Clay Carr, *Choice, Chance and Organizational Change: Practical Insights from Evolution for Business Leaders and Thinkers*), American Management Association, 1996). The data available on more recent downsizing and rightsizing initiatives are also unimpressive. Indeed, organizational decision-makers have begun to realize that a downsizing effort without major changes in structure, culture or process often produces only a short-term improvement.

This is not to say that there aren't any success stories. Large organizational turnarounds have been recorded and held up as examples of leadership excellence. Most business people have heard about Jack Welch's transformation of GE, Eckhard Pfeiffer's redirection of Compaq, and Arthur Martinez's rescue of Sears from oblivion. Such success stories, however, are fewer and harder to find than the cases of change mismanagement and subsequent organizational implosions.

In this article, we want to do three things. First, we will identify the reasons that organizational change usually fails. Second, we will demonstrate that the errors made in the change process are rooted in organizational behaviour. Third, we will argue that leaders have not recognized the importance of the in creating successful change, and that change efforts more often succeed when they are based on cognition (a focus on the facts) *and* emotion.

## Why do most change efforts fail?

A scan of the existing literature on organizational change provides numerous reasons and frameworks for the poor track record of major organizational change efforts. A popular framework is the one developed by Harvard Business School professor John Kotter. In

*Leading Change* (Harvard Business School Press, 1996), he identified eight reasons why most change efforts fail: (1) not discussing the need for change; (2) failing to create a powerful guiding coalition that communicates the need for change; (3) underestimating the power of a specific, challenging vision and goals; (4) under-communicating the vision to the various stakeholders; (5) permitting obstacles to block the attainment of the vision; (6) failing to create short-term wins that could generate enthusiasm and confidence; (7) declaring the change effort a success too soon; and (8) neglecting to anchor the various changes in the corporate culture. Together, these mistakes often lead to a host of negative consequences, including poor implementation of the change strategies and less-than-hoped-for results.

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Kotter's framework is compelling. This, of course, is not a surprise because Kotter, through his work as a scholar and consultant, has been involved in numerous change initiatives. What is surprising, however, is that leaders today continue to make the very same errors that Kotter pointed out almost 7 years ago. For example, although R.R. Donnelley, a large U.S. printing company, generated big profits in the 1970s and 1980s, it "fell asleep at the presses through the technology-driven efficiency boom of the 1990s." according to the company's current CEO, Bill David. "I came here in 1997 but saw 1982 all over again." ("Pressing for Change", *Forbes*, November 20, 2002). Previous change efforts had been declared successful too soon, and momentum for continued and continuing change had been lost.

The challenge for organizational leaders is not to come up with good ideas or guidelines for leading change; these already exist. There are, however, too few decision-makers capable of translating the ideas and following the guidelines that lead to a concerted, well-guided effort to lead change. We do not doubt that most managers and leaders are smart and talented, but the question remains: Why do leaders ignore the guidelines and frameworks that are available? Why, too, do they overlook or underutilize alternative approaches to getting people's commitment to change goals?

The errors that Kotter identified are usually made because of managers' inappropriate behavior. By this we mean that the errors consist of a series of observable actions, such as under-communication, lack of goal-setting and poor team-management skills, which, because they remain unmediated, lead to negative outcomes. This implies that change agents can improve their own – and organizational — performance if they change their own behaviour. From a behavioural point of view, therefore, it is critical to ask ourselves what we should stop doing, start doing or do differently to enhance our chances of success in leading change.

One of the more important reasons that change efforts fail, is that the idea of "organizational change" is an illusion. Organizations do not change.

It is the individuals in organizations that change their behaviours. Organizations are made up of hundreds, thousands or hundreds of thousands of individuals, formed into subunits, departments or divisions, all of whom need to be influenced or persuaded to change their behaviour. Unless the need to change is perceived as an effort to create positive outcomes including, but not limited to, the expansion of personal power and a more interesting job, individuals can be expected to resist the initiatives that are part of the overall change effort.

The critical point here is that all change is really individual change. Most individuals will consider changing their behaviours and routines if there is a clear, heartfelt reason for them to change. For those leading the change, therefore, the questions that are front and centre are, "How do I get individuals to want to do what I want them to do?" and, How must change leaders behave if they are to persuade the rank and file to change their behaviour?

### Appeal to the heart

Minimizing risk and maintaining current systems are a manager's responsibilities. Change, by definition, involves risk and requires the creation of new systems.

As such, management skills alone are not enough to facilitate organizational change: Change requires leadership. Among other things, leadership includes establishing a new direction for the organization, inspiring people to change their behaviours and routines consistent with the new direction, and coaching them on how to overcome barriers to change.

Leaders are agents of change, through their vision and charisma, passion, guidance *and* their emotion. To lead change, one must have the skills to create commitment to new courses of action. Such commitment can be obtained only if an individual's feelings and emotions are engaged.

In the past, most change efforts and techniques for obtaining commitment to change tried to engage the mind rather than the emotions. Traditional change-management frameworks, and subsequent advice to practicing managers, emphasized the need to over-communicate and insisted that the content of the message and the information itself were most important. For example, T.J. Larkin and Sandar Larkin encouraged the practicing manager to: "...communicate only facts; stop communicating values ...," and "... the solution is to communicate the facts —only the facts. Members of senior management change teams must articulate in the fewest words possible what they plan to do..." ("Reaching and Changing Frontline Employees," *Harvard Business Review*, May/June 1996.)

This advice is, in a sense, a leap backward. For example, in *The Heart of Change: Real-Life Stories of How People Change Their Organizations* (Harvard Business School Press, 2002), John Kotter and Dan Cohen describe three important limitations of using only facts or analysis to motivate people to change. First, analysis is not needed to find the big truths in most cases. It often doesn't take a detailed financial analysis to determine that the organization is in dire straits. Second, in a turbulent, fast-paced world, analytical tools are often limited due to the frequent changes in parameters and assumptions. Third, analysis, however astute, rarely

motivates people in a big way. Presenting facts alone will inspire few organizational citizens to commit to specific, challenging goals.

Only in recent times have managers begun to consider the emotional content and impact of a message in communicating organizational change. Individuals have to "see" and "feel" the message in order for it to have the desired impact. When leaders deliver the message in a way that creates a visible or emotional response, the chance that individuals will change their behaviour is greater.

Unless the need to change is perceived as an effort to create positive outcomes including, but not limited to, the expansion of personal power and a more interesting job, individuals can be expected to resist the initiatives that are part of the overall change effort

In "Managing Change: The Art of Balancing," Jeanie Daniel Duck described the importance of emotions as follows: "For decades, managers and workers have been told to check their feelings at the door. And that's a big mistake. It's one thing to say that behaviour is more

accessible to managers than feelings are; it's another thing altogether to say that feelings have no place at work. Change is fundamentally about feelings; companies that want their workers to contribute with their heads and hearts have to accept that emotions are essential to the new management style. The old management paradigm said that at work people are only permitted to feel emotions that are easily controllable, emotions that can be categorized as 'positive.' The new management paradigm says that managing people is managing feelings. The issue isn't whether or not people have "negative" emotions; it's how they deal with them. In fact, the most successful change programs reveal that large organizations connect with their people most directly through values—and that values, ultimately, are about beliefs and feelings." (*Harvard Business Review on Change*, Harvard Business School Press, 1998).

Duck's article is one of several that point out the merits of bringing heart, soul and spirit into the workplace. Relatively recent examples include "The Power of Emotional Appeals in Promoting Organizational Change Programs," Shaul Fox and Yair Amichai-Hamburger (*Academy of Management Executive*, no. 15, 2001); "What makes a Leader?" (Daniel Goleman, *Harvard*

*Business Review*, Nov/Dec, 1998); *Enlightened Leadership—Getting to the Heart of Change*, Ed Oakley and Doug Krug (Simon and Schuster, 1991); and *Leading with Soul – An Uncommon Journey of Spirit* (Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal, Jossey-Bass, 1995). Indeed, the most recent research on emotional intelligence rests on the belief that one’s emotional status affects other individuals and that all individuals must gain competencies in dealing with both intra- and interpersonal emotions to achieve personal and organizational success.

### How to motivate the heart?

Earlier, we discussed Kotter’s Eight Steps in the “Leading Change” framework. Each step involves communicating information and ideas to individuals and groups. However, some change leaders speak to people’s feelings, in addition to providing the hard facts. Kotter conceptualized the progression from hard, factual mechanisms to soft, emotional ones. and created the See-Feel-Change pattern associated with successful change. This is included in his updated change framework. The basic thesis, as he states it in *The Heart of Change*, is that “people change what they do less because they are given analysis that shifts their thinking than because they are shown a truth that influences their feelings.”

For each step in the change process, leaders should thus consider the following examples of behaviours in presenting and communicating change to people in the organization:

- 1 Make the need to change real. Do not just provide data. Make individuals see the need for change. For example, an international beer producer was concerned about its slide in market share, in part the result of poor packaging at its breweries. A customer had found a half-full bottle with a ripped label that was glued on sideways. The bottle had passed four inspection workers! Management put the bottle on public display as a reminder of the need to change and to ensure that due diligence was performed at all stages of the production process. When the bottle was shown to people in the organization, it reinforced the need for change in a simple, compelling manner.
- 2 Determine which people should be part of the guiding coalition to advocate the need for change, how to instill a sense of confidence in the team that it can be successful, and how observers can come to trust the team. For example, in *The Leadership Moment: Nine True Stories of Triumph and Disaster and Their Lessons for Us All* (Three Rivers Press, 1998), Michael Useem explained that people, including leaders, encounter “moment-of-truth” events, and that one should take advantage of such opportunities. He described the challenges that Eugene Kranz faced (he was the flight director of the ill-fated Apollo 13 mission). Kranz was successful because he had two attributes of leadership, one personal, and the other organizational. He had strong persuasive skills, determination and confidence, and was not willing to concede failure. From an organizational point of view, he had the skills to meld and exploit a team of flight associates. His team of astronauts sustained optimism when an oxygen tank exploded, a true life-threatening situation. He had designed and trained his “team of teams” for moments of heroism, and when the moment arrived, each person stepped up.
- 3 Create a vision that is clear, creative and viable. Arthur Martinez painted a simple picture for Sears’ future—to be a compelling place to work, shop and invest. The people at Sears considered this to be a tangible and reasonable goal, so they could remember it and visualize what was needed to make it real. People also considered the goal meaningful because it spoke to their feelings and directed them to put out their best effort toward creating this vision of Sears.
- 4 Do not wait to communicate what is happening to individuals. Everything that is or is not being done is sending a message. To facilitate understanding and commitment, communication should, among other things, be simple and heartfelt, be aligned with people’s feelings, and speak to their anxieties. Do not under-communicate an important message. For example, Oracle, the world’s second-biggest software maker, recently underwent sweeping changes. However, its North American sales force was often notified of the changes via e-

mail.

- 5 Let individuals express how they feel. Although some employees will embrace the changes, others will be skeptical. Allow for the airing of both positive and honestly negative comments that can be dealt with immediately and constructively. If leaders don't allow negative comments to be aired in open forums, they will surface in private – and often, destructive — forums. Good leaders encourage employees to tell them what they should know, rather than what employees think they would like to hear. In *On Leadership*, Colin Powell noted that: “The day soldiers stop bringing you their problems is the day you have stopped leading them. They have either lost confidence that you can help them or concluded that you do not care. Either case is a failure of leadership.” (Random House, 2002).
- 6 Ensure that short-term wins are celebrated. Jack Welch considered celebrations a good way of energizing people. He was often looking for ways to celebrate even the smallest success or victory. His advice to managers: “Your job is to make sure your team is having fun—while they're being productive.” Celebrations build momentum for the change effort, create a sense of confidence that change can be successful, and can turn fence sitters into champions of change.
- 7 Continue implementing initiatives until the change effort is a success. Critical momentum will be lost if one lets up before the change is complete. Continue to *show* people the need for change and make them *feel* the need for change (see point 1), using new situations or incidents that happen. In his farewell address, President Ronald Reagan talked about “the shining city upon a hill” to describe the America he envisioned: a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, windswept, God-blessed and teeming with people of all kinds, living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity. While the city was more prosperous, more secure and happier than it was when the Reagan revolution started, he reminded Americans that even more progress could be made.
- 8 The changes must be living changes and

become “the way we do things around here.” Telling stories that illustrate desirable behaviours (and the consequences of those behaviours) is one way to make sure that the changes will become embedded in the new corporate culture. For example, members of the top-management team at WestJet Airlines engage in regular “fire-chats” with new recruits, explaining what the organization cares about and what actions or behaviours are considered critical.

Engaging both the head and the heart helps transform individuals and organizations. For too long, leaders of change have focused on logical, rational arguments to change individual behaviour. What has often been ignored in the business literature is that helping people to *see* or *feel* problems, solutions or progress will influence the emotions of the individual, which in turn facilitates commitment to behavioural change or reinforce changed behaviour. To enhance commitment to the change effort, an exclusive focus on the “cold” or cognitive approach (e.g., as personified by *Star Trek*'s Mr. Spock) is as misguided as focusing only on the emotions (e.g., the passionate messages of Dr. McCoy). If leaders are to facilitate organizational change, they must use reason *and* appeal to the emotions. ■