



Change

From the Editor

I went to a wedding last week of two friends I've known since my university days. There was the usual bouquet-tossing, cake-cutting, and late-night dancing. But the part I liked the most? That's easy. The speeches.

Well, one speech in particular. The best man, a Montreal poet of limited renown, took to the podium, cleared his throat, and began: "We all know that the least common sentence in the English language is, 'That's the banjo player's Porsche over there.'" He paused for effect and continued, "The second least common must be, 'The best man's speech was too short.'"

On the plane home, that speech got me thinking. What are the least common sentences organizations are likely to hear? I came up with two. The first? "Sure, we can't wait to make more changes happen around here." The second? "Of course everyone in the organization is connected to our business strategy."

Here at LIVE Consultants, we design learning opportunities that are connected to your organization's mission, vision, values, and strategies and, at the same time, reduce the frustration of the change process.

Marilyn Baetz, editor

About the Author and the Article

It used to be that change was good and those employees who wouldn't or couldn't get on-board were sources of frustration. They were stick-in-the muds, old fogies, do-nothing dinosaurs. They were out of date and out of touch.

In this article, Stephen Baetz argues that our perception of change needs to, well, change. He challenges the assumption that those who resist are acting inappropriately. After suggesting that "change resistance" is better positioned as "change reluctance," Stephen maintains that people often are change-reluctant for "logical and healthy reasons" and that it is to our advantage to understand the nature of that reluctance. He goes on to detail five of the most common reasons for change reluctance.

Stephen is a partner in LIVE Consultants Inc., the organization which sponsors this publication.



Stephen Baetz

Change Reluctance

Let's agree on one thing: we won't debate whether we are experiencing more change than ever before in human history.

Agreed?

Good. We both know that it is impossible to determine in any objective way whether that assertion is true or not. That the argument exists at all is testament to the fact that we feel that the current amount of change is overwhelming. To declare that we are facing more change than ever before may be nothing more than an attempt to put our anxieties about change into perspective: as if to say, "It is understandable that I feel swamped — we've never faced this much before."

As much as I don't want to talk about the amount of change, I don't want to argue about the velocity of it either.

Let's just say there is lots and it's coming at us fast, real fast.

With those old standby arguments about change set aside, I'd like to challenge a fundamental assumption about change; namely, those who resist change are behaving inappropriately. In fact, I'd like to make two related assertions:

- People resist change for logical and often healthy reasons.
- It is to our advantage to understand the nature of the resistance so we can improve the way we lead and manage the change.

Before exploring those positions any further, I'd like to start by moving away from the word, "resistance." And yes, I'm doing more than splitting hairs when I ask us to use the word "reluctance" rather than "resistance." It seems that with resistance, you must push harder to overcome it, to defeat it, to even eliminate it. With reluctance, there is less need to do that. With reluctance, we might become curious enough to figure out why it is happening and even go to the second step and determine a better course.

So why are people change-reluctant? Why do some of those involved with a change become sceptical, drag their feet, and balk at leaving behind old habits, behaviours, and perspectives? In what situations might we expect people to be change-reluctant?

Here are the five most frequent reasons I've seen that cause change reluctance. Of course the list is longer but I think you'll see how my argument supports my assertions.

Reason #1: Change Means Loss

Every change has real and imagined losses associated with it. Those affected by a change can lose status, relationships, predictability, power, competence, respect, independence, confidence, or credibility, to name but a few. Those who are facing a change do an audit of what is to be gained and what is to be lost and, at the early stages, the lost-column is always much longer than the gain-column. As a result, people become change-reluctant.

Is it logical or reasonable that people are reluctant to make a change if losses appear to outweigh gains? I think so. We are taught to be acquisitive: to acquire knowledge, to acquire skills, to acquire independence, to acquire credibility, to acquire knowledge, confidence, trusting relationships. When facing a change, much of what we have worked to acquire appears to be going down the drain so we are tempted to hold on to what we have gained. In fact, it would be very odd indeed if a person merely moved forward to the new place without even a moment's pause to determine what might still be useful in the new world or to evaluate whether the balance sheet of losses to gains might shift over time.

Reason #2: Lack Of Information

All too often, we take people to the mountain top, show them what is possible, get them excited about going on the journey, map out the costs, gain their agreement that it's still worth doing, spell out a detailed plan ... and then we blindfold them and ask them to take a step forward. In other words, we don't provide people with regular and relevant information about how the change is going or what else is happening in the environment.

Is it appropriate for people in that situation to dig in their heels and refuse to take another step? You bet it is. In fact, it would be

dangerous and foolish to support, encourage, or even follow those who went charging ahead. Those we should be trusting are those who demand that they see where they are going and get information about what is going on around them. They are less likely to bet the bank on a whim or thrill.

Reason #3: The Change Is Seen As Temporary

The perception of those involved in the change is that it is only a passing fad, the flavour of the month that is likely to be gone within weeks, if not days. They may have observed that management has lost interest in initiatives in the past and the conclusion they reach is the only one that makes sense: the same thing is going to happen this time. As a result, those involved develop a wait-and-see stance. They don't embrace the change. They appear to be change-reluctant.

Is it logical and healthy for people to adopt this posture? I'd say so. We're taught at the kitchen table not to be distracted by the latest fads and fashions with admonitions like, "I don't care what other families are doing; we can't afford to buy you new clothes for every fad that comes around." By the time we evolve into adults, we've bought into the wisdom of focusing on what is durable and not funding fleeting fancies. Those insights come with adults into the workplace and, in my estimation, ought to be valued instead of being discouraged.

Reason #4: The Change Is Seen As Inconsistent

Those involved see that the change that has been proposed appears to be running counter to the mission, vision, values, and strategies of the organization and is undermining the strategic direction.

Is it logical and healthy for people in this situation to be change-reluctant? No doubt. We spend tons of money in organizations communicating the critical elements of our strategic thinking and planning in the full

expectation that individuals, teams, departments, and divisions will get their plans and behaviour aligned, that their plans will be consistent with where the organization is headed. If people are reluctant when they don't see alignment, we ought to be happy that the message has gotten through: lack of alignment is costly.

Reason #5: There's No Clear Plan

People may feel that the change is worth making but can't see that there is any real plan in place that will help it to happen. There's no communication plan, no training plan, no measures and milestones, no sponsor, no change agent, no dedicated resources, and/or no appreciation that those leading the change have anticipated the blocks or barriers.

Is it logical and healthy for people to be change-reluctant if there isn't a clear plan? You betcha. People know that an articulated change without a plan is nothing more than a wish. Most people by the time they have completed two decades of living know that wishes without plans and sweat only come true in fairy tales.

Listen To It

It seems to me that change reluctance is both healthy and logical for all of the reasons I've noted. Instead of trying to eliminate it, we should be trying to understand it. Instead of telling people to get on-board, we should listen to what they know and understand.

We should be asking, "What do they know that we don't know?" or "What do they see that we don't see?" and the responses that we get back should guide our thinking and planning about how to make the change even better.

I trust you have caught the difference. If we label reluctance as resistance, our stance will be aggressive and we will be telling and selling. If we view reluctance as a logical and healthy response to change, our stance will be open and we will be listening — listening for how to make the change initiative better.

Winning The Future

Simply put, strategic planning is figuring out how to win the future. It allows you and your organization to

- ☒ identify what business you are in,
- ☒ determine what your organization wants to become,
- ☒ specify the moral benchmarks by which everyone in the organization will judge their behaviour, and
- ☒ decide how your vision of success will be achieved.

But those are only the broad brushstrokes of what a strategic plan means for an organization. The actual development process for a strategic plan is one that companies often overlook, make too complex, or approach without any degree of practicality.

For that reason, we offer a strategic planning process that asks teams to come to consensus on the answers to 20 fundamental questions. One of the end results is, of course, a strategic plan, but more importantly the developed strategic plan

- ☒ provides analysis of your internal and external environment,
- ☒ compels you and other employees to think strategically about the opportunities, challenges, and problems the organization faces,
- ☒ is straightforward and practical and, therefore, more easily understood and implemented, and
- ☒ makes it easy for members of the organization to contribute to a successful future.

Strategic planning doesn't have to be mysterious and strategic plans don't have to be confusing and obscure.

They help shape the organization's day-to-day operations. They guide every action and decision. They offer a compelling vision of where the organization wants to find success. They help win the future.

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