

NAVIGATING THROUGH



CHANGE

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NAVIGATING THROUGH CHANGE

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*For Elizabeth and Nathaniel
on the eve of their entry
to a white-water world*

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Preface

None other than management expert Peter Drucker has stated unequivocally that “every organization of today has to build into its very structure *the management of change*.”¹ Drucker is not alone. The current demand to meet the challenge of change is not a theme but an anthem. Calls to “thrive on chaos” and to “create your future” echo from every corner of the business and organizational world. Unfortunately, this heady rhetoric often bypasses the core needs of those on whom the success of the change ultimately depends—the people who have to *manage* it.

In a recent series of interviews, managers who were either in the midst of or had just come through an initial wave of major change were asked to comment on their experiences. They said:

They told me the change would be like the flicker of a lightbulb. They were wrong. It was a total blackout. My regular skills didn’t work for me anymore and I ended up feeling my way in the dark.

The one thing that I know I didn’t anticipate was the severity of the impact on the staff.

I tried to assure people, but something—maybe it was my own misgivings—seemed to keep creeping through. The more I talked, the less they believed me—or trusted me.

They told me to “get creative and come up with some new approaches.” But the real message was: Don’t screw it up! They wanted trial and error—without the error.

It’s still without a doubt the worst experience of my career as a manager.

These are candid comments from managers on the front lines; from the people who have to make the change work. Far from being exhilarated, their experience of change is one of pain. Managers in this position are often intellectually in tune with, but operationally remote from, the rhetoric of becoming “change agents” and “reinventing the future.” As one manager put it, “I don’t mind change. It’s *changing* that concerns me.”

Managers in today's changing environment too often are condemned to try to solve new problems with old tools or are supplied with new approaches and innovations which do not meet the demands of their day-to-day jobs. This dilemma applies particularly to the intensified *human* aspects of that job. Indeed, the human response—more specifically, the “people breakage” that accompanies change—tends to be neglected, whether the organization is in acceptance or denial. Whether attempting to go back to basics or pushing out the envelope, organizations in the throes of change tend to fixate on their systems and procedures. They create a situation, as one person put it, “like that of a top-notch hospital emergency room team, so intent on preparing and fine-tuning their equipment that they forget about the patient lying in a corner, slowly bleeding to death.”

Purpose

The purpose of *Navigating through Change* is to provide a means for understanding change and, more importantly, a set of key skills for managing: managing yourself, managing your operation, and managing your people—in an environment of continual change. Although personal and organizational change are very complex phenomena, there are models which can simplify, without oversimplifying. There are constructs which will enable people to orient themselves and create a context for action. The skills presented are not recipes, but rather templates that can be immediately adapted and used in your organization.

The skills and approaches presented here are what we have discovered are the core competencies for managing and surviving in a changing environment. More than just the basics or “first aid,” these skills and approaches are the cornerstones for creating a successful change culture. They function to meet the initial and then the ongoing needs of people and organizations in continual chaos. As such, these skills open doors. The strategies presented here meet the immediate need and create a receptive host for subsequent approaches to the same issues.

My tenure in the area of change spans 20 years of working with a wide variety of Fortune 500 organizations, as well as a number of smaller organizations, in the financial, high-tech, automotive,

manufacturing, telecommunications, retail, and transportation industries. Also reflected in this book are my experiences with government, health care, colleges, and universities, and a number of international organizations.

In all, *Navigating through Change* takes its primary cue from the word *navigating*. As one change expert observes, "The whole idea that a map can be drawn in advance of an innovative journey through turbulent times is a fantasy."² He's right. The map cannot be prepared in advance; nor, indeed, can the final destination be plotted with any degree of certainty. But the tools and provisions for the journey are a different matter—particularly if we can base our selection of these tools on the experiences of people who have made similar trips. I hope the skills and strategies recommended in this book will be useful to you in your experience of change.

Contents

Chapter One, on "taking chaos seriously," defines the context of the current situation by identifying the key forces shaping change in organizations. This chapter also clarifies the nature of the current change environment—how it differs from "normal" change and what kinds of new tools we need to address it. In this chapter we will draw on some of the discoveries in the emerging field of chaos theory to help us understand the nature of continually changing, that is "chaotic," environments. And we will suggest some principles for operating in such an environment.

Chapter Two, on "skills for a new context," begins by looking at the experiences of people caught up in change and, more specifically, the job of the manager in a change process. This chapter outlines a general change strategy for managers and leaders and concludes by identifying and explaining the four key skills for successful change management. These skills will provide the basis for a practical approach to establishing a change culture in an organization.

Chapter Three, on "developing openness," examines the differences between "real goals" and "stated goals," that is, the difference between what I *say* I want and what I *really* want. Making this distinction is the beginning of the first task in the change

process: managing yourself and developing personal “openness.” Too many managers enter into the change process as a “house divided,” saying one thing and feeling another. This chapter will allow you to look at your own stated and real goals and decide if they are opposed to each other or in sync with each other. Only when you come to terms with your own reactions and intentions can you act coherently and foster a sense of trust in others.

Chapter Four, on “communicating change,” examines how the current practices or “norms” for communication in many organizations do not fully meet the operational or human needs of people in change. A constantly changing environment requires that you communicate more often and less formally—often with information that may seem sketchy or liable to be quickly outdated. As a result, many managers avoid or procrastinate telling people what is going on for fear that they will appear unprepared or not in control. How you handle information and, more importantly, how you handle yourself when you communicate is a key factor in your credibility and effectiveness. This chapter then offers some specific methods and techniques to set up an ongoing and effective communication system designed for organizations in change.

Chapter Five, on “supporting people in transition,” examines the basic reactions of people when they are faced with changes. It examines both the negative and positive aspects of these reactions. Managing change is, to a large degree, managing people through a difficult transition. It requires skill and sensitivity. Indeed, the job of a manager in this process is not so much that of a problem solver as it is that of a “movement starter”—someone responsible for helping people begin to move through the change process. The chapter offers insights and strategies for supporting people, a skill which one researcher has established as the single, most effective skill needed by managers of change.

Chapter Six, on “creating a learning organization,” addresses the issues of “learning how to learn” in a chaotic environment. We begin with an examination of the roles of intuition, of personal knowledge, and even of humor, and how they help us discern key issues and generate ideas. Later, we will suggest specific

techniques for generating and implementing ideas—techniques that establish learning as a tool for change.

Chapter Seven, “navigating through change,” offers insights and skills in two specific change-implementation areas:

1. Working backward, moving forward—a method for setting and revising goals in an environment that is continually changing. Setting a direction in a chaotic, fluid environment relies less on up-front planning than on mid-course observation and correction. This section provides examples and skills for change navigation.
2. Positive contention—given the need to constantly generate new ideas, a change environment must be willing to accept not only discussion but even argument and disagreement. Indeed, one of the key strategies in successful change management is to set up self-organizing networks that actually encourage open conflict and dialogue around problems and ideas. This section describes skills for contending positively to make decisions and implement ideas.

Taken as a whole, *Navigating through Change* provides practical means for grounding yourself in the change process and developing a core set of skills for establishing and sustaining a change culture.

Harry Woodward
Mary Beckman Woodward

Contents

<i>Prologue</i>	1
 <i>Chapter One</i> CHARTING THE FLOW: TAKING CHAOS SERIOUSLY	 5
Pictures that Convince, 7	
Toward a New Context, 9	
The Growth Curve, 11	
Chaos, 23	
Taking Chaos Seriously, 26	
Conclusion, 32	
 <i>Chapter Two</i> EQUIPMENT CHECK: SKILLS FOR A NEW CONTEXT	 37
A Comparison of Attitudes, 39	
Organizational “Bleed Through,” 45	
Four Key Skills, 48	
Conclusion, 51	
 <i>Chapter Three</i> FLIPPING YOUR KAYAK: DEVELOPING OPENNESS	 53
Flipping Your Kayak, 54	
Stated Goals and Real Goals, 55	
Self-Inventory, 57	
Case Studies in Change, 60	
Five Fatal Fears, 64	
Self-Inventory Revisited, 72	
Strategies for Self-Management, 72	
Conclusion, 76	

<i>Chapter Four</i>	
BEYOND MARK TWAIN: COMMUNICATING CHANGE	79
Three Meetings, 81	
The “N” Diagram, 83	
Openness Reopened, 87	
Communication Strategies, 92	
The Reframe Meeting, 95	
<i>Chapter Five</i>	
THROWING LIFE RINGS: SUPPORTING PEOPLE IN TRANSITION	103
Need for Support, 104	
The Human Response to Major Change, 110	
Four Reactions, 113	
Intervention Strategies (Coping Techniques), 118	
Applications, 122	
Creating Norms, 132	
Conclusion, 137	
<i>Chapter Six</i>	
NEW STROKES: CREATING A LEARNING ORGANIZATION	139
The Learning Organization, 140	
Correcting the Course (True Experimentation), 142	
Outside-In and Inside-Out, 150	
Humor Is a Funny Thing—The Power of Closure, 152	
Data Dump, Downtime, Draw Out, 162	
Conclusion, 166	
<i>Chapter Seven</i>	
NAVIGATING THROUGH CHANGE	169
Goals versus Outcomes: Strategy Redefined, 170	
Verbs to Nouns, 171	
Working Backward, Moving Forward, 174	

A Note on Intuition, 178	
A Comment on Confidence, 179	
Positive Contention, 181	
Conclusion—Good News and Bad News, 186	
<i>Conclusion</i>	
DREAMS OF WAKEFULNESS	189
<i>Notes</i>	193
<i>Bibliography</i>	196
<i>Index</i>	199

Prologue

Racing Shells and Rubber Rafts

The crew arrives early in the morning. The captain unlocks the padlock on the rough wood door. The door swings open allowing the morning light to fall on the hull of the racing shell. The crew members, some of them still yawning, walk the boat down to the dock at the river's edge, flip it upright and set it gently in the water. Within minutes the racing shell cuts through the glassy surface of the water in gentle, silent surges. On the shore, a passerby hears a faint dip, dip, dip as the boat glides through the morning mist coming off the water.

A racing shell on the water is a classic image of beauty: the bur-nished wood hull, long and sleek; the brass fittings; the precise movements of the crew in their school-color jerseys; the rhythmic cadence of the coxswain. The racing shell's crew is also a classic image of cooperation. Along with football teams and symphony orchestras, racing crews are one of the most often depicted and overused example of people working in harmony toward a common goal. Theirs is an ideal world in which every individual knows his or her job and relies on the benevolent direction of the leader and the cooperation of all the parts to achieve efficiency, harmony, and success.

But what happens if we put this boat—and its crew—into the Colorado River?

The images of beauty and efficiency quickly dissolve. The craft is tragically ill-suited to the foaming mountains of white water. The notion of a coxswain calling cadences or crew members trying to pull in unison becomes farcical. The craft takes on water. Its pointed bow lunges out of the water and shatters on a rock. Putting the shell and its crew in the river was a mistake, the same mistake that characterizes many people and organizations today: assuming that stable systems can function successfully in an unstable environment.

What kind of boat is better suited to white water? Obviously, a rubber raft. Not as sleek, not as efficient, and certainly not as orderly as the racing shell, the rubber raft is nevertheless the ideal craft for the river. It is flexible and resilient. It can arch and bend to the constantly changing contours of the river. It can sustain bumps and can pivot and find its direction again. It can take on water and remain afloat. Its crew members are trained in a variety of skills from paddling . . . to pushing off . . . to steering.

They vary their skills on a moment-by-moment basis. Their leader is not above bailing, nor is any crew member barred from navigating. In all, the yellow rubber raft—although not as pretty or romantic as the pristine racing shell—is a much healthier image for the organizational and interpersonal needs of people in change.

However, to what extent do people in organizations truly accept the fact that the change they are experiencing requires something unique from them? To what extent are terms such as “permanent white-water” and “rubber rafts” more than just rhetoric and jargon? Finally, to what extent is change really changing, and if it is, what can we do about it?

