

The Hidden Dimensions Of Organizational Change



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As organizations grapple with rapid technological change, increased global competition, and major shifts in the marketplace, leaders, managers, and change agents are being challenged to develop organizational responses.

They also must deal with the hidden dynamics and covert processes that emerge during organizational change initiatives. Change efforts may be thwarted by the unspoken fears, untested assumptions, and under-the-table dealings of organizational members. Changes may also be facilitated by unleashing hidden or repressed creativity, removing unspoken blocks and barriers, and giving voice to “unspeakable” visions of potential and greatness.



Visible and Hidden Dimensions of Organizational Change

The six dimensions of organizational change that are almost always involved in any significant organizational change effort are summarized in Table 1. Usually the first dimension, reasons, gets the most emphasis and overt, visible attention. The other five dimensions in varying degrees are relatively neglected, overlooked, or become covert in change efforts despite their influence and impact on achieving desired results.



Table 1: Visible and Hidden Dimensions of Organizational Change

Reasons:	Rational and Analytic Logic(s)
Politics:	Individual and Group Interests
Inspirations:	Values-Based and Visionary Aspirations
Emotions:	Affective and Reactive Feelings
Mindsets:	Guiding Beliefs and Assumptions
Psychodynamics:	Anxiety-Based and Unconscious Defenses



Source: Marshak (2006)

Reasons: Rational and Analytic Logic(s)

When all is said and done, most organizational change efforts begin and end with “making the case for change.” The case for change is invariably a well documented, logical analysis of the compelling reasons why the organization and the people in it must do something slightly or dramatically different:

Due to increased worldwide competition, we must a) change our strategy, b) reorganize, c) create a new reward system, d) transform our corporate culture, e) downsize, right size, contract out, off-shore, etc., or, f) all of the above. If we do these things then we will once again be a global leader.



The unspoken part of this message, of course, is that, “We expect everyone to be logical and rational and accept the compelling reasons for what has to be done and therefore not only understand and go along with the changes, but even embrace them.”

Politics: Individual and Group Interests

The possibility that individuals and sub-groups might have their own needs and interests that will be expressed or acted upon is guarded against by admonitions that people should act in the best interests of the organization not themselves. To act based on one's own interests is to be “political,” and being political is considered inappropriate behavior in most organizations. Instead

one is supposed to operate only from objective logic and reason based on the best interests of the overall collective. In actuality, however, people and groups do have their own needs and interests that they do in fact take into consideration in how they assess and react to organizational change. It would be unwise or unrealistic to assume otherwise.

Inspirations: Values-Based and Visionary Aspirations

Most change efforts include some kind of vision statement intended to capture the essence of the desired future state or change goal. “We will be the best (biggest, smartest, fastest) company in the world.” These statements often are a shorthand version of the conclusion of the case for change analysis: “And, therefore because of globalization, we need to become the best company in the world.” The difference between these kinds of vision statements and employing values-based and visionary aspirations in a change effort is the difference between head and heart. Many vision statements are a projection of the rational analysis and logic used to develop the case for change. They are intended to help people think about the end state of the change effort and to become convinced to work towards it.

Invoking values-based and visionary aspirations on the other hand is intentionally inspirational. It seeks to strike a chord in people compelling them to work towards the desired change, sometimes despite rational logic, because strongly held values or aspirations have been evoked. Inspiration speaks to the parts of people that want to do good things, want to be part of something bigger than themselves, and want to see their values, hopes and dreams fulfilled.

Emotions: Affective and Reactive Feelings

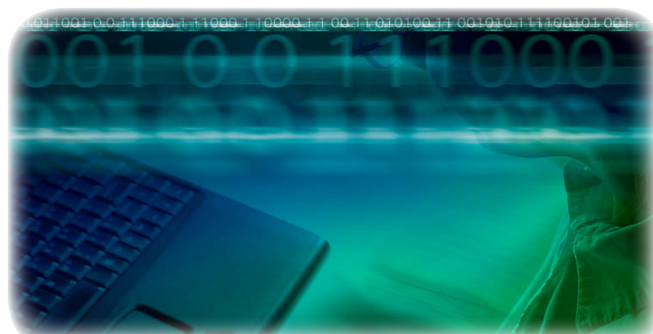
Similar to but different from inspiration is the role of emotions in organizational change, or perhaps better stated as the non-role of emotions in change efforts and organizational life in general. Historically, emotions are generally viewed as the enemy of logic and reason and must be overcome or suppressed. This extends into the organizational world where decision-making by logic and analysis, not emotion, is extolled as a virtue.

Although emotions and feelings are an integral part of human and organizational life they are still generally considered to be anathema in the workplace. Consequently, whatever feelings and emotions exist related to a change effort, and there are always plenty, they are supposed to be suppressed or ignored in favor of a reasoned, rational discussion. Unfortunately, avoiding dealing with anyone who is too mad, glad, sad, excited or afraid insures that emotions - an integral part of change in human systems - will have mostly covert impacts on change initiatives.



Mindsets: Guiding Beliefs and Assumptions

The term mindsets is used to embrace a broad array of concepts that explain how our experience is impacted by underlying beliefs, assumptions, and cognitive structures. These include: mental models, paradigms, worldviews, and organizational and societal cultures. All serve to guide how we think and can also prevent people from imagining possibilities if left unexamined or untested. Because people generally don't think about the underlying assumptions and frameworks that guide how they reason and interpret the world, mindsets have a profound but covert impact on the ways in which people react to change possibilities. The shift from the capacity driven, certainty oriented, mass production, industrial age paradigm to the more customer-oriented, flexible, and customized paradigm of the current information age requires both a revolution in information technologies as well as a revolution in mindsets.



Psychodynamics: Anxiety Based and Unconscious Defenses

No dimension is more covert or less addressed than the psychodynamic aspects of organizational change. Generally speaking, various unconscious reactions to and defenses against anxiety are considered to be the primary cause of psychodynamic phenomena at work. Because the processes associated with organizational change are likely to be anxiety producing, being alert to the possibility of unconscious reactions is yet another hidden or covert dimension to consider during change efforts.

Consequently, from a psychodynamic point of view you should not be surprised if during an initial meeting to discuss a change initiative an individual or even a whole group exhibits various unconscious defense mechanisms. Maybe the group, instead of rationally working on how to implement the change, will engage in unconscious "dependency" or "fight or flight" behavior. This does not mean that we should become organizational therapists, but we do need to understand the potential ways unconscious dynamics may manifest themselves during change efforts.

A Checklist Reminder

A simple change planning checklist that reminds everyone that a change initiative is not likely to be successful without considering all six of the dimensions may be helpful. Table 2 provides an illustrative example.

Table 2: Six Dimensions of Organizational Change Checklist

1. Reasons: Rational and Analytic Logic(s)

- ✓ Are we clear about our intended outcomes and criteria?
- ✓ Have we fully analyzed the forces and reasons for change related to our intended outcome and criteria?
- ✓ Have we fully considered all the options and selected the one most likely to succeed?
- ✓ Have we made a strong and persuasive case for change?
- ✓ Do we have a clear implementation plan and processes?

2. Politics: Individual and Group Interests

- ✓ Who are all the key stakeholders who may have interests related to this change and based on those needs and interests how might they perceive this change?
- ✓ What sources of power or influence do they have to impact the change?
- ✓ How will we need to deal with each critical stakeholder to insure support for the change?
- ✓ Will we need to modify our proposal to gain enough support by those who could block or veto our plan?
- ✓ How will we continue to monitor the shifting needs and interests and political processes as the change unfolds?

3. Inspirations: Values-Based and Visionary Aspirations

- ✓ What are the key values and aspirations of organizational members?
- ✓ How might those values and aspirations be impacted or energized by the proposed change?
- ✓ How can we present or modify our proposed change in a way that will inspire and enlist people?
- ✓ Do we have leaders and managers with the skills and abilities to inspire people about the change, especially if we will be having a lot of changes?
- ✓ How do we develop leaders and managers with basic inspirational skills and abilities?

4. Emotions: Affective and Reactive Feelings

- ✓ Which people may become mad, glad, sad or afraid due to the proposed change?
- ✓ Do we understand and accept that emotional reactions are a necessary and normal reaction to change and loss?
- ✓ How will we create settings, meetings, interventions, that may allow emotions to be expressed and acknowledged in constructive and appropriate ways?
- ✓ Do we have leaders and managers with the emotional intelligence and skills to be able deal with people who may be emotional in their reactions or questions about change?
- ✓ How do we develop leaders and managers with basic emotional intelligence skills and abilities?

5. Mindsets: Guiding Beliefs and Assumptions

- ✓ What are the key assumptions and beliefs held by people in this organization that are limiting the possibilities for change?
- ✓ What are the alternative assumptions and beliefs underlying our change proposal?
- ✓ How will we change people's mindsets to allow them to see the new possibilities? Will we educate them, confront them, raise their consciousness, or...?
- ✓ Do we have leaders and managers who are aware of their own mindsets and can practice double-loop learning as needed during the change effort?
- ✓ How do we develop leaders and managers with the ability to challenge their own thinking and strongly held assumptions and beliefs?

6. Psychodynamics: Anxiety-Based and Unconscious Defenses

- ✓ Do we understand and accept that there may be unconscious reactions by individuals and groups to our change proposal?
- ✓ Do we understand who might have the greatest anxieties about our change proposal, or be threatened the most?
- ✓ Do we understand some of the basic manifestations of unconscious reactions to anxiety, enough to recognize when trying to use logic and reason alone may not work?
- ✓ Do we have leaders and managers with enough emotional or psychological intelligence and skills to be able to at least recognize and minimally deal with basic unconscious defenses that they may encounter?
- ✓ How do we develop leaders and managers with enough basic emotional or psychological intelligence skills and abilities?

The purpose of a mental checklist like the one illustrated here is not to provide the answers for how to address hidden or covert dynamics. Rather it is a way to try to overcome the bias in most organizational change efforts towards expecting or subtly "demanding" only rational, logical thinking and responses. It helps to remind ourselves that non-rational dimensions will be involved, whether we like it or not. It also alerts us to be more aware and anticipatory of the range of covert processes that may manifest themselves as we plan and manage organizational change.

Further reading

Marshak, R. J. (2006) *Covert Processes at Work: Managing the Five Hidden Dimensions of Organizational Change*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

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