Convincing Organizations, Executives, and People to Change

What is the best way to convince organizations, executives, and people to change? This is one of the most commonly asked questions in the fields of organizational transformation, change management, and process improvement. Quality improvement, technological change, and management consulting in-general are also included in this list of fields.

In the high-technology field, the question may be slightly rephrased as, "*What is the best way to convince organizations, executives, and people to adopt a new technology management, design process, or product paradigm*?" The change could consist of a adopting an innovatively new technology (i.e., smart phone, hand-held operating system, or major new software-upgrade).

The change can also consist of adopting a new management paradigm such as Total Quality Management, Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, or Balanced Scorecard. These may also include ISO 9001, Capability Maturity Model, Six Sigma, Project Management Body of Knowledge, Enterprise Architecture, Information Technology Infrastructure Library, etc.

Major software paradigms in the 1970s included structured programming, walkthroughs, and formal methods. The 1980s were dominated by object-oriented design, software reuse, and automation. The 1990s included rapid prototyping, domain engineering, and enterprise resource planning. Open source software, agile methods, and lean thinking are early 21st century models.

Many theories for change emerged over the last century. Two of the most often-cited models are Lewin's unfreeze/freeze model and Kotter's urgency model. However, hundreds of models exist today. A popular taxonomy includes seven categories: evolutionary, teleological (planned), life cycle (stages), dialectical (dichotomous), social cognition (learning), cultural, and mixed.

Another way to view organizational change is through the lens of critical success factors. These are often viewed as environmental, regulatory, organizational, or individual preconditions, states, stipulations, events, or circumstances that must be present in order for change to succeed. An example of this might be passing a test to receive credit or having a ticket before entry.

The basic notion is that critical success factors must exist for change to succeed. Vice versa, the absence of a critical success factor may cause change to fail. If a critical success factor doesn't exist, then the first goal is to create or obtain that state or condition before proceeding. While this list isn't comprehensive, some popular critical success factors for organizational change include:

- Punctuated equilibrium. One of the most basic tools for change is the notion of punctuated equilibrium. This is also known using "crisis as a catalyst for change." Even the most stubborn organization will adopt a change in the event of a major crisis. This may be the loss of a life, business, job, or a customer. However, the threat or crisis has to be real and not contrived.
- Business case or justification. One of the most traditional tools for changing organizations is a business case or justification. This ranges from simple briefs or papers with point-by-point arguments in favor of a change. This may also include elaborate return on investment analysis. The typical audience for such an exhibit is organizational executives and managers.
- Executive-level coaching. One of the most powerful tools for change is executive coaching. Most people are right-brained and respond to advice from closely-trusted advisors. Once a business case or justification has been made, the next step is to convince executives to change in the form of highly-personalized communications. Over 75 books exist on this topic.
- Executive or management commitment. One of the oldest critical success factors for change is executive or top-management commitment. Organizations began using computers in the 1950s to perform business functions. These projects required executive authorization for the expenditure of resources. The success of change is often attributed to their commitment.
- Adequate resources. Out of executive or management commitment comes the notion of adequate resources. According to this approach, once the executive or manager is committed, he or she will allocate sufficient resources

to institute the new change. This often comes in the form of money, time, people, facilities, and tools (along with strong, reinforcing messages).

- Top-down organizational change. From commitment and resources, we get the notion of top-down organizational change. Often called the rational or planned model of change, any myriad of Plan-Do-Check-Act variations can be utilized. This includes Define-Measure-Analyze-Improve-Control (DMAIC) or Define-Measure-Analyze-Design-Verify (DMADV).
- Middle-management and employee involvement. Theories of executive and management commitment led to the notion of middle-management and employee involvement. It's more difficult to get all personnel onboard than a small number of top-level managers. Therefore, involving middle-managers and low-level employees in change initiatives gains their support.
- Training and workforce education. When doing top-down organizational change, it's imperative to provide training and workforce education. It's not enough to tell employees that they must adopt a change. Often times, employees must be shown how to change. This is done through a variety of formal and informal training, technical, and college-level courses.
- Evolutionary change. The failure of large-scale organizational change initiatives brought about the notion of evolutionary change. The individuals who make up an organization cannot psychologically cope with large-scale or even frequent changes. Therefore, our knowledge now includes the notion of introducing changes in smaller iterations, increments, and batches.
- Champion, project manager, or technical lead. A variation of executive and management commitment is the notion of a champion, project manager, or technical lead. This is a person who is responsible for change. Traditionally, this person must have formal authority and resources. Even lower-level champions, project managers, and technical leads can be effective.
- Coaching and mentoring. As a corollary to champions, project managers, or technical leads, coaching and mentoring may have a large impact on change. These may be formal or informal coaches and mentors who observe workplace teams. Based on these observations, coaches and mentors offer advice for improving performance up to 10 or 20 times above normal levels.
- Just-do-it. The antithesis of top-down organizational change is the notion of just-do-it. Ultimately, it is individuals who are responsible for implementing changes. It doesn't take a formal initiative to introduce a new change. Some of the most successful changes are made at the individual level by people who felt empowered to do so (or were willing to take a risk).

Here are some examples of these critical success factors in action. IBM-Houston became one of the first SW-CMM Level 5 organizations after the Challenger disaster in 1986 (punctuated equilibrium). Intel radically restructured to focus on microprocessors after failing to produce cost-effective semi-conductors in the 1970s (business case or justification). The U.S. DoD spent billions of dollars on enterprise architecture initiatives based on face-validity (executive-level coaching). General Electric led the application of Six Sigma based on personal support from Jack Welch (executive or management-level commitment). Lockheed-Martin has numerous CMMI Level 5 business units (adequate resources). Primavera instituted the use of agile methods (top-down organizational change). Southwest Airlines is one of the most profitable airlines (middle-management and employee involvement). The PMBoK is the most commonly accepted model for project management in the U.S. government (training and workforce education). Google adopted use of agile methods on their largest projects (evolutionary change). Bold, visionary individuals single-handedly created the transistor, mid-range computer, and super-computer (champion, project manager, or technical lead). Lockheed cultivated a culture of entrepreneurialism that created the F-104, U-2, SR-71, and F-117A. (coaching and mentoring). IBM engineers rapidly prototyped the AS/400 and turned it into a $14 billion product line (just do it).

A common theme that underlies all of these critical success factors is the notion of communication. Change often begins by communicating a business case to executives and managers. Then, executives and top-level managers must explain the necessity for change to middle managers. Middle managers and front-line managers must explain changes to the workforce. Employee teams must communicate with one another to build trust, cohesion, and new knowledge. Communication or lack thereof, is a frequently-cited tenet of change. This is often a one-sided view point. Executives and managers are often saddled with the responsibility for communicating the impetus for change. Communication is a two-way street, however. Front-line employees may ascertain the need for change before their leaders do. It's everyone's job to communicate up and down the food-chain in order to be successful in today's environment. The question becomes, "*Does your organization support a culture of open communication among all of its employees*?"