
Position Paper

Turning on a dime:

How to execute changes and
instantly impact behavior and the
bottom line

An essay on achieving rapid change

by André John Haddad

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Today more than ever organizations are accountable to their shareholders and employees for their performance. Their collective futures depend largely on the organization's capacity to quickly adjust to shifting markets and world events. We require nimble and agile organizations with a real capacity for change. In that context we can ask ourselves if we can apply the speed or velocity of change to people's capacity to transform their behaviors and habits? Can people change quickly?

Yes, but we need to review some of our basic beliefs about training, the development of people and leadership.

For as long as I can remember I have been instructed first as a student and later as a psychologist that people development is a lengthy and evolutionary process. It seemed obvious to me to believe that when changes are required, people need time to buy-in. Employees (and managers) also need time to assess how they could succeed and considerable more time to figure out how to behave differently.

I learned to accept that deep changes required comprehensive transformation management programs. This would involve a series of unavoidable hurdles such as the identification of end-states, communications' content, process reviews, all

manner of training approaches, positive reinforcement strategies, management training... to name just a few.

While preparing these support systems, the world continues to change, as it should, and unfortunately lays waste to carefully laid plans and strategies. From a practitioner's point of view, the execution of important changes was becoming increasingly difficult, as most of us were gradually falling behind our project plans. Colleagues would rightly explain the gap between the need to change and its execution to the number of transformations facing organizations, their complex nature, the costs of technology, the logistics of training personnel and finally the silent skepticism of managers and employees alike about the usefulness of yet another change and its related training program.

With no credible alternatives managers plod on, making the best of support mechanisms we know keenly and often use. Even though transformation programs generally fail to generate conviction, enthusiasm or engagement, managers persist in using them. This failure is mainly due to our staunch belief that employees will do the right thing... eventually, and because they are adults they must be treated as such. Consequently as managers we don't need to spell out each and every specific of what must be done.

For many years I expected that training could be effective in achieving positive attitudes among employees toward changes to be made in the

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workplace. Through seminars and courses, I was under the impression that employees would want to make changes, and that therefore, new directions and improved performance would result. However, experience has proved otherwise.

Again and again, attempts to drive organizational change through training bog down. The reality is that people are extremely adaptable, and that they figure out what they should do to be rewarded, and what they should not do in order to avoid penalties. However in the absence of clear directions and consequences, employees just keep their heads down and get along, staying under the radar to save their jobs and keep things comfortable.

The term "satisficing" is appropriate in this case: Herbert Simon, winner of the 1978 Nobel Prize for economics, invented it. It refers to behavior which attempts to achieve a minimum level of success, but does not strive to attain the maximum result. Simon found satisficing to be particularly important in describing administrative behavior in organizations.

The alternative: critical incident strategy

Based on quick turnaround experimentation over the last few years, some of us have succeeded in completing changes quickly by providing employees what they needed to perform. Two components are required: clear, specific descriptions of behaviors and attitudes, and a covenant of consequences that would follow upon chosen behaviors. Unfortunately too many managers have over time rejected or forgotten their responsibility to direct and demand from their employees what's required! Pretending that training programs would do a good job, managers have been relinquishing to others (trainers, instructors, consultants) their role of explaining what the job is all about. To make things worse, training material would often refrain from getting to the point and focus on "delicate" problems and issues that left unchecked obstructions to good performance. Written material to employees would get "cleaned up" in an attempt to sanitize communications. Also trainers would often be chosen on a basis of availability and ability to follow the training script. The trend to impart training to outside specialized firms confirms the notion that training isn't an appropriate change "conduit".

The alternative to traditional training strategies is remarkably in the hands of managers and supervisors: we concentrate our focus on clear and specific transactions; we also limit our requirements to critical behaviors and finally we demand compliance from employees and management alike. This simple approach is only possible because people have an infinite potential to adapt and change if, as we mentioned above, they know what is expected and they have a better than average chance to succeed.

We have been experimenting with critical incidents or "Moments of Truth" for the last 10 years and have come to understand that 2 salient factors are always in play when a quick turnaround or change is required in an organization. The first factor responsible for "instant" change is about clearly knowing **what** you want done differently and how. The second part of "instant" change is about **demanding** the new behaviors from people and settling for nothing else.

Why a critical incident strategy?

I have concentrated my efforts on "Critical Incidents" because not all business situations are important to an organization's success. Those incidents that impact our future are labeled "critical" because they directly impact business results and have lasting consequences. My initial challenge was to identify them from all the non-value or neutral events that fill our working days and take up most of our time.

I learned that these events happened often enough to create performance patterns that in turn generate business results. I observed these patterns in service, manufacturing and government environments. My clients and I also found that critical incidents were often about people's conduct and that their mastery of an incident was mainly dependent on knowing what to do exactly and how to do "it". Nearly all critical incidents were made up of transactions between people that generated results of some kind, most being simple in nature rather than complex. Nevertheless they required commitment and attention to details.

Today we know that when a critical incident is not handled skillfully, for any reason, a crisis usually ensues either within the organization, with customers or with shareholders. A crisis would include a

missed scheduled deliverable, a broken promise of some kind, an interpersonal conflict or a financial shortfall. Experience also shows that the aftermath of a badly handled situation usually lasts longer than one which is properly handled. Although people face such incidents on a regular basis, they are usually unaware of their existence, their true nature or the lasting repercussions of not handling them appropriately.

On yet another level, providing clear directives when implementing major changes will generate the least amount of stress or anxiety. Between "This is what I expect from you" and "Do the best you can", a routine of clearly identifying what you want will create for employees a psychological edge, especially when included is a list of precise behaviors required and a script on how to apply them (attitudes). This last component is lacking in most changes launched by management.

As we said the alternative to traditional change management strategies should provide employees and management with clear directives and explicit duties to render. In light of this alternative, what we know as "resistance to change" should be understood as an employee response to management's failure to clearly specify what they expect and demand from all involved.

The modern manager

Although modern management theorists have been rightfully instructing managers over the last 40 years on the values of engagement and participation, an unfortunate misunderstanding has occurred. Over time our comprehension of motivational concepts has unexpectedly produced a "limpish" management style whereas managers are reticent to demand, to insist or to direct.

Adding fuel to the fire are those muted sounds of frustration, discontent and even exasperation caused by changes assaulting us every single day with very little direction in way of support.

With the advent of a global competition, changes are generated at an even greater pace than ever before imagined. As a consequence of this upheaval, assaulted managers struggle to keep up and often confine themselves to paperwork and bureaucratic duties.

We can safely argue that this management seclusion perverts one's leadership and can be understood as an organizational *anorexia* where managers function as fulltime bureaucrats. It becomes unclear to me how we can ever change an organization's direction and be ahead or at least in alignment with the market, all the while trying to ignite changes without taking the risk of being clearly heard! The changes required in organizations today are too numerous and critical and as a result, to accept the present pace of change management is to accept failure.

Velocity

Despite our best efforts to predict the future and try to maintain some kind of operational stability, we have come to realize that significant changes are and will be required on a regular basis. Many of us secretly know that if we are to succeed, we need to be faster, more agile and quick studies. Speed is about maintaining, gaining and overtaking the competition. Once ahead managers maintain their advantage and anticipate changes that would affect their business in the future.

The saying "Turning on a dime" provides us with a visual example of the speed of change we are alluding to, and the techniques described in this article make such agility a practical possibility.

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