

A Commentary on “Leading Change with the 5-P Model: ‘Complexing’ the Swan and Dolphin Hotels at Walt Disney World”

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The management of the Swan and Dolphin Hotels found value in using the 5-P Model for implementing planned change. While such clearly defined methods can achieve desired outcomes, this commentary suggests that a symbolic lens is also useful in capturing and addressing important features of the change process. The success of a symbolic perspective depends in large measure on the leader's ability to listen and to

understand how organizational members make sense of the changes taking place. Each stage in the 5-P process is discussed in light of insights gained from a leader who listens and recognizes.

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The 5-P model discussed in the accompanying article is useful in providing a structure that focuses attention on the components of planned organizational change and the process leaders might use to facilitate and direct this transition process. As the authors state, the five "P"s offer a comprehensive framework that begins with a well-defined purpose and concludes with proof—"clear evidence that the desired change has been achieved." While contributing to the extensive tool kit leaders require as they engage in the change process, prescriptive and often linear approaches suggest that change can be implemented successfully simply by following a set of guidelines and considering a number of well-defined variables.

While academics and practitioners have long exchanged views on the methods and magic of leading change initiatives, the formula for successfully transforming organizations has eluded even the most experienced leaders. Numerous models have been discussed and debated, yet most conclude that too few leaders have been able to transform their organizations in the ways they intend. While compelling visions are relatively easy to articulate, the implementation of change strategies is multifaceted and complex. Why is it that seemingly straightforward goals are so difficult to accomplish? Perhaps the major challenges arise in large measure from the uncertainties and intangibles of organizational life that make efforts to control the change process particularly problematic. We are reminded of the executive who asked, "Which way did they go? How many of them were there? I need to find them—I'm their leader!"

Given the complexities of "complexing," this commentary offers an alternative lens to view and understand the change process, suggesting that essential insights can be gained by peeling back the outer layer of activity to uncover a more elusive

level of organizational life. This focus draws attention to the messier and less visible side of change, the ongoing and underlying sense-making processes that are difficult to identify and often nearly impossible to manage.

I suggest that while leaders direct the organization and articulate a clear and compelling vision, they must also be active listeners who recognize that change is not something that is "done" to organizational members but something that emerges as members go about constructing new meanings and realigning their perceptions of new organizational realities. Leaders functioning as change agents in the manner suggested by the 5-P model determine the nature and sequence of initiatives; leaders as listeners immerse themselves in the daily lives of their employees to cocreate the meanings that ultimately facilitate a successful change process.

Following is a discussion of how change might be viewed when the emphasis is placed on the leader as listener, that is, as a participant in the symbolic activity that underlies and influences change efforts. While the 5-P model provides a system for moving through the change process and for recognizing its many components, leaders must also address the underlying symbolic interaction by which organizational members attempt to make sense of their experiences with turbulent and often unpredictable events. Employees differ in their attitudes, agendas, values, and other key characteristics that result in their own particular interpretations of these experiences. These interpretations, and the meanings that are then assigned, form the basis for employees' subsequent behavior.

It becomes clear, given the variables of organizational role, culture, and other individual differences, that the pursuit of a shared organizational vision requires constant alignment and realignment as employees strive to "make sense" of the change. It is through

active listening that leaders come to understand what various events, decisions, policies and other factors mean to employees in the context of their daily experiences. Over time, members develop a collective understanding of the change; hence, an organizational culture is developed. Yet the organization's "story" is constantly evolving and leaders must not only tell the tale but must also listen to how it is being interpreted and understood by others.

In the sections that follow, each of the five "P"s is discussed in turn from a symbolic perspective. This approach provides a glimpse into organizational members' sense-making activity, a process that leaders must understand and consider if their change efforts are to be effective.

Purpose

The authors' note that "purpose" flows from the leader's vision. In this case, the vision is of "a trophy hotel," an image sufficiently general for organizational members to assign individual meanings based on their personal beliefs. As the authors explain, the vision for the Swan-Dolphin remained ambiguous—this allowed each person to bring his or her own "past experiences to present circumstances." They continue, "The people who needed to know what a trophy hotel looked like already did as the more senior staff had a wide variety of backgrounds in the hotel industry."

From a symbolic view the "people who needed to know" what was meant by "trophy hotel" would include all those affected, not just senior management. A shared image of a "trophy hotel" would be key to establishing a strong and shared culture. Highly discrepant visions of what a "trophy hotel" looked like present the risk that organization members would provide different levels of service or expect different performance standards. Is a "trophy hotel" distinguished by friendly front-desk service at check-in, or

by anticipating the guest's every need and calling her or him by name? When cultures change, leaders need to listen carefully to understand and align employee perceptions and to facilitate shared meanings.

Recently, "framing" has received a good deal of emphasis as leaders assume responsibility for managing stakeholder perceptions—in this case, of the desired change. While the authors refer to employees' "suffering through" the change process, an organization's story can be told from multiple perspectives, and choices regarding how the cast, the set, and the staging are communicated all influence the final performance. Appreciative inquiry, an increasingly popular methodology in facilitating the change process, is distinctive in emphasizing the significance of displaying and eliciting positive affect. Leaders who inspire confidence, hope, and other optimistic responses are more likely to generate sustainable change than those who present the situation in less enthusiastic terms. To assess whether this goal was accomplished, leaders as listeners must attend to the affective or emotional component as they strive to shape organizational members' understanding of the change process and its desired outcomes.

Priorities

Use of a PERT (Program Evaluation and Review Technique) chart assists leaders in analyzing the tasks required to reach a particular goal. This approach assumes that change can be controlled and monitored, that point A and point B can be defined, and that specific actions can be identified that will take the organization along this well-marked path. As the authors note, the chart also identifies an "end" to the change process. Here again, the notion of change as an activity that leaders can initiate and control is evident. The authors speak of the organization eventually "returning to normal," as if there were a static end state that might continue until

another planned change is launched. Here, leaders who are listening carefully to their employees might ask, Can an organization ever "return to normal"? What does "normal" mean to organizational members given the complexities of the Swan-Dolphin merger?

One of the main leadership concerns, as presented by the authors, was employee layoffs. From a symbolic view, leaders at this stage would focus on what the layoffs meant to employees—how human resource actions were perceived and interpreted. Was there organizational justice? Equity? Were decisions random? Were ethical issues considered? Answers to these questions—employees' interpretations of these activities and the meanings they assigned—would have a profound effect on the success of the change process.

People

The notion that "change involves people" is self-evident to symbolic leaders; the people are the change. Change is not something that is done to individuals; it is something that happens as a result of employees' viewing their situation from a new perspective and behaving accordingly. The authors' observation that an effective leader must understand organizational members' needs, motives, personalities, skills, and abilities is well founded. While the authors proceed as though employees are quite similar in these dimensions, the rich texture of the symbolic approach is created by recognizing how past experiences and cultural understandings shape each individual's unique perspective.

We are told that the Swan-Dolphin leadership recognized that those employees who remained with the organization would "watch closely what happened to the ones identified for termination to see how the new organization would treat its people." This suggests, again, the important role listening and close observation play in helping leaders know how to navigate the transition process.

The authors' go on to note that "people do not resist change"; they resist "the thought of something negative happening to them." Framing once again emerges as a key leadership task, one that has heightened importance during planned change but that never ceases to affect member perceptions of organizational decisions and events.

In many respects, change leaders become "servant leaders." In this role, emphasis is on understanding how employees interpret the current situation and how they make sense of the changes taking place. As employees redefine the meaning of various organizational activities, leaders must identify and deliver the information and support that individuals need to embrace core values, feel safe during times of uncertainty, and interpret key organizational activities in ways that support the desired culture. Servant leadership is also a relevant concept in the context of the three implementation strategies discussed in the following section on process.

Process

The authors propose that a leader's implementation strategy can be categorized as (1) decree, (2) participation, or (3) consensus. In decree, employees are simply informed of the change. A minimum of listening is required because the leader has already made the key decisions. In the participative style, the change leader consults with employees at multiple levels who are affected by the change, but retains decision making authority. The third and final strategy, consensus, requires that some decisions be delegated to subordinates. The authors suggest that small pieces of the process could be handled in this manner, especially those issues where the outcomes are less significant.

These three styles can be seen in contrast to a servant-leadership approach where the leader's primary focus is on actively listening to employees as she or he seeks and responds

to cues from organizational members. The leader's subsequent decisions and priorities, while influenced by the change goals, are also shaped by his or her assessment of organizational members' needs. The servant-leader recognizes that employees experience change from multiple perspectives and that understanding those perspectives is the first step toward designing and implementing an effective change strategy.

The authors note that an "unending" change process would be frustrating (so an eighteen-month framework was established), yet the certainty of continuous change is precisely what leaders must come to realize and embrace. Change never ends; employees' interpretations can never be completely managed; and leadership effectiveness depends, in the final analysis, on the leader's "best guesses" about what strategies will ultimately accomplish high-priority goals.

Proof

Narrowing (or eliminating) the "gap" between the original state of affairs and the vision is, in the authors' view, proof that the change has been successful. To assess whether goals have been met, the leaders in the Swan-Dolphin case applied such measures as turnover rate, morale, and employee and customer satisfaction scores. Such "proof," the authors suggest, demonstrates that the positive outcomes promised have been realized.

From the perspective of our "listening leader," such measures are useful not simply as assessments of a planned change but also as tools for ongoing efforts to understand a continuous change process. In addition to providing evidence of the "success" of a planned change initiative designed to close a predefined "gap," organizational systems can continue to provide listening leaders with the information they

need to direct improvement efforts. When change is viewed as continuous, it is not always clear when you "get there." The most important questions often address issues of organizational culture such as, "How do employees describe their experience working for this company?" or "What is distinctive about 'the way we do things' here?"

Conclusion

It would be comforting to believe that the change process could be controlled—that leaders could start and stop change activities, assess results, and then set new goals and direction for subsequent organizational activity. Karl Weick (1979) once used the metaphor of a band conductor who believed that he "controlled" the musicians by waving his baton. Weick then cautioned leaders not to be deluded into believing that they were in charge simply because they were waving a small stick before hundreds of participants. Leadership control over employees is an illusion.

Like Carl Sandburg's "Fog," change often comes on "little cat feet," slipping into hidden corners and watching as leaders come to realize that even the questions they ask lead their employees down new and uncertain paths. Inquiry becomes intervention, every decision becomes part of a new future as events are reinterpreted and meanings realigned. Is change, as the authors suggest, something that "should be done only when necessary"? Or is change, whether planned or unplanned, an ongoing opportunity for leaders and their organizations to create brighter futures?

Reference

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