

Management In Real Life

by Kevin Herring

Got change? We have courses in change management, how to be a change agent, creating change, changing culture, dealing with change, and the stress of change. But when we talk of change, what are we really talking about?

Not to be confused with nickels, dimes, and quarters, change machines, and money brokers, change in today's context refers to efforts to effect an outcome different from what exists currently in the organization. For example, we may feel the need to improve the quality of products or services provided to customers and work to effect change in that area. Or we may seek to change the level of employee commitment to business success demonstrated by the workforce in general, and work to that end.

One of the primary methods of creating change is what a friend of mine refers to as "moving the boxes around." In other words, we take the organization hierarchy chart and conduct what's commonly referred to as a restructuring. We believe that by moving executives and managers around, we can create new business outcomes. Within the organization that reassigns executives about every six months, however, the only change that occurs is reconfiguration of the organization chart and deepening employee cynicism.

Similar to affixing a new label on a jar, another common method of change is that of relabeling jobs. We find many organizations creating new job titles that suggest changes in ways of operating or changed relationships someone wishes to create. Instead of having managers, supervisors, and workers, we end up with coordinators, leaders, consultants, facilitators, agents, associates, and team members. When we proudly announce our new titles, those in the line organization have a field day with jokes about what they believe the titles really represent since changing the labels fails to change what's behind them.

But it doesn't stop there. Organizational psychobabble has become one of the fastest growing change processes to create new ways of thinking about work in an attempt to change attitudes. In this new language, new words are created and existing words become misused - nouns get used as verbs and verbs as adjectives. Phrases like, "I am a stand for..." and "What am I given being in this situation?" become standard expressions of commitment and questioning. The belief is that changing the words we use to communicate will lead to changes in understanding and dedication. Admittedly, this process encourages us to examine the meanings of words we use in our everyday language. But aside from the strange looks we receive from family and friends when we slip up and let out a proprietary phrase in public, what other meaningful outcome can we expect?

Fundamentally, changing the words we use, what we call ourselves, and where we show up on the organization chart serves more to distract us from dealing with the real issues - those of personal actions that enable change. The reason these methods are so widely used is two-fold: One, the intention in the aforementioned methods is to get employees to change. They are popular, not surprisingly, because they point to someone else as the problem.

Two, it's easier to resort to superficial change activities than to change oneself. When I speak to managers about needed organizational changes they typically respond in terms of what "they," meaning non-managerial employees, need to do. In these circumstances, rarely do managers acknowledge their own contribution to the problem. For example, when a manager delegates responsibilities to a work group and then second guesses, or "corrects," their decisions, the manager has effectively removed accountability from those to whom the responsibilities were delegated. It's much easier to blame the subsequent lack of employee commitment on the employees than it is to let go of control and live with their decisions.

So when we talk of change, let's be clear about the message. Are we only interested in the superficial appearance of change to get others to be somehow different? Or are we willing to make the personal sacrifices necessary to create an environment that engenders meaningful and lasting change for organization effectiveness. Put another way: Got change or just a nice empty wallet?

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