

Transition Management

Tips for Managers in Times of Change

Fred Nickols

© Fred Nickols 2003
All rights reserved



www.nickols.us
fred@nickols.us

Introduction & Overview

“Planned change,” the kind most frequently discussed by organization development (OD) specialists, is commonly portrayed as occurring in three stages:

1. Unfreezing
2. Intervening
3. Refreezing

This view of the change process has organizations moving from a period of stability through one of instability to another of stability. A lot has been written about unfreezing and intervening but precious little has been written about refreezing, that is, about restoring stability. It almost seems as if the writers have given a great deal of thought to the problem of upsetting the organizational apple cart but very little to setting it right side up again.

When organizations are unfrozen, either purposefully or by circumstances, they are characterized by uncertainty. In this atmosphere, roles and responsibilities are unclear, relationships that once seemed critical now seem questionable, and resources become more valuable than ever before. Philosophy, policy and practice are challenged and defended. People begin looking around trying to guess who will emerge at the top of the heap. Alliances and coalitions are quickly formed and just as quickly dissolved. In short, there’s a great deal of confusion and it does damage to cooperation. As a consequence, the organization is less efficient and less effective than before.

Presumably, if the organization is able to realize some new degree of stability, it will be more efficient and more effective than it was during the period of instability. And, assuming the instability stems from the introduction of changes intended to improve matters, the organization will be more efficient and effective than before entering the period of instability (otherwise, the wisdom of those who introduced the changes is called into question). So, whether the organization enters a period of instability as a result of sudden and unforeseen environmental pressures or as part of a planned change effort, the primary objective once in an unstable situation is the same: maintain enough stability to operate on at least a survival level and, eventually, restore enough stability to operate at a much higher level of performance.

This paper is about some practical things that managers can do to help their organization make the transition from one stable period in its life to the next.¹ For the most part, these suggestions are focused on ways to help the people in the organization cope with the effects of the changes encounter during a transition period.

Increased Operating Room

One of the major effects of change is a sudden and sometimes dramatic increase in the amount of “operating room” afforded many managers. (I am using “operating room” here to refer to the perceived limits of a manager’s accountability and authority.) In other words, managers suddenly find themselves with more “latitude” or “managerial discretion” than some of them know what to do with.

¹ It is tempting to argue that the unfreeze-intervene-refreeze model is dated; that organizations exist and operate in a continuous state of instability. However, there is an important difference between stable and static. Organizations must possess some degree of stability; they cannot afford to become static. So, the movement in question is not from one static state to another but from one stable state to another and the stable states in question might well be quite dynamic.

Transition Management: Tips for Managers in Times of Change

In stable times, the limits of a manager's accountability, authority and discretion are well-known and understood, even if they are sometimes more implicit than explicit. Many managers, if not most, settled in to well-defined roles and accompanying responsibilities – into what might be described as “comfortable niches.” The boundaries of these niches are maintained by the organization through its rewards and sanctions and by the people themselves by virtue of norms, customs and other unwritten rules that people enforce among themselves.

In times of change, however, roles and responsibilities are unclear and uncertain. As a result, the enforcement of the boundaries defining a manager's “operating room” or “niche” is less rigorous. Because this pervades all levels of management, almost all managers find themselves not just with increased latitude but also in the midst of conflicting expectations regarding its exercise. Consequently, their problem is not really one of coping with change per se but, rather, it is a problem of obtaining a new and clear understanding of their changed roles and responsibilities, especially as regards the limits of their accountability, authority and discretion.

Role Clarification & Negotiation Workshops

One way of easing the headaches associated with making the transition from one stable state to the next is to provide workshops on various role clarification and negotiation methods and techniques and charging all managers up and down the line with putting those methods and techniques to good use. These will be especially useful during the transition when roles and responsibilities might be in a continuous state of flux. They will also be useful (as well as tried and proven) afterward, once the dust settles, and the organization is ready to restabilize.

Clarity of roles and responsibilities is a tenuous attainment, especially in times of change. Job descriptions, organization charts and operations manuals are useless under such conditions because they're out of date by the time they're in print. What is needed is a way of maintaining clarity in the face of changing circumstances.

Linear Responsibility Chart (LRC)

One tool that offers some promise in this regard is the Linear Responsibility Chart (LRC) first introduced in this country in 1954 by the Serge A. Birn Company, then located in Louisville, KY. It is a simple, effective and yet flexible tool for clarifying organizational roles and responsibilities. At its simplest, it is a two-dimensional matrix, listing people across the top and responsibilities down the side. Codes in each cell of this matrix indicate the precise nature of each person's responsibility. It is easily maintained, even in times of turbulence because it captures the essence of roles and responsibilities on a single page. (Naturally, one matrix won't do for an entire organization.)

The LRC seems to have spawned a more general technique; namely, responsibility charting. It, too, involves the preparation of a responsibility chart or matrix but it is used more as the basis for intervention (e.g., as the basis for a team-building effort with some subset of the organization). Both the tool and the technique hold promise as aids to managers caught up in a transitional period.

Increased Experimentation

Another effect of change is increased experimentation with new ways of getting the job done. People start deviating from past practice. Managers must work to instill tolerance for such experimentation because those who are doing it are in fact engaged in establishing and testing the new limits of managerial “operating room.” Moreover, they will establish them the “hard way” – as is the case when they get their wrists slapped for going too far. However, it is precisely through the

establishment of new and relatively fixed limits on managerial operating room that stability is reestablished. If the experimenters are unduly restrained, the task of restabilizing the organization will be hindered and delayed. This can be extremely costly to the organization. How then to get managers to be more tolerant of both uncertainty and the experimentation it engenders?

One avenue is simply to communicate the fact that experimentation is both expected and necessary, that it is important to the restoration of stability. The point is for managers at all levels to be less prone and less quick to put the clamps on those who are testing for new boundaries. Otherwise, the establishment of these boundaries will be premature and the organization will all too soon find itself in yet another transition state.

Another way is to very visibly and handsomely reward the successful innovators. This encourages experimentation and, at the same time, makes it clear that rewards are contingent upon success. And what about those whose experiments fail? Well, there is no need to reward them but great care should be taken to ensure that they are not punished. After all, they are doing exactly what is required.

Changes in Job Content

One of the least noticed effects of change is in the content of the manager's job. In stable times, most of the content of most managers' jobs consists of fairly stable routines, that is, set ways of doing business. These routines define the phrase "the way things work around here." In times of change, however, the majority of a manager's routines must be novel, not "canned." They must be configured to meet the situation at hand. In other words, the problem-solving component of most managers' jobs shoots through the roof.

Problem Solving Training

For this reason, the organization might find it beneficial to provide extensive training in problem solving methods for its management force as well as selected members of the workforce. This can only enhance their ability to come up with reasoned, novel responses to new or different situations. Moreover, it provides them with a common language for use in communicating among themselves about the organizational problems they are encountering and attempting to resolve. The value of solving just one major organizational problem as a result of this training could easily more than justify the costs of the training.

Focus on Learning

The observation that many managers will be facing a new set of problems leads to a suggestion to focus on learning as well as training. During the transition period and for some time thereafter, people will be in learning mode; they will be figuring out the solutions to the new problems as well as some new solutions to old problems. Managers can help by committing resources to sharing the learning that is taking place. This can be done by ensuring that the lessons learned by one group of people are shared with other groups. De-briefing sessions, periodic "how goes it?" sessions and communications bulletins dealing with change issues are just some of the ways in which experiences can be shared. Another angle of attack is to capture some of the learning in the form of "how to" handbooks for various organizational functions, especially any new ones. This is particularly valuable to the organization because these early efforts are the preliminary definitions of the organization's new processes and functions and, once workable routines have been developed and captured, they will or can form the basis for training in the restabilized organization.

Revamp Employee Orientation

Focusing on organizational and individual learning suggests yet another approach to an ongoing issue, namely, the orientation of new employees. For the most part, employee orientations are typically “telling” kinds of events, that is, the new employees are told about the organization. To some extent, this addresses the new employee’s need to learn about the new organization but it is limited to some rather factual and dry kinds of information (e.g., compensation, policies, history, security, etc.). More important, both to the individual and the organization, is the task of getting the new employee up to speed in his or her new job. The quicker the better. (This holds true for many promotions and reassignments as well as new employees.) In this regard, the employee’s learning tasks involve learning about roles and responsibilities, organizational norms and the styles and expectations of co-workers (peers, superiors and subordinates. This kind of learning is best done on the job, not in a canned orientation program. However, this kind of learning can be facilitated by way of providing the new hired, promoted or assigned person with what might be termed a “homework assignment.” This is a structured set of activities for the person to carry out that shortens the time it takes to get up to speed in the new job.

Establish a Change Communication System

And the idea of communicating or sharing experiences and learning leads to yet another suggestion. Set up a change communication system early in the transition period. The reason for this is perhaps best put in the form of an analogy. Those who study the stock market know that it reflects the psychology of people. Thus, they also know that the stock market, like people, can cope with good news and it can cope with bad news but it can’t cope with no news. In the absence of information, people resort to imagination and many people imagine the worst. Instead of clamping the lid on information about impending changes and how changes underway are faring, managers are well advised to truthfully communicate it on a regular and, occasionally, situational basis.

Loss of Organizational Knowledge & Memory

The increase in the problem solving content of many jobs highlights the often overlooked fact that at least some old problems will have to be solved all over again. This effect is worsened by another: the loss of organizational memory. In times of stress, some people leave the organization; many of these are “old timers.” When they go, they take their knowledge and experience with them. If enough of them leave, the “new” organization will be seriously hampered in its efforts to resolve some of the old problems. It will spin its wheels reinventing the wheel. Therefore, managers would do well to keep an eye on the number and the quality of the old timers that take their leave during the transition period (and to be very judicious in their identification of those who must be “eased out”).

Knowledge & Memory Retention

There are several things managers can do to capture organizational knowledge and memory in the form of its old timers. One is to place some of them on retainers as consultants to the organization. Others can be placed in formal mentoring roles for a period of time prior to their actual departure – a sort of master/apprentice program. Still others might be kept on in different jobs (e.g., by organizing them into a small number of “flying squads” or SWAT teams assigned to help the people who staff the new organization wrestle some of the more old-fashioned problems to the ground). If an organization loses enough of its memory it will repeat at least some of its history. Further, retaining its knowledge and memory, provides the organization with a much-needed historical perspective on future issues.

Failure of Adaptation

One effect of change is that some people simply won't be able to adapt. Sooner or later, they will leave the organization. About all managers can do here is help these people make their way out of the organization with their dignity intact.

Outplacement

The obvious course of action here is outplacement assistance. Some people might be helped to find new jobs, others might need help in making the transition to a retired status, and still others might require some assistance in the form of psychological counseling. All should have their exits made graceful and dignified. Those who stay behind are watching.

Conclusion

It has been the central thesis of this paper that neither people nor organizations cope with change per se; instead, they can and do cope with the effects of change. These effects are most pronounced and troublesome during the transition period from stable state to another. Some of the effects of change that can be managed include uncertainty regarding roles and responsibilities, changes in job content, increased problem solving requirements, increased requirements for experimentation, the loss of organizational knowledge and memory, a need for focusing on learning as well as training and the need for communications regarding the changes, their effects and progress in managing them.

This paper was based on the following assumptions:

- Managers are as interested in finding ways of refreezing their organizations as they are in finding ways and means of unfreezing it or of intervening in its processes.
- They are interested in minimizing the harmful effects of large-scale organizational changes.
- They are interested in some practical things they can do that don't require a lot of high-powered, outside consulting help.

Contact the Author

Fred Nickols can be reached by e-mail at fred@nickols.us. Other articles of his can be found on his web site at: www.skullworks.com.