



NEED CHANGE MANAGEMENT HELP – WHO DO YOU CALL?

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In almost every job description for Change Management consultants is a statement about having a certification in one of the major Change Methodologies. This makes sense – right? But in the real world not so much.

Two of these methodologies are: Kurt Lewin’s – Unfreeze, Refreeze, Reinforcement, and Jeff Hiatt’s – Adkar. There are others. Each has merit. However, in my opinion what is critical is the ability to differentiate between real world knowledge and book world knowledge, or put another way between tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge.^{1,2} From this perspective the theoretical model is of secondary importance.

Most knowledge is in some way tacit. It is not possible to write it all down. It must be experienced, absorbed through doing, trying and failing. I can write a procedure on how to ride a horse but that is not the same thing as actually being able to ride a horse. This sounds like a statement of the obvious, but in real life change projects it is literally forgotten all of the time.

Without real world, tacit knowledge of Change, any certification is of limited value. Having a certification does not mean you can answer the most important questions. I can study and discuss Kotter, Hiatt, Von Mises or Lewin. However, without tacit understanding, which only comes from experience and doing, you never grasp the chaos of change, the artistry of change, the situationally driven nature of change.

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The real world is what teaches us the painful and necessary lessons. At the core, we all know this. It is the school of hard knocks that, if listened to and grasped, makes one a valuable consultant to change projects.

Let’s look at a real-world example. Learning how to ride a horse has been the hardest sport I have ever tried to master. In dressage, the whole point is to ride so that an observer cannot even tell if the rider is doing anything at all. The reality is that the rider is always doing something. The rider is never ‘just along for the ride.’

This reminds me of what I try to do when I “consult” on major change projects. There is basically never a moment when you are not engaged with the process of change. It sometimes may be difficult for the client to see or understand what is happening, but if the consultant is effective critically important interventions, aides, cues, hints and suggestions are happening all the time.



The price you pay for making a mistake in riding also reminds me of the real world of business change. When I make a bad mistake while riding, I often end up with broken bones. Making a bad mistake in a change project often results in an equally painful event, the business equivalent of a compound fracture! The upside is that some number and breadth of such experiences make you more and more valuable as a teacher, mentor or consultant.

The canter transition is a necessary riding skill. There is a procedure, an SOP. The steps are explicit and any trainer worth their salt will tell you basically the same thing. The steps are explicit, but the actual event of the canter transition is tacit. You can do everything exactly as you are told, over and over, again and again and still not get it right.

It does not happen the way the explicit procedure states it will because the horse is a sentient being, with good days and bad days, as is the person. Every day the horse is different. Every day the rider is equally as different. Every day together they are different. There is a core set of steps to make a canter transition possible, but at the core, the transition is situational, on a moment by moment basis.



Sometimes the horse is right there with you and sometimes his mind is on the saber-toothed butterfly that is about to eat him. However, once a canter transition becomes personal knowledge, then you can have a conversation with your horse about all of these things, as you are riding along, that sets the stage for the transition and boom - it happens. It happens because you are intuitively, automatically taking all that stuff into account, because you know what it is supposed to feel like and when it feels right – you have the canter.

Let's look at a real world transformational Change example. A communication plan will be a part of any Change effort. It just makes sense. If it is a good plan, it will be quite detailed. It will certainly include identification of and talking points for every critical stakeholder group. Getting this step right is incredibly important and unbelievably difficult. The communication action plan is the explicit knowledge component.

The help that is truly valuable, however, comes from the person who has experienced reality enough times to know and understand that it is impossible to plan and execute a communication strategy that works for every stakeholder group. It is just not possible. No matter what you do there will be problems. You will at best find an effective middle ground and at worst create civil war by what you do or do not do. One thing you cannot do is to create a plan that makes every stakeholder and stakeholder group contented. It just will not happen!

A simple, almost obvious explanation is that you cannot touch base with every stakeholder group simultaneously. Without the ability to talk to every group at the same time, someone or some group will be upset. Someone or some group will be second. You have to make hard choices.

Do I talk with Front Line Supervisors about the self-directed world before I talk with the work force about a self-directed world? If I talk with the Salaried group first I run the big risk of alienating the Hourly group. If I speak with the Hourly group first, I will not only alienate the Front Line Supervisors, but



will destroy any trust they may have in the change process. As well, every High Performance Work System is structured with less direct supervision. The Front Line Supervisors' work lives are literally on the line; their ability to earn a living, support their families, take pride in what they do. It is all on the line.

Oh, and by the way this whole thing about High Performance is based on creating an operating Hourly team that trusts each other and their leadership. This team must do what is necessary because they own their process/equipment, not because they are told what to do and when to do it. From their perspective if Leaders cannot even see fit to speak with the hourly team first why should they trust anything that is said, now or in the future. Explaining, especially after the fact, to these key stakeholders why I could not find a way to talk with them first is not a good place to be.

Whose fears and concerns and uncertainties and questions do I address first? In the real world, timing is everything, but the reality is you cannot sequence the perfect plan. Do I anger one group or the other? And in the final analysis I will probably upset both – so what do I do?

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I want someone who has been there and experienced this reality, someone who tacitly knows enough to make a judgement call that maximizes the positive and minimizes the negatives. The explicit knowledge about having a communications strategy is irrelevant in comparison to the tacit knowledge of what happens when you are trying to give the right cue to go into a canter or even more importantly into a full-blown gallop, because major change endeavors always happen at break neck speed. The wrong cue at the wrong time won't get you the canter transition, and mistakes breaks bones, destroy the Vision of a great canter transition, and ruins transformational change.

If you do not possess this tacit knowledge you cannot really help! You may know the change model, but so what. This reality is why the phrase a mile wide and an inch deep is heard so often in describing consultants. I want someone that is a mile deep. I do not need someone to tell me to put together a communication plan. I need someone who can give the best suggestions humanly possible about which stakeholder group I should talk with first, and then explore with me what to do when the proverbial stuff hits the fan, everybody's hair is on fire, and chaos is getting the upper hand.

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until you have a history.**

Change is tricky, very tricky. Expert assistance is a really good idea. I started this article by asking the question: who will you call when you need help with transformational change? My answer is to build on George Santayana's thought: "those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it." The build is you cannot learn from history until you have lived and experienced large-scale change efforts. You cannot learn from history until you have a history. Find the person who has been there and done that and you just might avoid the pain of business compound fractures!

REFERENCES

- 1) The term "tacit knowing" or "tacit knowledge" is attributed to [Michael Polanyi](#).
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, **1958** in *Personal Knowledge*.
- 2) “In his later work *The Tacit Dimension* he made the assertion that "we can know more than we can tell." He states not only that there is knowledge that cannot be adequately articulated by verbal means, but also that all knowledge is rooted in tacit knowledge. Polanyi, Michael (1966), *The Tacit Dimension*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago.”

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A results-oriented organizational effectiveness practitioner, with over 35 years of hands on experience in designing and implementing sustainable work system/cultural change initiatives. Intellectually knowledgeable enough to know what might work. Experienced enough to know what will work. Have coached and mentored leadership, from Front Line Supervisors to Superintendents to VPs. Have a real knack for quickly establishing, strong trust-based relationships.

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