Organizational Change Concepts & Principles

By John Park, MBA

Organizational Culture is defined as the way an organization does what it does. A common definition of organizational insanity is to keep everything the same, and expect the results and performance to improve. In our work we have found certain concepts and principles to be useful when helping an organization improve its performance and culture. These principles make it easier to implement changes, make them more timely and with less disruption:

1. **Components of Change** – There are two major components in organizational change, the 'hard' part and the 'soft' part. The hard part is relatively easy to accomplish. It consists of changing the order of steps in a process, e.g., change your work or computer based process to do your work in B-C-D-A sequence instead of A-B-C-D sequence.

   The soft part of change is more difficult to accomplish and takes more time and effort. This consists of engaging the 'hearts & minds' of the affected staff. Since each employee brings a different set of core values, preconceptions, and abilities to their work, they need to understand and internalize how the 'new' way will affect them. Organizations that successfully accomplish this are more adaptable to changes in the environment and more successful in remaining viable.

2. **Clear Consistent Objectives/Goals** – The organizational Objectives and Goals need to be clear, consistent, and transparent. It is very important to be able to articulate the need for change and the role that each employee plays in the process. If employees or groups believe that 'status quo' is an option, it is very difficult for them to accept the need to change. If they believe that change is vital to the organization and their role in the organization, it is much easier to engage them in change processes.

3. **Communication –** One of the most important steps in preparing to implement changes is to improve communication. It is almost impossible to communicate too well and improving takes dedicated time and an established structure to ensure that all affected staff are included. Communication needs to be timely and as transparent as possible.

Communication is the process of *sharing information and providing a means for the employees at all levels to think about the information and be able to discuss it*. This is the same well-understood and tested adult learning process that is widely used in conducting seminars and conferences. Ideally, the communication should be face-to-face so participants have the benefit of the non-verbal component of the discussion.

This differs from information sharing alone which is largely one-way in most organizations. The prevalence of using e-mail to inform staff works well for routine issues, but does not provide two-way discussion.

4. **Shared Decision Making** – Organizations use Shared Decision Making to engage the staff in the process and the direction the changes will take. Generally, the leader asks individual employees, or an appointed group of employees, for suggestions to address issues and/or improve performance. The suggestions are reviewed, the best ones selected for trial implementation, and monitoring set in place for a designated period to see if performance improves. If it does, the change is adopted and standardized to other areas. If not, other suggestions are tried. Regardless of the outcome, this allows employees to have a greater role in improving their work experience and focuses them on thinking about future changes to adapt to the environment.

   Throughout this type of participation, it is important to maintain communication so employees are consistently involved in learning **why** a change is occurring, **what** needs to happen, and **how** it will be done. If their suggestions are not implemented, it is very important to tell them why their suggestion will not be used. This prevents 'pseudo-participation' (the false impression of involving employees but ignoring their input) which can be more damaging than avoiding shared decision making in the first place.

Often leaders don't know all the why's, what's and how's in the beginning of a change process, especially when the mandate for change is coming from outside the workgroup or department. Transparency to the extent possible is a key to success and it is important for leaders to share with their staff what they do know and acknowledge what they don't know. This goes a long way toward building trust and cohesiveness within the team.

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