

Creating the Energy for Change

Leaders often get out ahead of their organizations – it's part of your role. But to be successful you have to stop and create an opportunity for others to see what you see ... and for you to understand what they see.

"I'm ready to make change, but my team isn't." One of my clients, John, a company president, was clear about the changes he wanted to make but convinced that his leadership team did not want to go with him. He had assessed the company's strategy and determined it wouldn't get them the needed business results. When I inquired about the conversations he had with the team, he said, "I shared my ideas for a new strategy, and they weren't interested."

I often hear about this type of situation – someone proposes a solution and becomes frustrated when others are not enthusiastically signing up to follow them and implement.

As a leader your work is to lead your organization from the present into the future ... a future that is better than the present. You are always leading and managing change. Whether that change is a slow steady progression from the present, or requires a significant shift, to be successful you need to generate the energy for the change.

- *How effective are you at managing change?*
- *Does it feel hit or miss?*
- *How well do you understand the key factors that lead to successful change?*

In this article I share a simple yet powerful framework that describes the conditions necessary for change to occur. It can be used to understand why a particular change effort is stuck and what to do to get it moving, or to design a change process that flows well from the beginning.

The Algebra of Change: $D \times V \times F > R$

Successful change requires dissatisfaction with the status quo, a positive vision for the future, and practical first steps to get started. If any of these is missing you can't create enough energy to overcome whatever resistance exists ... *and there is always resistance.*

For change to occur:



The three variables on the left of the equation are multiplied together. So dissatisfaction, vision and first steps must *all* exist (be greater than zero) for the left side to be greater than the resistance, the energy pushing against the change. Ignoring any of them will cause your change to get stuck, take longer, cost more or fail.

Dissatisfaction (D) with the current state is what pushes or propels a change. Without it, there is not enough energy for a change process to begin. Dissatisfaction can be with either something specific about the current situation, or with the current level of results.

No matter how clear the vision and first steps, without dissatisfaction there is no "reason" to change, so you stay stuck.

Vision for the future (V) is what pulls the change. It is the positive possibility for the future. It must be a compelling description of what you want in the future, not simply the absence of something in the present. Vision needs to be enough of a stretch from what exists today to make it worth an effort to get there, and yet seem achievable. When you have dissatisfaction and first steps, but no vision for the future you create an experience of "change of the month" – trying lots of things, but nothing "sticks".

First Steps (F) are actions you can take to begin the move from the present toward the desired future. Clarity about at least some first steps creates a sense of capability and hope. When you have dissatisfaction and a positive vision for the future, but don't know what steps to take to get started you get frustrated and stay stuck.

Resistance (R) is a force that slows or stops movement. It represents the risks and barriers to the change – the perceived cost of change. It is normal and natural – some resistance always exists – it's part of our biology. Some risks and barriers are things which you cannot change; others you can influence.

The good news is that you can influence each of these 4 variables. To increase the energy for a specific change you can focus on raising the variables on the left hand-



side (D, V and F), lowering the variable on the right hand-side (R) – or both.

This framework works for any intentional change – organizational or individual.

Applying it to individual change is simpler ... because there is only one person's D, V, F and R to consider. Organizational change is more complex because of the number of stakeholders involved.

As a leader you know that just because you want something to change doesn't mean that it will. And telling people that you want them to change is also not enough. A critical mass of those with a stake in the way it is today and in the future must be dissatisfied with the status quo, share a vision for a better future and be committed to first steps to get started.

You may be surprised to learn that for a large organization 20-30% is enough to have a critical mass. This is because *collective energy* is more powerful than individual energy.

To create collective energy, the *dissatisfaction* must be known, the vision for the future must be shared, and the first steps must be owned by the group and feel doable.

I've found that leaders are often reluctant to surface dissatisfaction for fear it will turn into a gripe session, get out of hand, or require each individual's issues to be addressed. While I understand these concerns, unless people know that others are dissatisfied there is no chance for the energy for change to build. Unless there is strong enough dissatisfaction that is commonly known, little or no change will take place.

When you find yourself having to "sell" the need to change or feel like you can't get your organization onboard, there's a good chance people aren't dissatisfied (enough). This is a sign to engage them to discover or surface their dissatisfaction.

A positive, compelling and shared *vision* of the future serves as a beacon through the change process so although the details may shift, the overall picture should be consistent over time. The clearer, more detailed, understandable and tangible the vision is, and the greater the positive emotion associated with it, the stronger it will be as a force pulling people toward the change.

Organizations with dissatisfaction and first steps, but no clear vision have the experience of "flavor of the month" – a continuous stream of new initiatives. People may participate in the initiatives, but they don't know why. As a result, the initiatives eventually die and you get no real change. Initiatives are actually "first steps" – a way

to get somewhere, but are not themselves a vision of a better future.

The power of *first steps* increases when they are clear and within the organization's capacity. The steps don't have to be large or many, but they must be known, clear, and within the capacity of a critical mass of the organization. If first steps are not clear, or out of reach of the organization you get frustration and eventually passivity or helplessness.

Resistance to change in organizations can take many forms, e.g. denial, confusion, criticism, easy agreement, sabotage. It's common to try to overcome resistance by pushing back, but that usually has the opposite effect by increasing it. But it's more effective to manage resistance -- understand it and use that information to adjust your approach and build support for the change.

Implementing the Equation

Let's revisit John's situation through the lens of this framework. Clearly, he was dissatisfied and he had a vision for better results, and the first steps (a new strategy) to get there. The leadership team however was not (yet) dissatisfied, and didn't share his vision ... so, of course, they weren't signing up for his strategy. Once we created an opportunity for the leadership team to assess the company's existing strategy and the results it would likely produce, the team quickly convinced itself that the strategy would not achieve the results they desired. Creating a vision and getting clear on some first steps flowed easily once they all had a reason to want something different.

It's not unusual for a senior leader who has been thinking deeply about his/her organization's situation to be dissatisfied with the current state of the business, have a vision for "better", and an idea of how to get started. The leader has energy for change, but until others are dissatisfied, has a shared vision and is clear about how to get started in that direction there is no *collective energy* for change. This same dynamic is often replicated between the leadership team and the layers of the organization below them.

When John and his leadership team were ready to share their new strategy with a larger group of leaders they designed a meeting that allowed the top 120 managers to assess for themselves the competitive environment and the probability that they would succeed with their existing strategy. It didn't take long before the group was dissatisfied, interested in a vision for improvement and how to get there. The leadership team shared their vision and the new strategy and then engaged this next level of leaders in how to implement the strategy



throughout the organization – thus further building the energy for change.

Additional examples

Neither Yours, nor Mine ... but Ours: Another client, a University Library, came to me after unsuccessfully having tried several times to implement organization-wide change. Both the library leaders and the staff were not satisfied with the current state of communication and decision-making within the library, but for very different reasons. The future vision that the employees had did not address the dissatisfaction of the leaders, and vice versa – and the compromise version was so complicated that it didn't work for anyone. They were stuck. Although they were all dissatisfied, they did not have a shared vision. Once they created a vision that addressed the concerns of both groups they were finally able to move forward and implement how the library would operate.

Merged Businesses ... A New Leader ... A Team that Leads: Karen was appointed SVP for a new business unit formed from two existing businesses, each of which had a different structure and culture. Karen wanted to form an effective team to lead the business rather than having just a group of managers. The “dissatisfaction” (reason for the change) in this situation was related to merging two businesses to one, and from the desire to clarify the role of the newly formed leadership team as distinct from the role of individual team members. Both Karen and her team members were concerned about these issues. They also agreed that the “vision” for better consisted of a unified team with a common purpose, clear roles and responsibilities and commitments to each other. As “first steps” for leading the business to achieve its stretch goals, the team members fleshed these out ; further steps involved implementing them and monitoring progress.

Unlike the previous two examples where the change process was stuck, for this intervention we used the framework to design success from the outset. Dissatisfaction represents reasons for change from the perspective of the different stakeholders. Rather than coming from a “problem”, in this situation it came from something external ... moving from two businesses to one ... with a new leadership team and a new leader. Dissatisfaction does not have to come from something strongly negative ... just from a need or desire for something different than “what is” or “what was”.

While many leaders try to tell their organization why change is needed, it's more effective to create an opportunity for self-assessment – people are more likely to move toward something they have concluded for themselves. With good information and a good process

people usually convince themselves there is a need for change. It's much easier to develop a vision and first steps if the group is already convinced that a better future is needed.

Create energy for your change effort

Use this framework to design your change process from the outset, or to diagnose what might be preventing a change from getting off the ground or taking hold.

When you begin a change process, be sure to design how to establish the need for change (D), what the preferred future is (V), how to get started (F) and understand any resistance (R). How will you engage the stakeholders at each level of the change to understand and address each of these key factors?

If you are in the middle of a change process and it seems to be stuck, this framework can help you determine why, and what to do to get it moving. Consider each of the variables. Have you made them explicit? If not, engage people in a conversation or process which allows them to clarify the dissatisfaction, vision and first steps.

No one finds leading change to be easy ... *but* it's part of your role as a leader. Use this framework to help you pull together the organization's energy and improve your success rate.

¹ This framework was proposed by David Gleicher and first published in 1969 by Richard Beckhard. It was simplified to the form included in this article by Roland Loup of Dannemiller Tyson Associates.



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