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# The Undiscussable Sides of Implementing Transformational Change

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*Consultants who understand the inevitability of the emergence of unknown but predictable complexities during the implementation of planned organizational change are reluctant to inform their client systems' leaders. Those leaders do not want to hear about those complexities. Thus, they collude and perpetuate the false belief in reasonable but simplistic mental models that claim that complex system change can be implemented in a linear fashion—quickly and without undue inconvenience, disruption, or discomfort. This article has two sections: first, the most likely complexities, described in terms of a four-phase realistic mental model of systemic resistance during implementation; second, interventions that organizational leaders, line managers, and consultants should be prepared to enact (a) during each of the four phases, (b) throughout the transformational process, and (c) as needed on various occasions.*

Today we hear and read about many organizational and management consulting gurus who market commercialized approaches to planning and implementing a broad range of transformative organizational changes. Each "change management" model is quite distinctive in some respects, and yet, the models are remarkably similar in other respects.

Most models for managing change tend to define and treat all types of organizational issues as if they were problems. That triggers the perceived need to "solve" them, once and forever. This is an extraordinarily convenient premise, because not all challenging issues are "problems." But the premise allows practitioners to market their preferred models as solutions that fit all types of organizational issues and circumstances: One size fits all.

This is rather curious. These people are probably not charlatans; they are probably honorable people. Furthermore, they are practical people. Their livelihood relies on building a trustworthy reputation leading to referrals and repeat business from satisfied customers. They know it is in their long-term, enlightened self-interest to promise only what they can deliver. They are probably wise enough to refrain from proposing models for managing change that, ultimately, will not be effective and will disappoint their customers, colleagues, and

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This article represents much of the culmination of 18 years of work on the issue of resistance to implementing planned change. It is based, in part, on the presentation "Strategic Management of Organizational Change" delivered at AIC's *Industiproduktion i forandring—Urvecklat ledarskap i produktionen* (Changes in the Production Industry—Developing Leadership Conference), Stockholm, Sweden, September 10, 1996.

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managers. Yet they present universalistic solutions to particularistic (unique), complex, unprecedented issues.

I am of a different opinion. I believe that proponents of single models of organizational change have overgeneralized the applicability of their models. I am convinced that different types of issues and unique organizational circumstances require different strategies, philosophies, methods, and skills: in other words, a contingency approach to consulting.

I believe there are basically three types of organizational issues that leaders and members of transforming organizations must identify, set goals for, and develop both strategies and action plans around (followed by implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the effects of those plans). These issues are as follows.

**Problems to solve:** Either (a) something has been broken or does not work as needed and must be corrected, or (b) problems that have not yet manifested themselves (but clearly will occur, sooner or later) should be prevented.

**Opportunities to exploit:** Some existing business processes or practices may be functioning perfectly well; however, it is apparent that substantial benefits can be achieved through the application of a radical technological innovation (as measured in terms of profitability, quality, waste, cycle time, or productivity). On the other hand, (b) opportunities constantly emerge to create something totally new (e.g., goods, services, processes, configurations of existing technologies, or markets).

**Dilemmas to manage:** Organizational members are caught up in an apparent conflict in choosing which of several alternatives can best deal with an apparent problem (Johnson, 1992). The alternatives are often "polarities": extreme endpoints on the same continuum (e.g., to centralize or decentralize or to reward employees on the basis of individual or team achievements). A single solution would create consistency;

however, a solution that consistently reinforces either alternative would exclude the benefits available through the other polarity. This is a dilemma that people can begin to manage if they assume it may be possible to design a system that would reinforce and support both options.

I think it is imperative to make these distinctions because different approaches to managing complex systems change are required to deal with different types of issues appropriately. A perfectly good model for managing one kind of change, improperly applied under substantially different conditions, not only will fail to achieve the expected results but will also discredit those who designed the model as well as those who use it and sponsor it. In addition to the type of issue, leaders must also consider the organizational level at which a change is intended to take place. What may be an effective change model at one level may be irrelevant or counterproductive at any other level.

Organizational leaders—and their consultants—need a portfolio from which they can select relevant models for various issues and conditions. Those who rely on a single model for managing organizational change are likely to fulfill a prophetic Japanese saying: "If the only tool you have is a hammer, all you will see is nails."

### **The Process of Supporting and Facilitating Complex Systems Change**

Virtually all organizational change management models are derived—knowingly or not—from Dick Beckhard (1969; Beckhard & Harris, 1987; Beckhard & Pritchard, 1992). He and his associates suggested six "organizing principles" to provide a sense of order in guiding managerial thinking and action in coping with the challenges of managing complex change in turbulent and uncertain environments. These principles are as follows: (a) Why change? (determine the need for change and determine the degree

