



BUY-IN: A RADICAL APPROACH TO CHANGE MANAGEMENT

BY SHARON DREW MORGEN

How do we manage change in our organizations? Not very well, apparently. According to statistics, the success rate for many planned change implementations is low: 37 percent for Total Quality Management; 30 percent for Reengineering and Business Process Reengineering.

Regardless of the industry, situation, levels of people, or intended outcome, change seems to be sabotaged in unknown ways, causing the real possibility of failure:

- Internal partners are unable to get the help they need as they attempt to promote the proposed change.
- Leaders get blindsided by unknowns, with no clear way to overcome obstacles without creating more problems or becoming part of the problem.
- The system gets disrupted, harming people, relationships, and initiatives.
- The change doesn't get adopted as conceived, with financial and personal fallout.

As change agents, the models we use to address these issues have met with limited success. Is it possible that our approach is causing some of the problems?

The good news is that it is possible to have a successful change outcome in any situation—successful in its ease, simplicity of buy-in, ability to enable all participants to embrace leadership roles, and encouragement of creativity at all levels. But to achieve this out-

come, we need to add new beliefs and skills to what we are currently doing.

The Systems Aspect of Change

By failing to look at change as a *system* rather than an *event*, our existing change management models don't go far enough in helping us manage change. In fact, in many cases, they actually contribute to the resistance we get.

For decades, I've been teaching a change management/decision facilitation model, Buying Facilitation™, to sales folks as a tool to help their prospects navigate through the unique, private, and often unconscious buy-in journey they take before they can decide to make a purchase. Like our typical efforts to manage change, salespeople generally approach a potential sale (which exemplifies change to the buyer) as if the recognized problem is an isolated event, independent of the system within which it is operating.

Based on what I've learned about helping sales professionals better navigate buyers' decision-making processes, in this article, I will:

- Explain how the underlying beliefs inherent in current change management models often lead to failure,
- Show how to minimize resistance and maximize leadership and creativity,
- Familiarize you with a systemic view of change management,
- Show it's possible to achieve buy-in by influencing, reweighting, and expanding decision criteria,
- Introduce a way to make change a welcome part of the system.

Because my background is in the sales field, I'll first use an example from that industry. Then I'll present a parallel model used to help change leaders achieve buy-in in environment.

All Problems Are Systems Problems

Throughout history, the sales profession has adopted an outside-in approach, focusing on providing a solution/fulfilling a need and ignoring the fact that any purchase represents a change for the buyer. As a result, the success rate in the field is dreadful, with a 7 percent close rate. In the traditional model, a sales representative pushes a buyer to adopt a seemingly rational solution to a problem. The challenge is that even when buyers are interested in making a purchase, their current reality is usually working "well enough," and getting them to make the decision to alter that current reality can be an uphill battle. Likewise, in change initiatives, even when people within an organization recognize the need for a shift, they consciously or unconsciously push back.

In both sales and change management, we tend to look at making a purchase or buying in to a change initiative as an isolated event. As a result, we end up with far more failure in both sales and change management than we should have, given the efficacy of our solutions. Indeed, it's quite possible to create buy-in before attempting to instill change, thereby circumventing resistance.

All systems are made up of interdependent parts that work hard to maintain homeostasis and will defend the organism against anything new that might cause disruption. Whether it is a company resisting reorganization or a user group resisting new software, the issues are the same.

To maintain congruence throughout the change process, systems must:

- **Maintain Functional Stability:** Systems have specific and idiosyncratic functionality. For a system to remain sta-

TEAM TIP

Experiment with following the steps outlined in this article the next time you launch a change initiative.

ble, it must create workarounds for any problems that crop up. A system's daily routines and behaviors serve to maintain these workarounds. Thus, a change agent must take these routines into account as part of the change process.

• **Achieve Individual Buy-In:**

Whether consciously or unconsciously, a system will resist anything from outside that threatens the status quo, regardless of the efficacy of the change.

• **Maintain Underlying Rules and Beliefs:** Great data or solutions do not influence the change if it runs counter to the system's beliefs and rules, overt or covert.

From my research, I have found that accepted change management models have no tools to create systemic, criteria-based buy-in before the requested change initiative begins.

Systems Alignment in a Sales Environment

Here is a story that highlights the similar problems within sales and change management. In this case study, the seller gave the buyer ways to help her work through personal issues and address the impediment to make a purchasing decision. Note: All buyers or change problems must address these impediments with us or without us. Until now, we've left them to manage on their own.

I was with a client in Scotland when he received a call from a long-standing prospect—a learning and development manager with whom he had been talking for 11 months—to say, “Thanks, but no thanks” for the product purchase. After three trials and a close relationship developed over the course of a year, what could have happened? The software was a perfect solution for the university; they were not speaking to any other providers; and price didn't seem to be a problem.

At my client's request, I called the L&D manager. Here is the conversation:

SDM: Hi, Linda. Sharon Drew here. Is this a good time to speak? Pete said you'd be waiting for my call around now.

LR: Yes, it's fine. How can I help? I already told Pete that we wouldn't be purchasing the software.

SDM: I heard. You must be so sad that you

couldn't purchase it at this time.

LR: I am! I LOVE the technology! It's PERFECT for us. I'm so disappointed.

SDM: What stopped you from being able to purchase it?

LR: We have this new HR director with whom I share a leadership role. He is so contentious that few people are willing to deal with him. After meeting with him, I get migraines that leave me in bed. I've decided to limit my exposure to him, discussing only things that are emergencies. So I've put a stop to all communication with him just to keep me sane. He would have been my business partner on this purchase.

SDM: Sounds awful. I hear that you have put your personal feelings ahead of work requirements and now don't have a way to get the necessary buy-in for when your employees might need additional tools to do their jobs better.

LR: Wow. You're right. That's exactly what I've done. Oh my. I'm going to have to figure that out because I've certainly got a responsibility to the employees.

SDM: What would you need to know or believe differently to be willing to work through the personal issues and figure out how to be in some sort of a working relationship with the HR director for those times your employees need new tools?

LR: Could you send me some of these great questions you're asking me so I can figure it out, and maybe use them on him?

I sent her a half dozen facilitative questions. Two weeks later, Linda called back to purchase the solution.

What happened?

1. While the university needed a better flow of information to employees, the poor relationship between the HR director and the L&D director created hidden, ongoing dysfunction. The obvious problem could not be resolved while the hidden problem remained in place.
2. There was no way to resolve either problem as long as the L&D director—the ultimate decision maker—avoided the HR director. Given the level of the directors, the effects of this unhealthy dynamic permeated many decisions in the university.
3. In Linda's decision to forgo a solution in favor of maintaining her avoidance, she unconsciously weighted her personal criteria above her criteria for doing her job.

Through our conversation, Linda gained the perspective to reestablish equilibrium within her work and personal systems. Once she realized that she needed to make a work-related decision separate from her personal issues, she was able to reevaluate her choices while maintaining her own criteria and just reweighting them.

Rule: Until or unless people view a solution as matching their underlying criteria/values, no change will happen regardless of the necessity of the change, the size of the need, the origination of the request, or the efficacy of the solution.

Current change management models assume that a rational, data-based change request will supplant unconscious bias or belief-based, idiosyncratic responses. But any kind of change disrupts the status quo, causing resistance as the system fights to maintain homeostasis. This is why most change management models heavily rely on developing skills to manage resistance, focusing on the problem rather than figuring out how to manage the underlying cause.

Rule: Whether it's sales or change management, until or unless the folks within a system are willing to adapt to, and adopt, the requested change, they will either take no action or will resist to maintain the homeostasis of the system.

How Change Happens Within a System

Fortunately, it is possible to get buy-in before attempting a change initiative.

1. Behaviors are merely beliefs in action.
2. Most of our beliefs are unconscious.
3. By asking people to change before they have understood, mitigated, or reweighted their unconscious beliefs and bought in to new roles, jobs, behaviors, and mental models, we are creating resistance.

Change must happen from inside the system. Indeed, it's necessary to first teach the system to re-weight criteria, reorganize and adjust to potential disruption, and figure out how to maintain

its baseline values. And any proposed change must include ways to manage and replace workarounds or it will compromise the integrity of the system.

Since it's not possible for an outsider to lead from inside, we must teach the system how to *lead itself* through change, much like a GPS system leads a driver to a destination. Like a GPS system, we can be neutral navigators with no agenda other than to use systems coordinates to guide change through its route from one aspect of the status quo to another—not based on our agenda but by teaching the system how to do the necessary internal change work first.

Here are the rules:

1. Enter with no bias. Help the system recognize the internal areas that must buy in to the change. These include anything—jobs, people, initiatives, relationships, departments—that the new solution will touch.

Rule: Entering the decision-navigation portion of the change experience with bias will impede the process and create resistance.

2. Help the system recognize all of the parts—the people, rules, relationships, presuppositions, workarounds—that maintain the status quo.

Rule: Until or unless the system recognizes all of the factors and ensures that they buy in to the change, it will not be able to give agreement.

3. Help the system figure out how to reorganize around the new change so it will not face disruption and will have all of the pieces in place to accommodate the change.

Rule: The change cycle is the time it takes for the system to figure out its own trajectory so there will be minimal disruption during the change process.

Buy-In: A Real-World Example

A coaching client of mine in a small company (around 150 employees) had a problem: He wanted to implement a new customer-service initiative but had just joined the company and was fearful of making waves. Yet as the chief marketing officer, he knew the quality of the company's customer service was lacking.

Joseph initially wanted to take control, issue edicts, and fire those who didn't comply with the initiative. He realized he had to choose between enforcing the behaviors and outcomes he had in mind, or creating the structure and teaching the employees how to become creative leaders who would design their own behaviors. I helped him decide to build a creative structure, which meant giving up some of the details of his plan while maintaining the congruence of what the outcome looked like.

Joseph put together a list of his basic criteria and then left open the financials, job descriptions, timeline, activities, and other decisions. He called a meeting with the entire company—even groups that the change process wouldn't necessarily touch—and told them that he was thinking about expanding the customer-service operations. He asked everyone to take a few hours to discuss, think about, and brainstorm what it could look like if they had an unlimited budget, and said he'd meet with them the next week to get their ideas.

He told them that this process was highly important, and he wanted it to be part of people's daily discussions over the next week. He asked that each group have a spokesperson and historian to keep track of all ideas.

Joseph's criteria included:

1. Maintain the company's integrity, professionalism, and level of service
2. Design a mix between technology and human interaction
3. Provide customers with better access to more data and meet their needs more proactively
4. Create award-winning service that would differentiate the company from all competitors and keep customers over time

The next week, Joseph met with employees again and asked for their input. He captured the ideas by audio and on an idea board. He set up an interactive website for the new ideas and told people to add their thoughts. He then sent them back to consider the ideas offered and generate even more.

At the next meeting, he asked workers to take all of the ideas now floating around and use them to brainstorm what the new initiative would

look like, who might do what, what would have to change, and what the change would look like for those involved. He asked them to consider:

1. What jobs would change? What jobs would be added/subtracted—and what would happen with the people whose jobs might be affected?
2. What needed to stay the same internally, no matter what? And how could this be included in the new initiative?
3. Which might be the possible fallout from the staff and from customers?
4. What could get in the way of a successful change initiative?

Eventually, employees got into teams and developed solid implementation plans. Those folks who had to change jobs or had their work significantly restructured in a way that might cause resistance joined a management team or focus group and became part of the solution.

Did Joseph get everything he wanted? Well, yes and no. The new organization ended up far exceeding anything he had conceived. It had more creativity and leadership. It also cost more than he realized (time and money) to put everything in place. And there was no resistance because everyone had bought in to the idea and made it their own.

The Steps

Here are the steps to begin a change process that avoids resistance and develops leadership and creativity:

1. Announce the change strategically. Request that folks start thinking about issues of choice, difficulty, confusion, and ultimately bring in creative ideas for adopting the change.
2. Help the group organize around problems, change issues, and new practices. What structures are holding the problem in place and must buy in to being changed? How does the group propose to manage the shift in status quo if a change will disrupt major portions of the system?
3. Help the group recognize what it currently does (and what each person does) that could be useful in the new initiative, and figure out how to include it so the old can meld with the new.

4. Let the system determine how to disband the old and bring in the new in a way that maintains systems congruence. Change agents must be prepared to give up their bias regarding what the ultimate change will look like.
5. Let the system create new rules, policies, job descriptions, and so on.
6. When the new system has been created, celebrate—and continue to create plans for maintaining it over the long run.

Conclusion

Before introducing any change initiative, discover who needs to be included, recognize what would get in the way of success and what needs to

happen to mitigate that interference, look at how to manage workarounds, and figure out how to ensure that you'll have an intact, non-resistant, functioning system that will welcome the new initiative. Then you can introduce the change.

Until now, we've assumed that resistance is a normal part of the change process because we've been taught that we need to push change into a closed system. We've ignored the rule of systems and forgotten that the change we are suggesting will encounter a status quo that is trying to maintain homeostasis. But as we've explored above, it is possible to get buy-in without resistance. We don't have to throw out the many won-

derful change models out there. But we first need to get buy-in, and then the change will be welcomed rather than spurned or sabotaged.

Note: Thanks to Barry Sugarman for his help in thinking through the current state of the change management field. ■

Sharon Drew Morgen is the author of the *New York Times* business best-seller *Selling with Integrity* as well as six other books and hundreds of articles that explain the behind-the-scenes issues buyers must manager before they can buy. She is the thought leader behind Buying Facilitation™, a sales paradigm that focuses on helping buyers manage their behind-the-scenes issues to get the internal buy-in they need to make a purchase. Sharon Drew's blog is #6 of all sales/marketing blogs. Her most recent book is *Dirty Little Secrets*.



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SYSTEMS THINKING AS A LANGUAGE

BY MICHAEL GOODMAN

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Language has a subtle, yet powerful effect on the way we view the world. English, like most other Western languages, is linear—its basic sentence construction, noun-verb-noun, translates into a worldview of “x causes y.” This linearity predisposes us to focus on one-way relationships rather than circular or mutually causative ones, where x influences y, and y in turn influences x. Unfortunately, many of the most vexing problems confronting managers and corporations today are caused by a web of tightly interconnected circular relationships. To enhance our understanding and communication of such problems, we need a language more naturally suited to the task.

Elements of the Language

Systems thinking can be thought of as a language for communicating about complexities and interdependencies. In particular, the following qualities make systems thinking a useful framework for discussing and analyzing complex issues:

- **Focuses on ‘closed interdependencies.’** The language of systems thinking is circular rather than linear. It focuses on closed interdependencies, where x influences y, y influences z, and z influences x.
- **A ‘visual’ language.** Many of the systems thinking tools—causal loop diagrams, behavior-over-time diagrams, systems archetypes, and structural diagrams—have a strong visual component. They help clarify complex issues by summing up, concisely and clearly,

the key elements involved.

Diagrams also facilitate learning. Studies have shown that many people learn best through representational images, such as pictures or stories. A systems diagram is a powerful means of communication because it distills the essence of a problem into a format that can be easily remembered, yet is rich in implications and insights.

- **Adds precision.** The specific set of “syntactical” rules that govern systems diagrams greatly reduce the ambiguities and miscommunications that can occur when tackling complex issues.

Example: In drawing out the relationships between key aspects of a problem, causal links are not only indicated by arrows, but are labeled “s” (same) or “o” (opposite) to specify how one variable affects another. Such label-