

## Article 4

# Creating a Climate For Change: Promoting Engagement

### Introduction

Most of today's organizations, including those in the human services sector, are facing unpredictable futures of unprecedented change. An inescapable reality is that the nature, scope and duration of the changes that we have been seeing over the past few years are unlike anything we have had to face before. As a result, we must come to terms with unique organizational and personal challenges.

Many organizations are working hard to develop strategies to respond to these challenges. We are learning a great deal from their efforts. Some organizations have learned how to make conditions of constant change work for them, both on an organizational and a personal level. In short, they have learned how to create healthy change.

Organizations typically base their approach to bring about change on two basic human emotions: fear and hope. A fear-based approach tends to start the change process more quickly, appears to generate more energy and work activity, and may even increase productivity, especially in the short run. However, this early momentum is almost never sustained, and fades as quickly as it began. By contrast, a hope-based approach provides the people who make up the organization with the tools and support they need to create their own change. While it is true that this kind of approach takes longer and requires more "up front" investment by the organization, experience shows that it greatly enhances a sense of ownership by staff in the process. As a result, the overall change is more easily sustained.

In recent years, we have had the opportunity to study the change initiatives of a wide variety of human service organizations. Some clear patterns have emerged. 'Change-friendly' organizations work hard at creating a climate for change in which staff genuinely feel that they are a part of the process, that their contributions are valued and, more important, that they are valued as people. These organizations treat their staff as people worthy of a significant investment and this also supports their participation in creating change.

Based on our work and conversations with countless organizations over the past few years, we have learned that employees look for support in four specific areas:

1. Communication – Can we talk?
2. Support – Do we really care?
3. Structure – Are we in this together?
4. The Future – Can we create it together?

Let's examine each of these more closely.

### Communication – Can We Talk?

Communication is an important part of creating change. Good communication doesn't just happen automatically, however, it requires attention, energy and respect for others. Taking the time to establish better communication during periods of significant change should not be a luxury, as many organizations seem to treat it; it is an integral part of engaging staff in the change process.

Effective communication is about how information is shared, how input is sought, and how decisions are made.

Key indicators of effective communication include:

- More information about issues and process
- Sooner, more often, and on demand
- A variety of forms and channels
- More opportunity for input and discussion
- Clear guidelines for influencing decisions
- Opportunities for ongoing dialogue

## **Support – Do We Really Care?**

Organizations need to demonstrate in very practical ways that they care for their staff and support them—not just as employees, but also as people with intrinsic value. As the nature of work evolves, and organizations re-structure, people need support both to perform their current jobs and prepare for ‘new’ ones either within or outside the organization.

Effective support is about equipping staff for the challenges of the future, both organizational and personal.

Key indicators of effective support include:

- Realistic human resource plans, fully accessible and regularly updated
- A focus on helping people create their new jobs
- Adequate professional development support
- Opportunities to explore a variety of options
- Clear guidelines for ‘transitioning’ into whatever jobs people are headed for next, and clear information about available supports and how to access them
- Follow-through assistance

## **Structure – Are We In This Together?**

Traditional organizational structures typically reflect a ‘command and control’ philosophy, with authority, freedom, and usually money, concentrated at the top. Today’s more adaptive organizations, on the other hand, are characterized by more open, flexible, ‘flatter’ structures, and environments in which authority, accountability and ownership are part of how everyone works. Making the shift to such structures means addressing important questions about formal and informal structures, staff/management relations, and the key issues of job attachment and security. Handled appropriately, the result will most likely be a group of people committed to common goals, and to the organization itself. Handled poorly, the result will likely be an alienated and detached work force.

Structuring effectively for change is about creating a sense of ‘connectedness’ – an organization where people are committed to the ‘work’, the organization, and each other.

Key indicators of effective structure include:

- Reduced bureaucracy
- Teams organized around, and responsible for, complete processes
- Broad sharing of authority and resources
- Clear guidelines for supporting ‘success’
- Open processes related to job attachment and security
- A commitment to ‘servant leadership’

## **The Future – Can We Create It Together?**

Planning for the future of an organization is a role traditionally restricted to management. If an organization is to truly create a sustainable future, however, every staff member needs to be a part of the process. These changes will serve the organization well in the midst of whatever challenges and uncertainties it may continue to face.

Creating a sustainable future together is about engaging as many people as possible as co-creators, indeed, as co-owners of the organization.

Key indicators of planning for the future together include:

- Clearly defined planning process

- A focus on both vision and current reality
- Acknowledging uncertainty, complexity and diversity
- Clear guidelines for innovation, renewal and change
- Freedom to fail, and learn
- Appropriate implementation expectations and support

## Conclusion

Organizational change has been a very hot topic in the past few years. As evidence for that, all you need do is enter the term 'organizational change' into any search engine, and see how many thousand 'hits' are reported. Alta Vista reports more than 20,000 pages. Or check on one of the online book-sellers, and see how many books on the subject are currently in print - Amazon.com lists more than 1,500.

There's clearly no shortage of people offering advice on how to bring about successful organizational change. And yet, it seems far easier to find evidence of failed change initiatives than of successful ones. We believe that the main reason is a simple one - a fundamental oversight that dooms many well-intentioned change initiatives to failure. Michael Hammer, the person often named as the originator of business process re-engineering, wrote an article not long ago, the title of which pretty much sums up that oversight - it was called 'Re-engineering - the Fad that Forgot People.' Sadly, most failed change initiatives deserve a similar title - 'the change that forgot people.'

Whenever we present this idea in workshops (and no doubt this is happening with some readers of this article), there are some who react a combination of frustration and despair. "What about the fact that so many people resist change? We can't wait for them to get comfortable - we need to them to act... now!", they say.

Indeed, many popular books and articles on change suggest that the best strategy is one that operates on two distinct levels. Managers and supervisors are encouraged to be everything from cheerleaders to task-masters, whose role it is to cajole, motivate or simple command their reluctant followers to knuckle down and do what must be done. At the same time, the message given to subordinates is often along the lines of "don't worry, be happy" - trust management to do the right thing, and just go along with it. The result - a workforce with little opportunity to 'own' the changes they are expected to implement.

Perhaps we should pay more attention to the words of two of today's leading thinkers on organizational change, who challenge us in similar ways. Fritjof Capra (*The Web of Life, The Turning Point*) recently said, 'People don't fear change - victims fear change.' In a similar vein, Dee Hock (founding President of Visa International) said, 'People don't resist change - they resist being changed.'

It's time to put people back into the change process by creating a climate that promotes engagement.