



## LIFELONG LEARNERS INFLUENCING ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

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### **Abstract:**

*Organizational change occurs in every organization that deals with growth and transition. Organizational leaders develop a commitment to lifelong learning throughout their careers. As the organizational leader grows, the organization in which they lead grows as well. Organizational leaders are characterized by how they develop their strategic plan that will influence change. Discipline is essential to the development of a leader influencing organizational change. Organizational leaders create psychological contracts with employees to build trust, confidence, and business relationships. Psychological contracts motivate employees intrinsically, and in ways that go beyond the confines of the physical contract signed between employees and management. Organizational leaders honor psychological contracts to take advantage of the talented employees that can benefit the organization. Psychological contracts assist leaders guiding their organization through changes by creating intrinsic motivators to develop an understanding of expectations. Changes that need to occur should be well communicated and implemented at a time that offers the organization and advantage rather than a setback. Leadership differs from management by requiring an alternative approach when dealing with employees and how to direct change at the individual, group, or larger system level. Organizational leaders create an environment for change that must be nurtured for the employees to commit to following the leader. Organizational change develops throughout the life cycle of an organization and is dependent on the organizational leader's willingness to continue to learn.*

**Key words:** *organizational change, organizational leadership, lifelong learners, organizational model*

### **1. Introduction**

“Organizations change all the time, each and every day. The change that occurs in organizations is, for the most part, unplanned and gradual” (Burke, 2014, p. 1). Although this is not a definition of organizational change, in essence, this defines the realistic life cycle of an organization. Organizations adapt to their environment and situations to become leaders in their industry or some cases to maintain a standard operation. Many factors can impact the type of change, and the models of change and

organization will use. Change factors that influence organizations include; the environment, personnel, the history of the organization, and external or internal forces. Organizational leaders drive organizational change by demonstrating the characteristics of a lifelong learner. "In a static world, we can learn virtually everything we need to know in life by the time we are 15, however in a changing world, we can never learn it all, even if we keep growing into our 90's" (Kotter, 2012, p. 23). Lifelong learners lead organizations by demonstrating their capacity to incorporate habits that can drive their followers to achieve the goals of the organization. The lifelong learner will develop a strategy or follow a model that will guide an organization through change. Classifications for organizational change falls into three distinct levels of change: individual, group, and larger system change levels. Each of the three levels of change affects the organization by focusing on different dynamics and complexity of the organization to move the individual, group, or larger system forward. This report discusses how life-long learners influence organizational change by committing to offering new perspectives through increased understanding of organizational change models.

"In a time where the half-life of any skill is about five years, leaders bear a responsibility to renew their perspective in order to secure the relevance of their organization" (Mikkelsen & Jarcho, 2015, p.2). Lifelong learners must bring fresh new ideas to their organization, or create a structure that allows for new ideas to be accepted. The leaders of an organization must remain relevant to their colleagues and followers if they are to continue driving the organization forward. According to Kotter (2012), lifelong learners or leaders should incorporate five mental habits that support their learning; leaders must be willing to take risks, to humbly self-reflect on experiences, solicit opinions from their colleagues and followers, listen carefully to their staff, and learners must be open to getting new perspectives from others. Leaders define the direction of the organization based on their values and the experiences they gain from their openness to learning. Leaders that continue to grow and learn gain the respect and loyalty of their followers and build a culture that encourages growth. Senge (2006) states, "people with high levels of personal mastery are continually expanding their ability to create the results in life they truly seek" (p. 131). Leaders with a desire to influence organizational change want to align vision with reality. For change to take place leaders, find the necessary discipline to develop habits that can turn their vision into applicable reality. Organizational change does not happen automatically, but with a leader that can see where the organization can grow and develop.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

Leaders that are self-motivated decision-makers will make mistakes throughout their careers. However, a lifelong learner is willing to admit their mistakes allowing themselves to learn and grow. Mistakes do not signify failure, but mistakes signify leaders are making decisions to move the organization forward. A leader that

admits mistakes opens the door for growth in their life and their organization. An organization that publicly admits their mistakes builds loyalty and trust, which allows the organization to change with minimal fear of the unknown. An organization that does not have a lifelong learner as their leader is less likely to advance in the marketplace when opportunities present themselves. Leaders that are learners can advance because they are more apt to be ready and prepared due to their constant willingness to grow. Another habit that leaders must consider when striving for organizational change is finding a time to reflect and consider their failures and successes (Kotter, 2012). Personal reflection becomes essential to the growth of leaders as they move an organization to change by allowing for consideration of multiple alternatives to assist in their decision-making. Humility is necessary during this reflection time for the leader to recognize their opportunities and strengths versus their weaknesses and threats.

According to Bugge and Wikan (2016), lifelong learners are leaders established in the society that has increased their personal value by continuing their education to gain further knowledge and understanding. Leaders have to be willing to develop their skills and talents through continued education programs due to the increased level of necessary skills required for employment. "At the same time, on the job training is shrinking. In America and Britain, it has fallen by roughly half in the past two decades" (Economist, 2017). Employees see fewer opportunities to train on the job; however, more organizations are encouraging their employees to develop the necessary skills in online learning environments. The lack of training demonstrates an increase in competition for candidates seeking jobs, requiring workers to add more value to themselves by learning more on their own. Leaders that have a desire for their organizations to grow may offer opportunities to their employees to develop the necessary skills needed or offer incentives for the employees to develop skills and talents. Leaders should be committed to developing a culture of growth and learning, so there is a continuous attitude of development in the organization by all the employees. As a leader grows, the organization is more likely to grow. However, the leader must decide what areas of the organization will develop in and how they will meet their goals.

Strategic leadership is another component of organizational change that influences the positive and negative direction an organization may take. "Leadership defines what the future should look like, aligns people without vision, and inspires them to make it happen despite the obstacles" (Kotter, 2012, p. 28). Leaders have the difficult task of combining the talents of people with a variety of backgrounds into a functioning team. By developing a strategy for leading change in an organization, leaders can avoid succumbing to trivial day-to-day managerial duties but can create opportunities for professional development designed to meet organizational goals. Leadership differs from management by requiring an alternative approach when dealing with employees and how to direct change at the individual, group, or larger system level. "Management is a set of processes that can keep a complicated system of people and technology running smoothly" (Kotter, 2012, p. 28). When a leader

focuses on managing policies and procedures in an organization, they run the risk of demotivating employees and miss opportunities to inspire employees to make desired skill level gains. Leaders must decide to either manage their employees by forcing compliance or to strategically direct their employees through motivation and inspiration (Kotter, 2012).

"For change to occur there is a need to understand more about the timing of communication and the amount to communicate at any given time" (Burke, 2014, p. 351). As a leader works through the strategic plan for organizational change, the leader must intentionally select the least disruptive period to maintain a normal flow of business no undue stress. Changes that need to occur should be well communicated and implemented at a time that offers the organization an advantage rather than a setback. Unfortunately, leaders are not able to always plan out the right time to make changes depending on the type of leader that was in place before them. "Successors to charismatic leaders often have a difficult time because charismatic leaders rarely leave adequate infrastructures and systems to maintain what they initiated during their tenures" (Burke, 2014, p. 351). The successor to an organization after a charismatic leader has departed often faces challenges of not being accepted because of the personality differences. Recommended changes may be viewed negatively because of what the employees are not able to visualize for themselves. "A fundamental principle of managing organizational change is that in an organizational change effort, communicating what will remain the same is as important as communicating what will be different" (Burke, 2014, p. 248). Clarity about upcoming changes establishes transparent communication between employees and new leadership. An organization will have a difficult time making changes if there is friction between the new leader and the employees, especially if changes seem to be made unwarranted. Not only do employees develop a sense of loyalty to past leaders, but employees also develop loyalty to the culture that was developed by the previous leadership. "In order to change an organization's culture one must first find it" (Burke, 2014, p. 256). Patiently observing an organization to identify their culture offers leaders insight into the culture and how to create changes in the needed areas. For leaders that are new to an organization, this observation period may range from weeks to months, and possibly even a year. Unfortunately, many new leaders are not afforded the amount of time to assess the culture of the organization properly; rather they may only be given a few weeks to establish a strategic plan for the organization.

"Organizational change is more likely to happen when the leader develops trust with the employees and can gain their cooperation and respect. "When the people feel safe and protected by the leadership in the organization, the natural selection is to trust and cooperate" (Sinek, 2016). Organizational leadership must develop psychological contracts in the workplace to create trusting relationships that lead to an understanding of expectations. Psychological contracts motivate employees intrinsically, and in ways that go beyond the confines of the paper contract signed between employees and management. According to Streble (1996), "psychological contracts incorporate the element of mutual expectation and reciprocal commitment

that arise from feelings of trust and independence between employee and employer" (p. 88). Organizational leadership must honor psychological contracts to take full advantage of the talented employees that can benefit the organization. Organizational leadership that does not use psychological contracts risk breaking trust and losing credibility with their employees which hinder the advancement of the strategic plan for organizational change. Employees of an organization that has broken psychological contracts no longer trust the leadership to fulfill previously made promises.

"Great leaders would never sacrifice the people to save the numbers; they would sooner sacrifice the numbers to save the people" (Sinek, 2016). Leaders committed to organizational change intentionally develop a sense of security with employees by meeting their needs as they drive the company towards change. Organizational leaders must avoid risking conflict with employees by placing the interest of the employees as a priority, and part of the organization's strategic plan. Employees that are part of an organization going through change observe the reactions that leaders have to situations, and how they align with the policies and procedures in the handbook. Leadership that responds in a fashion that differs from expectations leads employees to develop negative perceptions of the leadership, thus causing increased resistance to change. "Employees translate those perceptions about values into beliefs about how the company works – about the unspoken rules that apply to career development, promotions, decision making, conflict resolution, resource allocation, risk sharing, and layoffs" (Strebel, 1996, p. 87). Organizational leadership does not need to develop a personal relationship between leaders and employees to have effective psychological contracts. Organizational leaders must have their employees believe they are cared for and valued. Leadership can create incentives that support employees by offering intrinsic rewards when employees meet expectations. Psychological contracts assist organizational leaders by offering motivators to help keep the strategic plan operating efficiently.

In Strebel's (1996) article referencing Haruo Naito's leadership goals at Eisai Naito wanted to "encourage entrepreneurial and innovative activity and create an environment in which such efforts would be accepted and rewarded" (p. 90). Naito's goal was to develop a psychological contract to change the culture and allow employees to become empowered to develop a product on their own while offering rewards. Organizational leaders can create opportunities to surpass their competitors by implementing reward systems that honor employees for adding value to the organization. Organizational change can occur when the leader develops programs that motivate employees with psychological contracts. Organizational change happens when leaders are committed to "redefining employees' commitment to new goals in terms that employees understand and act on. Without such leadership, employees remain skeptical of the vision for change and distrustful of management, and management will likewise be frustrated and stymied by employees' resistance" (Strebel, 1996, p. 92).

Organizational leaders that develop psychological contracts establish expectations and rewards that benefit both the leaders of the organization and the

employees. Expectations instituted with psychological contracts should remain consistent in their rewards as well as their consequences. Organizational employees must realize that their success is dependent on the organization's success. If the success of the employees relates to the success of their coworkers, employees will be less likely to backstab their colleagues. Sinek (2014) stated, "In the military, they give medals to people who are willing to sacrifice themselves so that others may gain. In business, we give bonuses to people who are willing to sacrifice others so that we may gain". Likewise, organizational leaders should receive consequences when they break psychological contracts and sacrifice their employees' rights and benefits to achieve gains. The achieved gains met by sacrificing employees' rights and benefits pale in comparison to the missed opportunities due to the leader breaking the psychological contract. Breaking psychological contracts harms the organization by creating a divide between the leadership and the employees. Organizational leaders that failed to develop psychological contracts missed the opportunity to create a culture that encourages self-learning, experimentation, and employees using their entrepreneurial skills to strengthen the organization.

Organizational change occurs at three levels within the organization: individual, group, and larger systems. Organizational leaders tasked with directing change must address change at each of the organizational change levels to be successful. "Frequently, a deliberate tactic for organizational change at the individual level is to infuse the system with new leadership, especially at the tip" (Burke, 2014, p. 104). Organizational leaders that are new to an organization decide between retaining current employees, and hiring new employees that can fill the needs of an organization. Organizational change at the individual level begins with recruitment, selection, replacement, and displacement. "This category of individual change concerns getting, placing, and keeping the right people in the right roles and jobs to facilitate the larger change effort" (Burke, 2014, p. 101). Once the team is selected, there is a training and development phase that allows the organization to train and prep their employees for the positions they are most needed. Although organizational leaders make changes they perceive as positive, there will still be a level of resistance from employees that do not believe changes were necessary. "The phenomenon of resisting change is more accurately a resistance to losing something of value to the person – loss of the known and tried in the face of being asked, if not forced to move into the unknown and untried" (Burke, 2014, p. 108). Organization leaders that implement change at the individual level should develop an action plan for how to respond to employees that are resistant to change.

Organizational change at the group level focuses on the work group and how they support the individual employee as they process change. "Conducting team building activities often supports the larger organization change. The more the work unit has at least one goal that is common to all group members, the more likely a team building activity is in order" (Burke, 2014, p. 115). Team building is an integral part of organizational change due to the collaborative working environment it creates. Team building allows employees to focus on the common goal by working together in

their quest to achieve the mission of the organization. "To the Greeks dia-logos meant free flowing of meaning through a group, allowing the group to discover insights not attainable individually" (Senge, 2006, p. 10). Organizational leaders that develop strong teams create a culture of communication and togetherness, but employees benefit from intrinsically and extrinsically. "But unless one purpose is defined as the primary purpose, there tends to be a considerable misuse of energy. People then operate from their own hierarchy of purposes and, predictability, these are not always the same for all members" (Burke, 2014, p. 115).

Organizational change has three categories of change at the larger system level; first, second, and third order changes. "First order change is within a subsystem, and all the change in that unit will have some consequences for the larger system" (Burke, 2014, p. 122). An example of first order change in education is when a school may consider integrating collaborative learning in the classrooms, and focus mainly on one grade level working collaboratively rather than the entire school. "Second order change means that the target is a subsystem or process that is beyond the initial focus, but that will be affected if the initial effort is successful" (Burke, 2014, p. 121). Second order changes in education demonstrate a shift from collaborative learning in a single grade level to an increase in collaborative learning for all grade levels and across the curriculum. Collaborative learning across the curriculum would offer opportunities for students and teachers and different classes and subject areas to work together to ensure student learning. "Third order change eventually influences some organizational processes or outcome that is affected by multiple factors" (Burke, 2014, p. 121). Organizational change that develops at the third order of larger systems can be exemplified by a school reserving time during the school day to allow for collaboration on a daily basis amongst teachers and students. Creating a dynamic working environment for collaboration would have a complex degree of change that would need to be considered and instituted before implementation.

Organizational leaders have the responsibility of implementing a model to direct the changes in the most efficient manner. According to Burke (2014), there are five reasons why organizations should use organizational models: organizational models can help to categorize organizations, they help to interpret data about the organization, they help to enhance our understanding of situations, they help to provide a comment, shorthanded language, and organizational models can help to guide actions for change. Incorporating in organizational change model allows organizational leaders insight into how to clarify their mission and goals for their employees. "We must achieve clarity about strategy and then let this clarity help us to determine what the structure should be" (Burke, 2014, p. 203). An organizational model that leaders can use to execute organizational change is the Nadler-Tushman Congruence Model.

The Nadler-Tushman Congruence Model assumes that "an organization is an open system and therefore is influenced by its environment and also shapes its environment, at least to some extent, by its output" (Burke, 2014, p. 208). Organizational leaders that use this model gain the benefit of a framework that influences change in their organization through input and output. The transformational

process has four inputs that influence change: the environment, available resources, an organization's history, and strategy. Each input of the transformational process has different factors that directly influence organizational change. The framework for this model allows each of the four inputs and opportunity to be a change agent for the organization. Burke (2014) states, "models, then, help us to be more efficient and to be more rational as we attempt to understand and change an organization" (p. 207)

### **3. Conclusion**

Organizational change is directly related to the effectiveness of the organizational leader and their willingness to be a lifelong learner. Organizational leaders that exhibit characteristics of a lifelong learner influence change in their organization because of their commitment to seek personal mastery for themselves and everyone around them. Lifelong learners embrace change in their professional lives on a continuous basis and incorporate these change principles in their leadership. Organizational leaders develop strategies to make changes that would benefit an organization at the individual, group, and the larger system level. Strategies developed by the organizational leader create opportunities for the organization to change by transitioning the organizational leader's vision to reality.

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