

Getting Ready to Get Ready for Change

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Over our 20 plus years of consulting, we have taken great pride in our ability to use a reasoned and logical approach with our clients. We have believed in our mastery of the art and science of helping clients identify the obstacles to their organizational success. We have placed great trust in our knack for assisting them in crafting sound approaches to conquering those impediments. While we have enjoyed much success with our consulting over the years, we do have a deep, dark secret. Sometimes our consulting work has failed!

Of course, when the results of our consulting engagements have fallen short of our expectations, we have reflected and analyzed them from every conceivable *logical* angle. However, in general, this rational reflection process has not yielded any great insights or prevented us from falling into similar traps from time to time. Eventually, we did discover what we now believe to be the root of the problem.

Our real “aha” experience came about quite inadvertently when I was working with a colleague who is a clinical psychologist in private practice. She works with us from time-to-time as a management consultant as well. She listened to me recount my woes of my latest “difficult” client who was paying me lots of money to carry out a project that didn’t seem to be going anywhere. She interrupted me and said, “Kathy, just because a client comes to my office with a fistful of money and asks me to help her stop smoking doesn’t mean that she is really ready to give up cigarettes.” Her comment caused a sudden shift in my logical, rational perspective. I turned fresh eyes on the factors that might differentiate those consulting projects that succeeded from those that floundered.

Subsequently she and I have collaborated to develop and test some new approaches to working with organizational clients. We have come to acknowledge afresh, and understand at a deeper level the following:

- ◆ *All consulting projects are about change.* Even “technical” consulting projects such as assisting clients with the development and installation of new computer systems, or the reengineering of new work processes, require some type of change. The changes are likely to affect the organization and/or the people who comprise it, especially the leaders.
- ◆ *The leader’s true commitment to the project is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for success.* The leader of the organization must be truly supportive of the project and ready for all that it implies. If the project is to succeed, the leader must be ready for the organizational changes as well as some personal changes, i.e. changes in his or her own attitudes and behaviors. Of course the leader’s active commitment alone is not enough to ensure success. However, without it, the project cannot succeed.
- ◆ *An accurate understanding of the leader’s readiness for change requires a conscious assessment.* Getting ready to change, in addition to the actual personal change process, evolves through a

distinct set of developmental phases. An individual's place in the process may not be transparent. We have found that a critical element in choosing effective methods of working with our clients is our ability to assess the leader's level of readiness for change.

- ◆ *Consultants, like many educated people, are susceptible to logic traps.* These logic traps lead us to make erroneous assumptions about our client's level of motivation and readiness for the actions that will be required of them to ensure the success of the project.

While these insights are not revolutionary, incorporating them into our practice consciously has made a difference in our work. Now we are on the look-out for those aspects of the change process that defy logic. The remainder of this article will describe what we have discovered as we have tested our new insights.

The Consultants' Fallacy: If at First You Don't Succeed, Try Harder

Frequently, when a client contracts with us to carry out a project within the organization, we approach the assignment from a reasoned and logical perspective. We listen to the leader describe the problems to be addressed, and goals and objectives to be achieved. Since the leaders are aware of the issues, we assume that they are motivated to address them. Logically, we believe that if we provide them with relevant and accurate data, they will agree with our recommendations. If we make a sound business case for our advice, they will take it. We are shocked if they don't act quickly and forcefully. Often we assume that there is something wrong with our data, our logic, or our powers of persuasion.

What do we do? We try harder. We try harder to persuade them. We try harder to give them stronger data. In other words, we keep doing the same thing only more of it. In escalating our efforts, we take on more and more ownership of the problems ourselves. In fact, our zealotry may backfire. The client leader may react to our fervor by becoming even more resistant to our recommendations.

Certainly, we are not arguing against using data and strong business arguments. However, cognitive approaches, such as arguing with data and facts, will appeal only to the rational aspects of our clients' personalities. Sometimes our clients fail to act for reasons that are not so rational. In these cases, we must find approaches that address their *emotional* needs in order to create a climate of change. If the leader is not truly ready to change, the project probably is doomed.

We are not proposing that the leader's readiness for change is the only factor in determining the success or failure of a consulting project. The organization is likely to be composed of numerous layers, many individuals and a culture and subcultures. Any major change effort must address all of these constituencies. However, we have found that if the leader is not really on board, efforts aimed at the rest of the organization are likely to be in vain. Thus, we decided to examine the research on personal or individual change to see how it might apply to our initial work with the leaders of our client organizations.

Stages of Personal Change

According to psychotherapists, Prochaska, Norcross, and Diclemente, (1994) the personal change process unfolds in a spiral through six stages. Each of the stages represents a person's motivation or state of readiness to change. Motivation, in this model, can be viewed as a probability of certain behaviors, (Miller and Rollnick, 1991). The reason that the process is depicted as a spiral is because motivation can fluctuate from time to time. It is normal for a person to go through the entire process more than once before the changes become a stable part of the individual's normal behavior.

To cite one example of a personal change that is all too familiar, I would guess that many of us have changed to healthy diets in order to lose weight. While changing our diets long enough to lose weight is hard enough, the real challenge is to maintain the healthy diet once we have lost the weight. Undoubtedly, many of us have moved through the change of diet spiral several times before the new eating habits became part of our normal behavior.

This change spiral is composed of the following six stages of readiness:

1. Precontemplation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• no awareness of the problem• resist or minimize the need for change.• far from ready to change.
2. Contemplation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• increased awareness of the problem• high levels of ambivalence and resistance to the change that is needed to solve it
3. Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• much of the ambivalence is resolved that leads to commitment to change and readiness for action• may begin planning for action but still need self-confidence in order to act
4. Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• new behaviors occur and• change is observable
5. Maintenance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• actions continue• plans are made to prevent relapse
6. Termination or recycling	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• new behaviors either become routine, or some recycling through the stages occurs

In our view, the consulting approaches that will succeed with those who are in the first two phases of the change process are not the same as the approaches that will work with those who are in the later phases. That is why it is so important for us to accurately assess our client's actual stage of readiness to act.

Others have developed models that depict the stages of personal change as well. For example, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's (1969) classic work on the stages of death has been adapted by organizational change practitioners (e.g. William Bridges, 1991). This work has been used widely in companies to help managers and supervisors understand the grieving process. These organizational

consultants maintain that people are likely to go through this grieving when faced with inevitable change. We believe that unique value that the Prochaska stage framework brings to our consulting is that this model defines each stage as a level of readiness to act. Moreover, we believe that the first two stages in the Prochaska model, precontemplation and contemplation, are unique and are the most critical to us in our work. For purposes of assessing whether we have the level of commitment that we need from the leader, we have chosen to use this model and to focus on the first two stages.

Look Out for Ambivalence

Chances are when we begin our work with a client organization, many of its members are in those early stages of precontemplation or contemplation. The precontemplation stage is characterized by a near complete lack of awareness of a problem. At this stage the person is not even considering the possibility of change. However, others within the organization may see the need. People who are confronted with the need to change while in the precontemplation stage are likely to be surprised more than resistant at first. However, once they recover from the surprise, they are very likely to become ambivalent about it at best. At worst, they may be resistant.

The contemplation stage is *typified* by ambivalence. When clients are ambivalent, they may swing back and forth between acknowledging the problems and denying the problems, wanting to change and wanting to stay the same. For example, consider the words of a leader in one of our client organizations. He had just received some feedback about the behavior in his organization from some of his customers. He said the following to us:

“They told me that my group is dysfunctional! I really don’t think that is the case. Yeah, the managers did get in an argument with each other while we were meeting with our customer. But that isn’t so bad, is it? The argument wasn’t serious. The managers *did* continue to argue out in the hall after the meeting. And one of them *did* call the other a liar. I guess that is pretty unprofessional. I suppose I should speak with them about this incident. But I don’t think that the customer heard this. I am not sure that this is really such a big deal. After all, we do get a lot done in our organization. We couldn’t be too dysfunctional and be so productive. Right? I know I should probably address this, but I hate to get down on these good performers.”

Prescribing Remedies Prematurely

If the consultants confront the problem and prescribe a remedy when the client is struggling with ambivalence, they run the very high risk of the client denying and resisting. The key at these early stages is to use an approach that encourages the clients to explore their ambivalence and to come up with their *own* arguments for change. Some psychotherapists call this strategy motivational interviewing, (Miller and Rollnick, 1991.) Those of us who would jump into the fray and tell our clients to address this dysfunctional group of managers immediately would probably only succeed in pushing them in the opposite direction. When people who are experiencing ambivalence are confronted, they are likely to feel trapped. This feeling frequently results in resistance.

Working with those who are in these early stages is tricky. And, persons may recycle through stages of ambivalence to action and back again, before the changes truly stick. Indeed, the leaders who bring consultants into the organization and contract for our services may cycle through several spirals of change. Remember that awareness of the problem does not necessarily imply straightforward commitment, ability or readiness to solve it. And, even those who are ready for action when they contract with us may relapse into earlier stages of ambivalence from time to time. The key is to match our consulting approach flexibly to the leaders' motivational states even as they shift. Thus, we may be dealing with their ambivalence one-day and their readiness for action the next. Moreover, if we are working with a team of leaders, each may be in a different stage of the change process at any given point in time.

Assessing Leaders' Readiness for Change

The assessment process, while critical, is complex. We begin by asking our client leader a series of questions. The questions are aimed at measuring several aspects of readiness. For example, first we appraise their understanding of the issues, including how they became aware of the problem, and how they gathered either formal or informal data. We ask them how they determined that they needed a consultant and what they think the consultant should do to assist them in solving the problem.

Next we estimate their ability to address the problem. We ask them a series of questions to get at whether they have the power, resources and personal and organizational capabilities to carry out the project and solve the problem.

Finally we judge their stage of motivation or readiness to act. This is the part of the assessment in which we use the Prochaska model. Our emphasis is on evaluating whether the leader is in the precontemplation, contemplation or preparation stage. We ask a series of open-ended questions designed to get the client to do most of the talking. The point is to listen for signs of ambivalence. For example, we might ask the client to tell us about what has led up to our being brought into the organization. While the client talks, we remain neutral towards the problems he or she describes. We occasionally ask questions to probe for ambivalence, such as "What would happen if you didn't act on this issue?" "How important are these issues to the success of the organization?" "What is good about the way things are?" "What is the likelihood that you really can make these changes?"

Recently, we have begun to use scenarios with the leaders as a way of assessing ambivalence. We describe possible incidents, which could take place during the project. We ask the leaders what they would do in the face of these scenarios, (e.g. how would they feel? What they would do? How far they would go to address?) We believe that this assessment technique is promising.

Ready for What?

Our assessments may indicate that our clients are at the contemplation phase when considering the *overall organizational changes* that are needed. They are aware of the problem and can talk quite convincingly about it at an intellectual level. However, awareness of the problem does not necessarily imply commitment to solve it. They may still be in a state of ambivalence, fluctuating back and forth between reasons to change and reasons not to change the organization.

At the same time, if we were to assess their stage of readiness to make *personal* changes in line with the requirements of the project, we might find that they are in the precontemplation phase. Frequently, the leader who hires us in the first place is almost completely unaware of what the project will require in terms of his or her own personal change. They assume that the causes of the problem or the factors that will determine the success of the project lie elsewhere. Thus, not only are they not motivated to change, they aren't even aware that they may have to change.

The assessment process is crucial yet difficult. In fact, we have found a few traps, which can lead us, astray unless we are on guard for them.

Avoiding the Logic Traps

We have identified three logic traps that have ensnared us occasionally. Our hope is to prevent other consultants from being ambushed by the traps. We will use our own experiences with clients to exemplify each of the logic traps.

Logic Trap #1: Clients who are willing to pay us to assist them with a project are committed to do whatever it takes to see it succeed.

Sometimes we will run into clients who resemble the person who pays the therapist to help him stop smoking but who isn't really ready to give up cigarettes. The clients' commitment of money and resources to the project is not necessarily a direct indication of their motivation to do whatever it takes to see it succeed.

For example, we worked with a client organization recently on an instructional design project funded with a six-figure budget. The project was to result in an interactive training program to teach members of the organization worldwide to follow a new work process aimed at bringing products to market more quickly. Our primary customer was the vice president of the organization. She appeared to be squarely behind the success of the project. After all, the money for the project was coming out of her budget that she had to justify and for which she was accountable.

As we blithely proceeded with what seemed to be a very straightforward, technical instructional design process that she had sanctioned, we began to run into roadblocks. Frequently, disagreements within the organization led us down some blind alleys. When we brought the data illustrating the roadblocks to the attention of the vice president, she agreed to help us resolve the problems. However, she did not follow up and the project continued to stall. Our next tactic was to try to persuade her of the importance of her active involvement by showing her project-tracking charts that indicated that we were in danger of going over budget and missing deadlines. Still she did not act.

Eventually we came to understand that she had been pressured by others in her organization to provide better training on the new work process. Her response to the pressure was to commit to the design and development of the new training program. However she, herself was ambivalent about the need for the training program. On the one hand she believed that people should be given instruction on how to carry out the new work process. On the other hand, she felt that really strong performers would learn it on their own or through listening to a didactic presentation on the subject. In spite of her commitment of resources to the development of the training, she was ambivalent about

it and was not ready to support it with her own active involvement. She resembled the smoker who went to the therapist to get help in breaking her smoking habit because her family persuaded her to do so.

This client was in the contemplation phase of the change process. Our use of data that showed how the project was veering off-course was not going to work in inspiring her to act. Instead, we should have used techniques appropriate to working through her *and* her organization's ambivalence. Of course, first we would have had to recognize that the leader and many in her organization *were ambivalent*. Instead of assessing the level of readiness of this leader, we assumed that she was ready to act because she was willing to pay for the project. Furthermore, we assumed that she could take the lead in addressing any differences in the rest of her organization. We now believe that her inaction, in spite of the budget overruns, missed deadlines and our nagging was a direct result of our "missing" her ambivalence in the first place. She was not likely to help us handle the ambivalence in the rest of the organization if she was experiencing the ambivalence herself.

Logic Trap #2: Clients who become aware of how their behavior is contributing to a problem will be motivated to make the changes that will solve it.

Frequently, the leaders who hire us in the first place are almost completely unaware of how they, themselves, will have to change. They assume that the causes of the problem or the factors that will determine the success of the project lie elsewhere. Thus, not only are they not motivated to change, they aren't even aware that *they* may have to change.

Often consultants believe that their clients will willingly change if they become aware of how they are contributing to the problems. In fact, the consultant's task of raising awareness in those who do not see their own problems is quite arduous. However, we cannot assume that our job is done once our clients are aware of their problems. If we make this mistake we are in a position similar to the doctor who assumes that his patients will change their diet if they find out that their arteries are clogged. The good doctor realizes that this insight does not mean that the clients will control their fat intake or even want to try.

An example of this phenomenon in our own work comes from a project in which we were assisting a management team with the rollout to their work force of a new business strategy. The leader of the management team was a true believer in the strategy. He was a strong advocate for the changes that he believed would be required *of others* in his organization. However, over the course of the rollout, he became frustrated with what he perceived to be the project's slow progress. He attributed the problem to a lack of enthusiasm and energy from the rest of his management team.

We assisted the leader and the management team in examining and addressing the leader's concerns. We came to the conclusion that it was the leader's behavior that was the greatest impediment to the progress of the rollout. He was very demanding and tended to ask his management team to commit to and carry out more projects and tasks simultaneously than they could complete even if they worked 80 to 90 hours a week. And he communicated to them as if all requests were high priority.

We concluded that this client was in the pre-contemplation phase. He was completely unaware of how his behavior with his management team was affecting their ability to meet his expectations for the rollout of the new strategy. Thus our first task was to help him become aware of the problem without eliciting his denial or rejection.

We were rightfully proud when we accomplished that goal. He was able to articulate his understanding of his role in creating and sustaining the problem both to us and to his management team. Thus, we felt sure that he would change. We began to coach him with very specific suggestions and advice about how to set priorities with his team, and how to work with them to establish achievable objectives. We were taken back when, at one point in our coaching session, he interrupted us and said, “ Wait a minute! You are telling me how to change my management style. I didn’t say that I was ready to go that far.” We realized that we were in a situation similar to the doctor whose patient was aware of how his diet was affecting his deteriorating health but wasn’t ready to change his eating habits.

Logic Trap #3: Once a client takes observable actions to change, we can rest assured that the ambivalence is resolved and we can move on.

When we observe a change in behavior in our clients, it is tempting to breathe a sigh of relief. Frequently we assume that the hard work is behind us. However, change rarely unfolds in a straight line. We don’t necessarily leave one stage cleanly behind as we enter another. Instead, psychotherapists, Prochaska, Norcross, and Diclemente, (1994) illustrate how the personal change process evolves in a spiral. This means that our client can be engaging in new behaviors in line with the desired change one-day and fall back into ambivalence and lack of action on another day.

The wise therapist knows that a smoker may take steps to stop smoking without really giving up cigarettes for good. Likewise, we should not assume that our clients’ ambivalence is resolved once and for all when we see them begin to act.

A few years ago we were hired to coach a very high level manager who was brilliant technically, but who lacked the ability to manage people. In fact, it appeared to us that he lacked the ability to be civil to people with whom he worked. At first he did not see any reason at all to change. He believed that the people he managed should merely “toughen up” to his abrasive style. We engaged in coaching aimed at helping him overcome his ambivalence about his style. We were pleased when he told us that he was changing. He had decided to start asking for the opinions of his employees periodically. We were quite delighted with his apparent progress. We eagerly anticipated what he called his first employee suggestion meeting. He did, in fact, ask his employees for suggestions during this meeting. However, when the client-leader didn’t agree with a suggestion, he tended to interrupt or mildly insult the person offering the suggestion. For example, when one of his employees gingerly suggested that he thought efficiencies would improve if preventative maintenance was performed on the equipment, the manager burst out with “Get real! You have been around here long enough to know better than that!” So much for our delight in the client leader’s personal change.

Conclusions

So what have we learned from these experiences?

- ◆ First, we now know that we are subject to several logic traps that frequently ensnare people who are educated and who use their brains to make a living. What seems logical is not always so.
- ◆ Second, we truly recognize the importance of matching the consulting technique or intervention to level of readiness of the client (a contingency model). We have always known that consultants and other behavioral scientists use various kinds of interventions. The types range from those that are aimed at addressing the feelings and tensions that create dysfunction to those that prescribe specific actionable steps. We have tended to think of these types of interventions as being attached to “schools of thought” or “models of consulting.” Now we believe that we should look at the types of interventions in the framework of a contingency model. For maximizing effectiveness, consultants should match the intervention to the specific circumstances of the project, including the client’s stage of readiness.
- ◆ Third, we have learned to be alert to and detect the signs that will lead us to an accurate assessment of our clients’ phase in the change readiness cycle. Based upon this assessment process, we can choose not to work with the client who we do not feel is ready, or we can choose to use a strategy that will help them with their lack of awareness or ambivalence. In other words, we can choose to help them get ready to change.