

The Colour of Change is Grey

BY ROBERT M. GIGNAC

Change. Ongoing. Eternal. The only constant. The major factor in what we as business owners/professionals do for a living. We live to change things. We change the way people work, we change their routines, and in our desire to reinvent continually, we attempt constructively to change peoples' lives. Change can cause pain. This fact is the first law of change. Change takes what is known and familiar to us and turns our existence into the unknown and unfamiliar. But this shouldn't be news, consider the following: "There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things." Sounds like the latest in management hyperbole doesn't it? It was, over 300 years ago, the quote is in fact from Niccolo Machiavelli, 1659.

Change doesn't ask for volunteers and it doesn't ask for permission. So what drives change? We do. We are continually striving to find different (not always 'better') ways of doing things, and encouraging those around us to change as well. We often take the role of change implementer not simply to make somebody else's job easier, but to make our own easier.

Change on its own really has no colour; it would be transparent if implemented successfully, so where does 'Grey' come from? Imagine change as a continuum, white on one end, black at the other. White change is the illuminating change, the bright idea, shedding light on dark processes constraining an organization from being successful. White change provides the major competitive advantage, the new products and procedures that allow us to become better at what we do. At the other end of the spectrum we find black change, change implemented for change's sake. Black change stifles creative processes imposing obsolescence on an organization, and is identified by the appearance of movement toward no apparent goal. In reality, only about 5% of change is white, and only about 5% of change is black. That leaves the remaining 90% of change somewhere in-between – an area known as 'Grey.'

Why does change often fail?

On the surface change sounds simple. Making change can be most easily described as a top-down process. Change targets are identified, goals are set, specific objectives are defined, targets are formed. Plans follow the goals. Once your goals and objectives are established, each party to the change process can then create their own individual list of the goals/plans that each subgroup needs. Everyone knows what is expected of them and what each other are supposed to accomplish in a synchronized manner. In other words, a massive planning and operational document will be the guiding force for change. We've all seen this type of document, the one sitting in a nice three-ring binder collecting dust. Which is precisely why this method doesn't work.

Basic management principles revolve around four primary functions: planning, organizing, directing and controlling. However, the situations that we find ourselves in today are extremely dynamic. A point could be made that most planning is a waste of time due to the shifting sand we stand on. Why? We plan based on variables, realities and projections as we understand them in the current context, and by the time that we get around to implementing the change, everything around us has changed. This leaves us in the situation where we are attempting to implement yesterday's plan into tomorrow's environment. As a result, do we need to learn to plan better, or do we need to learn how to react more effectively? The traditional top-down planning process runs counter to the needs of today's organizations. Far too many planning processes lack the key ingredients: leadership, passion, and feeling.

How do we start to improve the process?

In his book *Change Is*, Stephen Baetz analyzes the dynamics of change as seen through the eyes of a businessman's childhood toys kept in the attic of their home. Sound silly? Trust me, this is a powerful book and one that I heartily recommend for those interested in managing change. In order to properly facilitate change, we must understand and address the fact that most change fails for personal reasons. Baetz offers up the following

So what is change – and why is it Grey?

thoughts on interpersonal relationships:

1) The person who spills the milk, cleans it up; 2) the walls we build to keep others out also keep us in; and 3) what we fear most, we should face first.

First, we have to take responsibility for the things that we do. We have to be responsible enough to pick up the pieces when things go wrong. Too often, we fall back on the standard excuses that change implementation failed because of lack of commitment, lack of effort, or resistance to change. When change fails, it is often the result of poor planning and execution on our parts. Second, we must strive to change the well-entrenched idea that we are entities unto ourselves, and that we are somehow immune from the intrusion from the 'real world.' The third thought follows closely to the second. We really aren't different from other people, and the easiest way to change other people or processes is to change ourself first.

A final important thought

Managing and implementing change is one of our primary functions many of us deal with daily. Successful implementation of change requires that we spend time up front in preparation. The actual change usually isn't the hardest part, identifying what is needed for success, and doing the work to set the climate is the hard part. It's not only hard, it's our job. Only when we begin to better understand organizations, the people involved, and the process will we start to see a dramatic improvement in our opportunities for successful change.

One final important thought as you move ahead through the change implementation process: There are two types of people who are out there trying to implement change: 1) those who get things done, and 2) those who want to take the credit for it. Try to be in the first group – there are a lot fewer of them. **SBCM**

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