



IF CHANGE WERE A COLOUR

by Robert M. Gignac

“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.”

So what is change? Does it have a colour?

Change. Good? Bad? The only constant? Call it what you will, dealing with change is probably 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 constant desire to reinvent ourselves, we self-impose change.

But sometimes I think we underestimate that 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. However, this should not 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, almost 350 years ago; the quote is in fact from Niccolo Machiavelli, 1659.

Change on its own really has no colour; it would be transparent if implemented neatly and successfully. Since this is rarely the case, I often refer to change as 'Grey'. Imagine change as a continuum—white on one end, black at the other. White change is the illuminating change, the bright idea. 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, with no apparent upside. In reality, about five per cent of change is white and five per cent is black. That leaves the remaining 90% of change somewhere in-between—an area known as 'Grey'.

Why does change often fail?

Basic management principles revolve around four primary functions: planning, organizing, directing, and control-

ling. 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 can sometimes leave us in the situation where we are attempting to implement yesterday's plan into tomorrow's environment.

How do we start to improve the process?

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

Baetz offers up the following 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.*
- 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 the process 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 part. Second, we must strive to change the well-entrenched idea that we are somehow immune from the intrusion-change into our life. The third thought follows closely to the second. We really are not different from other people, and the easiest way to change other people or processes, is to change ourselves first.

A final thought on change

Dealing with and managing change is one of the primary tasks many of us handle daily. Successful change requires that we spend time up front in preparation. The actual change usually is not the difficult part—identifying what is needed for success and doing the work to set the climate is. Only when we begin to understand organizations, the people involved, and the process will we start to see a dramatic improvement in our opportunities for successful change. **E**

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