

# Creating Critical Mass To Support Change

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**M**ost likely every one of us has had the frustrating experience of helping to create an action plan during an off site session, only to have it filed away and forgotten upon return to the work site. We have also probably felt frustrated at how much longer major organizational changes take than was originally anticipated. It should be axiomatic to us by now that any social system will develop a tremendous amount of "status quo" inertia in its patterns of operation. Individual habit patterns, group norms, and organizational culture are all expressions of this axiom.

This inertia, or investment in the status quo, extends the time it takes to complete reorganizations and mergers, frustrates managers who want to implement new programs or policies, and frequently causes the various cultural change and development programs propounded by organization development practitioners to receive a "flavor of the month" response.

There are many reasons for this inertia. The dynamics of any organizational system will create self regulating and self correcting mechanisms which tend to protect the status quo. It is essential that these mechanisms be addressed if any significant change effort is to succeed. But that exploration is NOT the purpose of this article.

There are also a number of "cognitive structures," such as beliefs, assumptions, expectations, etc., plus the norms which all groups and organizations evolve, which also contribute to the inertia in the status quo. This article suggests ideas for working through the status quo inertia via these less tangible structures. In the following paragraphs, three problems arising from ignoring these processes are introduced. One way of addressing these problems, the creation and development of a "critical mass" network, is then presented. Next, a five step influence process for working

with status quo inertia is described. The article closes with a summary check list of ideas for use by those who wish to implement changes in organizations.

## THREE COMMON REASONS CHANGE EFFORTS TAKE SO LONG

One of the most frequent reasons for slowness in implementing organizational changes has to do with people's non-conscious but habitual mental patterns. This "Automatic Pilot



*\*John Adams is Director and Co-Founder of Earthheart Enterprises, Inc., an international consulting and training organization.*

Mindset" creates a non-conscious inertia in thinking and individual behavior patterns. A second reason is the frequent bias towards training which assumes that the ideas agreed to in the classroom will find ready acceptance on the shop floor. The third reason is a general absence of support for managing the "novelty" engendered by changes. The following paragraphs explore each of these reasons for continued inertia and then develop a basic set of criteria for creating a critical mass network of people who are fully in support of the desired changes.

## The automatic pilot mindset

To illustrate what I mean by this phrase, please put this paper down and quickly fold your arms. Now, reverse the way they are folded, placing your other arm on top and note how this feels. Most of you will experience the second way of folding your arms as being awkward or uncomfortable. It would probably take you quite a long time to get used to folding your arms this new way, and to cease folding them in the until now familiar way. This illustrates how our habit patterns work. We don't have to think about how we fold our arms, and when we do consciously choose to fold them in the reverse way, it just doesn't feel right. Everyone of us has myriads of beliefs, values and attitudes that are operating in a similarly non-conscious way at all times, subtly influencing how we act and the results we get. The longer we hold a belief, the more consistently it tends to be supported in our experience, and the more it is reinforced as the truth. This is the essence of the self fulfilling prophecy. First we must raise our "automatic pilot" patterns to consciousness, and then we must be quite disciplined if we are to succeed in creating new habits.

The same thing is true on the group and organizational levels. Here is an example. In reviewing the results of an attitude survey several years ago with a research and development (R&D) client, it was determined that the most negative item on the survey was, "You only get feedback around here when you screw up." There was unanimous agreement that this must change. Everyone felt that in order to be more innovative and do better R&D, an occasional "thank you" or "well done" were desirable. In a follow-up meeting six weeks later, we found that no one was giving any positive performance feedback. Supervisors felt they might be taken

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advantage of if they gave out strokes, and subordinates felt they were being manipulated whenever they heard good news. Even though there was still unanimous agreement that a change was needed, they had slipped back to their original patterns! The group still wanted to balance their performance feedback, so we required that there be a feedback review as the first item on the agenda of every meeting held in the group. The top management team went one step further and required that each person at the table give someone an honest, positive compliment before carrying on with the meeting agenda. This structuring of the desired new habit into the daily lives of everyone was what was needed to generate the desired new habit patterns.

If we are to disrupt the automatic pilot mindsets and create desirable new patterns of operations, we must reward the desired changes, formalize them in our everyday lives, and create ways to monitor and reinforce them.

### Bias Towards Training

Training has become a huge operation employing thousands of people. A great many organizations use various kinds of training activities as the primary vehicle for attempting major organizational changes or productivity improvements. In many organizations, training comprises virtually the entire development program and, as a colleague in the UK says, “Bums in seats” is the primary measure of success for the Human Resources Department.

When there is too much bias towards training as development, an excellent means often becomes an end in itself. Training has an absolutely essential role in supporting most kinds of changes in organizations, but it must always be provided in the service of clearly articulated change outcomes to be of real value in overcoming status quo inertia.

### Absence Of Support For Novelty Management

Any change has the potential to create distress (and a desire to cling to the status quo) to the extent that it creates novelty (surprise, unfamiliarity, uncertainty). In order to be most effective in implementing changes, we must do so in ways which minimize surprises, and we must develop mechanisms for clarifying and familiarizing employees with the new way of operating.

Support for novelty management needs to come in four areas:

- 1) information needed to adjust to the change;
- 2) skills needed to adjust to the change;
- 3) attitudes and values which must be developed to support the change;
- 4) reward mechanisms for adopting the change

### THE VIRTUE IN PREACHING TO THE CHOIR

The cliché of “Preaching to the choir” has long been used to suggest that an activity is a waste of time. I contend that it is sometimes the most important mechanism for creating a critical mass of people who are solidly behind a change program, and who will ensure that the change process becomes self sustaining. As the diagram in Figure 1 suggests, for any new idea, there are likely to be about 10-15% of the employees who think it is a fantastic idea, and about an equal number who will probably never buy in. Our normal tendency is to go after the hard core resisters and attempt to change their minds, rather than creating a network of those who are already sold on the idea.

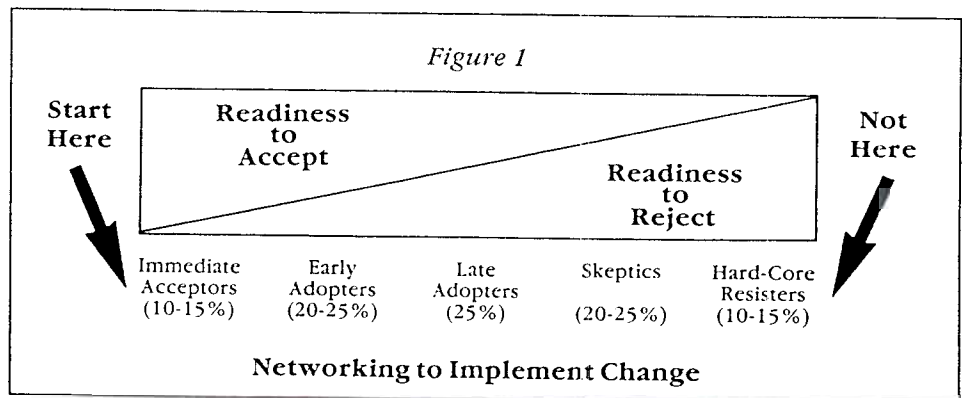
Finding out who in the organiza-

tion, regardless of formal role, are solidly in support of an intended change and bringing them together can be one of the most important factors in successful change implementation. Their shared interest in the change virtually always leads to some highly innovative ways to enroll the early adopters. As a result, a critical mass favoring the change is generated rather quickly, and with little “forcing.”

This network of solid supporters is the “choir”. Frequent “choir practices” will generate lots of good ideas for gradually bringing in new choir members from the early adopters. The main consideration relative to the hard core resisters is to encourage them to stay tuned, and to avoid any confrontations which may cause the skeptics to throw their support to the “underdogs.”

### HOW MANY DOES IT TAKE TO HAVE A CRITICAL MASS?

A critical mass of supporters is that number required for a change goal to be sure of being reached. The effort becomes self sustaining, and no longer needs to be kept alive through constant vigilance. It is unclear just what percentage of an organization’s employees constitute a critical mass, but it is often said that when 20% of the employees get solidly behind an idea, success in implementing that idea is assured. There is probably a lot of variance around this figure, depending on the following three criteria: ownership, direction and purpose, and versatility. It is my hypothesis that the more completely these criteria are developed, the lower the percentage needed for critical mass; and the less well developed these criteria, the higher the percentage needed.



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### Ownership

By ownership for an idea, I mean the degree of responsibility one feels for the idea, the amount of energy one makes available in service of the idea, and the degree of commitment one feels for the idea. The stronger the expression of ownership, the lower the percentage needed to create a critical mass for change (Adams, ODP, 1971).

### Direction And Purpose

In almost every working unit, there are about as many subtly different interpretations of the group's mission and purpose as there are group members. It can be a very valuable team development exercise to have everyone in a group complete the statement “We behave as if our mission were. . . .” compile the responses anonymously, and discuss the differences until agreement is reached. In the absence of this clarification and alignment exercise, everyone in the group is likely to be moving in a slightly different direction based on her/his understanding of the purpose and mission. This same phenomenon is likely to be true relative to the goals of any change effort. The clearer the direction and purpose, and the higher the degree of alignment, the lower the percentage needed to create a critical mass for change.

### Versatility

Most of us operate under the assumption that if others would only behave and see the world the way we behave and see the world, we'd be much happier, more productive, etc. In fact, if everyone DID operate exactly like we operate, we'd only be able to function in a rather narrow arena. Different people have different perspectives, different styles of operating, and different strengths to offer. We won't be able to access these fully if we don't operate with a high degree of behavioral versatility. (I'm

defining versatility as appropriate flexibility.) In general systems theory, Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety states that the subsystem with the greatest repertoire of responses will eventually control the entire system.

The same principle applies on the level of individuals' automatic pilot mindsets. The most effective leaders are those who can hold short term and

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long term perspectives simultaneously. That is, they are able to think strategically about implications and consequences while operating on immediate issues and priorities. They can also be responsive to pressures arising in the environment while simultaneously creating innovative approaches and longer term visions.

The greater the degree of behavioral and mindset versatility, the lower the percentage required for creating a critical mass for change.

In summary, whenever we are contemplating changing the way things are in an organization, we need to develop a foundation of supporters large enough to cause the change effort to be self sustaining. We can probably do this more easily if we develop strong ownership, alignment with clearly articulated direction and purpose, and high behavioral and mindset versatility. I predict that the more successful one is at developing

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these qualities, the smaller the choir has to be.

### ESSENTIAL STEPS IN OVERCOMING INERTIA

In the 1960's, David Gleicher, then at Arthur D. Little, postulated that in order to bring about change, three variables had to be developed so that their combined effect was greater than the investment in the status quo. In the last few years, with input from several colleagues, I have been using Gleicher's idea with two additional variables added. The five essential steps to overcoming inertia, in my present way of thinking, are described below. Think of a change effort or influence situation you are currently involved with, and explore how you could be more effective by enhancing each of these five variables. Choose anything from changing a personal habit to renegotiating a personal relationship to implementing a major reorganization.

#### Belief That Change Is Possible And Desirable

If the people in a system do not feel that it is possible to make the desired change, or if they don't think the change is a desirable one, then this is the place to work. In your personal example, what could you do to increase the sense that the desired change is both possible and desirable?

#### Sufficient Disenchantment With The Status Quo

Kurt Lewin taught us that we first have to unfreeze a situation before we can expect any movement. This means operating in ways that will destabilize the status quo. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways including: increasing dissatisfaction, threatening adverse consequences, and (preferably) building a vision of a better way of being that people can relate to. In your personal example, what could you do to increase disenchantment with the status quo?

## Clear Goals And Outcomes

This step is much like the Purpose and Direction criterion already described. People may be sufficiently disenchanted with the status quo, but they aren't likely to make any changes if they aren't clear about what is expected or what the desired outcomes are. In your personal example, what could you do to clarify the goals and outcomes of the change you want to make? Are there actions you could take to ensure that everyone both understands and agrees with the goals and direction?

## Success-Oriented First Steps

When the previous three steps are sufficiently well developed, there still may not be any movement if people don't know what the first steps are. Developing some small steps that you are sure will succeed, such as a thirty day trial of a new policy, or giving each person in a group a specific and easily completed assignment, can create a great deal of momentum towards the desired change outcomes. Succeeding steps become obvious as the early steps are carried out. In your personal example, what are one or two steps you could initiate which you know would be successful?

## Role Of Others In Ensuring Success

Even when the focus of our change or influence is ready to move, the effort can be defeated if people at the "boundary" of the effort aren't informed and perhaps negotiated with. For example, if a group decides to implement a new time management scheme, those individuals from other groups who habitually interact with members of the group may need to be informed about the new practice, so as not to "interrupt" at the wrong time. In some cases, one can maintain the momentum of change by negotiating moral support or setting up an agreement whereby another person can provide monitoring, challenge, expertise or access to resources.

## A CHECKLIST FOR CREATING CRITICAL MASS FOR CHANGE

In summary we may unwittingly prolong the time it takes to implement

a change if we: overlook the normal individual and group tendencies to maintain status quo; expect too much from training interventions; and overlook the need for novelty management. Conversely, we may reduce the time it takes by focusing most of our energy on those who favor the change and by promoting ownership, clarity of direction, and versatility among these "choir members." And, when we need to be influential in our dealings with others, we can improve our effectiveness by focusing on the five variables for overcoming status quo inertia.

The following represents a summary of these points in the form of a checklist of things to attend to when you need to implement a change or influence a situation.

1. Are you aware of your own and other's non-conscious cognitive patterns (automatic pilot mindsets) which may be operating to reinforce the status quo?

2. If a training program is called for or contemplated, is it being implemented as a means, or is it being viewed as an end in itself?

3. How well are you anticipating and managing the resistance to change which arises from excessive novelty (surprise, uncertainty, unfamiliarity)?

- Avoidance of unnecessary surprises
- Availability of mechanisms for creating clarity and/or familiarity
- Identification and dissemination of information which can reduce novelty
- Provision of the skills needed to be effective in the new situation
- Identification of attitudes and values which need to be created and/or reinforced
- Development of tangible and/or intangible rewards for adopting the new state

4. Have you identified those people in the system who are already "on board" and in strong support of the change (the choir)? Once they have been identified, they can be brought together for "choir practice," to discuss strategy for implementation and for bringing in new choir members from those in the system who are waiting in the wings (the early adopters in Figure 1).

5. Do the choir members feel a strong sense of ownership (responsibility, energy, and commitment) for the change? What can you do to further enhance their feelings of ownership?

• Are there ways to increase people's responsibility for successful implementation?

• In what ways can you help people invest more energy in the implementation?

• How can you help these people feel even more committed to a successful outcome?

6. How clear are you about the direction and the purpose of the change? Can you state the results or outcomes that you want in very specific terms? Have these been clearly articulated — especially to the "choir?" Are you confident that all the key supporters understand the direction and purpose and agree that they are appropriate?

7. Do your core supporters in the choir represent a diversity of operating styles and personalities? Are they aware of their differences and do they value them and recognize the potential contributions of each to the overall effort? Are they able to shift their styles of operating appropriately to support the overall effort?

8. Are your core supporters in the choir able to simultaneously hold the vision of the outcome and the immediate priorities in their minds? Are they able to both anticipate future contingencies and be innovative from moment to moment?

9. What can you do to spread the feeling that the desired change is both desirable and possible?

10. Are those in the system to be most affected feeling sufficiently dissatisfied with the status quo to welcome the intended change?

11. Do the people to be most affected share the same clear understanding of the goals for the change? Do they agree that these goals are worthy?

12. What are some small steps that can be taken towards the goal? Are you confident that these steps will be successful? Which ones will be highly visible?

13. Can you identify the people, both within the system and around the edges of it, who can in some way contribute to the success of the change or influence effort? □