Change is What It Means

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To make dreams apparent to others and to align people with them [requires not just] mere explanation or clarification but the creation of meaning.

—Warren Bennis[1]

In education, as in most spheres of American public life, leadership and change have become inseparable. The conventional wisdom has long been that most of our schools are failing and that even the best are not preparing students adequately for the world of the future. Innovation is therefore seen as both a necessity and an opportunity, its pursuit as leadership's defining purpose. This emphasis has led to, and been fostered by, real growth in the knowledge base about leading change. For all the quackery and quick fixes in the popular management literature, there have been some terrific contributions, both within the field of education by, among others, Michael Fullan, Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal, Andy Hargreaves, Philip Schlechty, and Thomas Sergiovanni, and within the field of organization development by, among others, Edgar Schein, the grand master of organizational culture, Warren Bennis, James Kouzes, and Barry Posner, and Peter Vaill, as well as by writers in other fields, most notably Peter Marris, who brilliantly captured the key connection between change and loss.

Unfortunately, even though these and other topnotch thinkers have written many books and those in the first group have appeared widely at educational conferences over many years, their insights remain vastly under-applied in the actual practice of school leadership in America. Indeed, the demand for rapid improvement has promoted approaches to change that contradict their wisdom, treating the school as a factory or a service company and the leader as a corporate turnaround specialist whose success is to be measured by a simplistic bottom line (students' test scores). This primitive approach may be relevant in industrial and corporate workplaces, but it ignores the unique features of schools and the special challenges of leading innovation there.

Like the sharpest school thinkers, the sharpest school leaders do not make this error. They know that change naturally provokes ambivalence and resistance, that this is particularly true in schools,

and that whether faculty embrace innovation depends not on whether outsiders think they need to, but on their own readiness to do so. Key to creating this readiness is shaping the meaning of the change. Savvy leaders do this through a combination of pressure and support.

Understanding Resistance

America is a nation founded in revolution, peopled by immigrants and seekers of new frontiers, fueled by a sense of its own exceptionalism and a deep-seated belief in the potential for individual and collective progress. This outlook has culminated in a worship of innovation and of the faster, more productive life. The belief that we must prepare ourselves and our children for even greater rates of change is widely and firmly established. Hence the emphasis on creating "learning organizations" capable of continuous improvement. The cutting edge is the place to be.

In real life things are not nearly so simple. Change almost always causes ambivalence and resistance. We know that change is inevitable. We know Heraclitus's maxim that "no man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man." We often hope for change, for our own lives and relationships and careers to be different. Yet at the core we remain conservative creatures, our psychology marked by a powerful preference for predictability. We routinely resist change when it occurs, especially when imposed on us by others. This conservatism is not political but a deep impulse to preserve continuity and familiarity in life. In his wonderful book, *Loss and Change*, Peter Marris makes a compelling case that life depends on continuity and that in virtually every significant transition of any kind acceptance and adjustment prove far more difficult than anticipated for all concerned. This has certainly been my experience in the schools and organizations where I have consulted, in the clinic I direct, in the individuals and families I have treated, and in my own life. Whether a change is planned or unplanned, personal or

professional, large or small, welcome or unwelcome; whether we take the perspective of reformers or their targets, of people or organizations, the nearly universal result is ambivalence.[2]

This is because human beings are, as the late Harvard paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould said, "pattern-seeking animals."[3] Pattern-seeking is actually hard-wired into our brains, visible even in the behavior of newborn infants, and is vital to our very existence: our ability to make sense of events—and to adjust to new circumstances—depends crucially on continuity, on the validity of what we have learned and how we have learned it.[4] So, too, does our ability to find meaning in life. Our lives cannot be meaningful unless we can construct and preserve a coherent, predictable pattern in events and relationships. *Meaning* here has two main components: *understanding* ("I see what you mean") and *attachment to people and ideas* ("you mean so much to me"; "teaching a child to read means so much to me"). How we react to any change depends above all on what it means to us, that is, how it affects the understandings and attachments by which we live. The impact of any particular innovation always hinges on many factors, including, among others, our individual characteristics (personality, history), the kind of organization we work in, the nature of the change, the way it is presented to us, and so on. But at best, our reaction is likely to be mixed. For though the public meanings of change, as it is typically promoted, are cast in terms of growth and development, progress and renewal, and though these can often be the ultimate result of change, its private meanings are about resistance, not acceptance: they start with loss and include, among others, incompetence and conflict.

Growth and *development* may be the ideal synonyms for change, but *grief* and *bereavement* are every bit as accurate. We are bereaved when someone we love dies, but we are also bereaved when an assumption we take for granted is devalued. This kind of grief is not usually as intense as that caused by the death of a loved one (though it can be), but it provokes a similar mourning often marked by disbelief, denial, sadness, and anger. The pattern each of us constructs that makes our life meaningful is formed in a context of specific relationships and circumstances and rooted in feelings and experiences that have great emotional significance. It can rarely be altered just by rational explanation. We can't just discard familiar understandings and powerful attachments in the name of an "impersonal utilitarian calculation of the common good."[5] In this regard, change agents often overlook a crucial fact: patterns create meaning through continuity, not happiness. We become attached not just to positive patterns but to negative ones. We are often reluctant to abandon patterns even when we dislike them. We can accept—even cling to—the hopelessness of our situation. Indeed, we can become fiercely resistant to changes that promise to address the very circumstances that most distress us. When trying to understand reactions to change it is never just the logical that matters but the psychological.[6]

A second powerful meaning of change is to threaten competence. A school promotes innovation (a new curriculum or teaching method) to enhance teachers' competence, to improve their ability to fulfill the school's mission, but the innovation typically begins by threatening their *existing* competence: it requires them to abandon something they know how to do and adopt something they don't know how to do. Alterations in practices, procedures, and routines make all of us feel inadequate and insecure, especially if we have exercised our skills in a particular way for a long time (and even more if we have seen our performance as exemplary). Ultimately, if we see the project through, we may develop new skills and knowledge and the change may come to mean progress. But this is rarely true at the outset.

Change also means conflict. Although planned innovations are usually sold as being better for everyone in the school, this is almost never true. Every major change creates winners and losers, at least at first. For example, staff often see change as imposed by administrators for their own purposes without regard to the difficulties of implementing it. Within the faculty, some people's beliefs and commitments will be better aligned with the new priorities, some people's skills and temperaments will be more relevant, some people's roles and status may rise faster. And old wounds may be reopened. Every staff family contains within it a history of disputes and disagreements, personal hurts, jealousies, and betrayals. Change can reawaken the memories of these events, increasing tension, diminishing cooperation, and sparking disagreements that seem to be about the change at hand but are actually about old hurts.

These three meanings of change cause resistance in all sorts of workplaces, but they certainly loom large in schools. To begin with, education is fundamentally a backward-looking, conservator's

enterprise. In a nation obsessed with innovation, this may seem a condemnation; it is not. A school's function is to prepare children for the future, but it can only do this by teaching them about the past—not just history but the assembled body of knowledge in each subject and the society's key values and norms. We can only teach what we know. Moreover, much (though not all) of a school's curriculum is, if not timeless, slow-changing (fractions, the periodic table, the meanings of *Hamlet*, the causes of the American revolution, and so on) and many schools pride themselves on their devotion to enduring truths and established traditions. Good teaching is always creative, but it is not perpetually innovative; it benefits from regular refreshers and occasional overhauls, but it doesn't demand the kind of continuous updating that, say, law or medicine or high technology do. Continuity is a powerful fact of school life, just as it is in family life and religious life.

Not surprisingly, teaching attracts people for whom continuity is a good fit, people with a strong security orientation and a strong service ethic, not entrepreneurs with a thirst for risk and competition. It is the only field that offers tenure, and it draws those who, among other things, are willing to trade salary for stability. Teachers have traditionally tended to change employers much less frequently than corporate professionals, to look for a school that is a good home and to stay there. They typically thrive in—and usually prefer—the company of children and adolescents (would we want our youth taught by people who didn't*?*) and they try to emphasize the positive. They wish to help, nurture, foster, inspire, encourage, and bring out the best in students. They generally like people and want to be liked. They take their work very personally. All of these characteristics are good for raising the young; none of them make it easier to manage the loss, the threat to competence, and the potential for conflict caused by change.

One cannot hope to implement change without persuading people that it is necessary. This is a task of daunting proportions that must often start by challenging people's view of themselves and their performance. Easily the most thoughtful, realistic approach that I have encountered is Edgar Schein's concept of change as "unfreezing,"[7] which he adapted from the work of the social psychologist Kurt Lewin. This approach begins by recognizing the tendency of people and systems to maintain a homeostasis. Since innovation requires the learning of something new, and, usually, the unlearning of

something old, it causes anxiety. As we have seen, people naturally cling to their current skills and are afraid to try new ones, especially when the changes involved are large and complex or when the time frame for mastery is short or when the tolerance for error is low—all conditions that have applied in schools for several decades now. In such a context, it becomes easy to rationalize the value of the tried and true and the impracticality or impossibility of the new. As Schein presents it, unfreezing is a matter of creating a readiness to change by mobilizing one kind of anxiety, the fear of *not* trying, and by lessening another, the fear of trying. The first requires the leader to apply pressure, the second, to offer support.

Pressure: Why, What, How

If people are to accept—let alone embrace—a change, they must understand its *why*, *what*, and *how*: why they can't simply preserve the status quo and keep doing what they've been doing; what they must start doing; and how they can accomplish this goal. Unless something increases the cost of preserving the status quo, unless people are sufficiently dissatisfied with the present state of affairs—and their role in maintaining it—they have no reason to endure the losses and challenges of change. Pressure can be defined as anything that makes it harder to continue the old. It ranges all the way from simply asking people, "Why do you do it that way?" to threatening to fire them if they keep doing so. Inevitably, it involves the assertion of power. Despite a strong bias against top-down leadership that remains popular in education, virtually every instance of successful school innovation that I've ever known of involves a powerful, adroit leader. I've never met a successful change agent who simply waited for everyone to get over their grief. Waiting for buy-in to occur spontaneously is almost always a losing strategy. Buy-in must be built and the building begins with the leader making the case for change.

To make the case, a leader must disconfirm people's reading of their situation and their satisfaction with their present practices. This does not mean castigating and blaming them, but it often means challenging them to face realities they have preferred to avoid. Effective implementation thus begins with candid discussion. Leaders have to justify the changes they propose. This requires a clear statement outlining the current challenges and issues and the risks of continuing with the current ways of coping (*why*), the old practices that must be

abandoned and the new ones to be adopted (*what*), and the concrete help that will support the implementation (*how*). Simple. But not easy.

Many school leaders are good at the *what* and the *how*, but give short shrift to the *why*, which is the most important. Explaining why the status quo can't continue is usually where the loss begins—and where negative feelings are engendered—but it cannot be avoided. Without it, there is no readiness, no motivation to change. Without readiness and motivation, even topnotch training is ineffective. To the surprise of many leaders, presenting the *why* can be unexpectedly difficult in schools that see themselves as successful. If students have typically performed well, if the school has historically been sought after, if placement of students into the next level (secondary school, college) has generally been good, and if there has been a strong tradition of teacher autonomy, faculty often feel, "It ain't broke; don't fix it." But in any school, presenting the *why* can cause distress. It confronts a school with its shortcomings, with the gaps between teachers' professed goals and students' actual outcomes. It usually involves raising people's guilt by noting how their performance violates a shared ideal ("We say we believe that every child can learn, but the gap between our best and worst performers is widening") and/or raising their anxiety by noting how their performance threatens their well-being("We asked for new staffing to improve literacy, but our results are no better; if they don't improve we will lose the staff, and return to our old class sizes").

One key to building buy-in is making change inevitable. The more certain a change seems, the more people are inclined to adjust to it. And when the ultimate aim is a change in beliefs and assumptions, which cannot be imposed, one must often insist on a change in behavior, which can. A key reason for this is that changes in behavior don't just flow from changes in belief, they foster changes in belief.[8] Of course, forcing a group of teachers to team together doesn't make them good or willing collaborators, but the teachers will never grasp what teaming can offer or learn how to collaborate if they don't try. Experimenting with a new behavior is often a prerequisite to new learning. Pressure thus helps to promote commitment, spurring the process by which we finally accept loss and reformulate our pattern of meaning.

There is no denying that pressure can cause casualties. The more intense and widespread the loss caused by an innovation, the less likely it is that every staff member will choose to embrace it or be able to achieve it. Some may prefer to leave; others may have to be let go. In virtually every other field but education employers see these consequences as inevitable. Corporations pursuing improved performance routinely take a "restructuring charge" to cover the cost of staff they've fired. Only in schools and religious institutions do we expect to accomplish major innovation without pain and turnover. Savvy school leaders, though not typically as hard-boiled as their corporate peers, nonetheless accept the necessity for this kind of triage. They anticipate that change will generate turnover. They know that turnover, especially when it is involuntary, sends shock waves through a faculty and, depending on the school and the context, through the larger school community, so they don't usually go out of their way to provoke it, but they don't avoid it when the need arises.

Support: Continuity, Contact, Time

Applying pressure, disconfirming people's views and beliefs about their performance, raising guilt and anxiety—these are necessary, especially at the outset of an innovation, but almost never sufficient. In my experience, disconfirmation and an intellectual agenda for change have never, by themselves, been enough to motivate participation. And if one only threatens people, they resist in all sorts of ways, overt and covert, conscious and unconscious. Disconfirmation can engender much fear and loathing—so much that people often dismiss the information, which lets them repress any anxiety or guilt. This is why in many schools and organizations disconfirming data about performance exist for a long time but are denied or devalued. To nourish innovation, pressure must be accompanied by support.

Support can be defined as anything that makes it easier to try the new. It can range from encouragement to training to financial incentives. It fosters what Schein calls psychological safety. It reduces the anxiety of change, the fear of trying something new. It begins by confirming for staff that the leader is committed not just to the change but to them. Thus, the early confrontation about the need for change must avoid humiliation, *ad hominem* attacks, blanket condemnations, and demands that people admit they were wrong. Change agents must make clear their caring and support, their commitment to work with staff to take the difficult steps in new learning. They must reaffirm connection and help make the change meaningful to people by

finding the familiar in the new and strength amidst weakness. They must expect the grief and tolerate the mourning.

Most innovations can only flourish if staff adopt them actively, becoming vigorous, engaged participants. Hence, leaders must help those who are to implement it move from loss to commitment, from a letting go of the old to a true embrace of the new. Years ago I wrote that this principle had for far too long been overlooked in school reform but was especially vital. Today it is, if anything, even more neglected. But for a long time now, the most promising school improvement proposals have called for fundamental changes in the ways teachers conceptualize teaching and learning, curriculum and assessment. These changes require active commitment and participation, not passive tolerance or partial engagement.

Fortunately, even though the obstacles to change are formidable, there are tendencies within the individual that support adaptation. Paradoxically, they emerge from pattern-seeking and resistance. Although change usually causes loss, from such loss comes not only grief and despair, but innovation. Indeed, grief and despair are often the source of innovation. The strength of our tendency to seek patterns, the tenacity with which we cling to purposes and relationships, leads us at first to resist change, often fiercely, but also inclines us, ultimately, to accept it. We eventually come to accept the loss not merely as an event that has happened but as part of an expectable series of events.[9] Given the chance to revise and broaden the framework in which we understand things, our need to preserve continuity moves us to incorporate a change into our pattern of meaning and to adapt to it. Coping thus requires working out new meanings, making enough sense of the loss we have suffered that we can come to accept new functions and assume new roles. This is a kind of grief work. The conditions that are required for adaptation are those necessary in resolving grief.

These begin with reaffirming continuity. Change agents tend to conceive of their improvements as substitutions—replacing something old, worse, and illogical with something new, better, and logical. But people cannot resolve their grief simply by substitution, they must work their way through it. They must learn to reformulate the purposes and attachments that are threatened by change.[10] This process is complex, both cognitively and emotionally. It needs continuity. People must be helped to link

the new with old, to see the future not as disconnected from the past but as related to it. Ideally, they need to see the future as fulfilling traditional values in new ways. This search involves a period—often lengthy—of distress and ambivalence as people try to grasp the full extent of what is being lost and modify their pattern of meaning to incorporate the new. This search cannot be hurried and each person must do it for himself. Efforts to jump start change, to preempt opposition or conflict by thorough planning and rational explanation alone are likely to be futile. For it is only through re-working again (and, often, again and again) our experience of loss and the necessity to adapt that we come to accept change and commit ourselves to something new.

To bear loss and invest in new ways of behaving, to move from bereavement toward commitment, to abandon old competencies and try new ones, people need help to graft new perceptions and priorities onto the roots of older ones. They almost always need a person, a leader, to embody the change and create the bridge between the old and the new, to help them relinquish what they hold dear so that they can move on. This can never be forced. It is best accomplished when the leader's vision overtly emphasizes continuity, making change more familiar by linking the future to the past and emphasizing existing strengths.

When leaders can explain change in clear, focussed terms and connect innovation to longstanding values that matter to constituents, reaffirming wherever possible the school's traditional principles and qualities, they help staff link the new with the old and bear the uncertainties and losses of change. Keith Shahan, reflecting on an exceptional career leading public and independent schools, sees this transitional help as defining leadership more generally. "Good leaders," he says, "develop a narrative for the organization, so that people understand where they have been, where they are, what they need to do to get where they need to go. Linking the values of an organization to the narrative and communicating it well is a pretty good job description for a leader."[11]

People's progress from loss to commitment benefits enormously from personal contact with the leader. Those who are being asked to implement change respond better when they have regular attention from, and access to, those who are responsible for it. This contact serves two key functions: the obvious one is to help in the learning

of new skills and the troubleshooting of problems. The less obvious, but equally important aspect is to assuage the very personal losses innovation provokes. Not least among these is the severing of personal attachments as people leave and relationships are altered, which in itself is a source of bereavement. A key way that teachers' needs for continuity can be sustained is by regular contact with a sympathetic principal who will acknowledge the distress they are experiencing even as she reconfirms the promise of change and reinforces the necessity and potential of the new skills required. Personal contact that is oriented both toward task performance *and* emotional adjustment greatly facilitates the adoption of innovation.

Even when support and contact are plentiful, grief is often slow to yield. Respecting people's need to process loss and fashion their own meaning out of change means allowing them sufficient time. Change is so highly personal that all who will be affected by it must have the chance to work it through, try it on, see how it fits, and discover what they can gain from it as well as what it will cost them.[12] This takes time. When we seek genuine commitment and changes in belief, the person doing the changing is in control of the transformation, not the architect of the change. Teachers must be permitted time to complain, to wish things were different, to long for the old days, to worry that they won't be able to manage the new approaches, and so on. This opportunity can't last forever, but if it is denied altogether, resistance simply goes underground and undermines the necessary change. The leader can't wait indefinitely, but she often has to wait longer than she imagined.

The Artful Balance

Unfortunately, neither continuity, nor personal contact, nor time for grief come naturally to many change agents. This was true even during the heyday of the school reform movements of the 1980s and 90s, which were much more humane than the narrow, test-driven approaches favored today. Innovators tend to concentrate on the potential benefits of their recommendations and to overlook the effort and pain of adapting. They can easily assume a very moralistic tone: change is Right, the status quo is Wrong. Too often they don't acknowledge the loss provoked by innovation or attend to the grief of those it affects. They tend to be impatient to get on with progress and to see implementation as a matter of persuasion and power: one should explain the rational necessity for the change and then use appropriate combinations of carrot and stick to maneuver or, if necessary, compel compliance. But to rely on these alone is to overestimate the influence of the leader and underestimate the realities of adaptation.

It is also a self-defeating hubris. After all, reformers who press staff to innovate have already assimilated the reform and made sense of it for themselves. In Marris's terms, they have already worked out a reformulation of purposes and practices which makes sense to them, one which may have taken them a long time—and which, as they were working it out, may have caused them real distress. Denying others the opportunity to make a similar journey, criticizing them for not responding to explanations about change, dismissing their resistance or hesitation as ignorance or prejudice expresses arrogance and contempt for the meaning of other people's lives.[13] This contempt, which denies people the respect and the time to move through loss toward commitment, does little but intensify opposition and impede implementation.

The wisest change leaders don't make this mistake. Nor, as noted, do they simply await an intellectual immaculate conception that delivers spontaneous commitment. They convey two essential messages. The first is, "This is very serious, the risks of inaction are very real, and we must change." The second is, "I value you as people and I will help you get where we need to go." They thus straddle the fault line between pressure and support, change and continuity, confirming their commitment to the people who must accomplish the change even as they express their commitment to the change itself and urge them to act. No wonder Schein calls unfreezing "one of the most complex and artful of human endeavors."[14] Because we too often equate power with coercion, we fail to see that power need not be malignant but rather a means to fulfill a larger vision that takes into account the needs of most, if not all. Viewed in this way, it is quite compatible with support. In fact, the two are complementary, as Michael Fullan has noted: "Pressure without support leads to resistance and alienation; support without pressure leads to drift or waste of resources."[15] Successful innovation combines the right amount of both. Together, they respect the human need to find meaning in change and encourage the human capacity to adapt.

[1] Bennis, Warren. *Why Leaders Can't Lead*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989, 20-21.

2 Marris, Peter. Loss and Change. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986, 5.

[3] Gould, Stephen Jay. *Bully for Brontosaurus*. New York: Norton, 1991, 60.

[4] Marris, 6.

[5] Marris, 10-11.

[6] Vaill, Peter B. *Managing as A Performing Art*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989, 57.

[7] Schein, Edgar. *Process Consultation Vol. II*. Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1987, 92-94; *Organizational Culture and Leadership (First Edition).* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass*,* 1985, 252-256; 294-295; and *Organizational Culture and Leadership (Second Edition).* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass*,* 1992, 298-303; "How Can Organizations Learn Faster? The Challenge of the Green Room." *Sloan Management Revue*, Winter, 1993, 88-90.

8 Fullan, Michael with Suzanne Stiegelbauer. *The New Meaning of Educational Change*. New York: Teachers College Press, 91.

[9] Marris, 21.

[10] Marris, 158.

[11] Shahan, personal communication, February 16, 2009.

[12] Fullan, 127.

[13] Marris, 155.

[14] Schein, 1987, 98.

[15] Fullan, 91.