Organizational Consultation: An Appreciative Approach
IV. Change and Stabilization

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We will move a bit deeper into the very challenging issue of selecting an appropriate model of consultation and will do so by beginning with a brief case study. Jill was furious about the state of the community service agency she directs. She had just fired her third office manager in the last eight months. The budgeting and personnel problems in this agency never seem to go away. Jill lets the world know of her discontent:

> We live from day to day in this agency, hoping out of one frying pan into another! I don't want to live this way anymore and have taken decisive action to avoid staying with a bad decision once we know things aren't going to work out. I have asked for Gerald's [the business manager's] resignation.

Jill is convinced that problems are solved by bold decision-making regarding change. Unfortunately, some of her problems may relate to the processes and rates of change itself. Frequently, change itself is a major problem facing contemporary organizations.

Change Itself Can Be a Problem

Contemporary organizations are constantly exposed to changing conditions in the various settings they encounter. The needs of consumers shift in unanticipated ways. The costs, constraints or quality controls of a supplier will vary. The financial support that is available from Wall Street, venture capitalists or even from wealthy trustees or local philanthropic organizations seems never to be dependable. Even within an organization, working environments change as a function of new union-management agreements, shifting worker needs and values, new technologies and modifications in existing federal, state and local policies and regulations.

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The leaders of many organizations, such as Jill, are inclined to respond to these changes by themselves introducing changes into the system. These changes are likely to be minor, for most leaders believe that minimal change is less likely to create either adverse reactions from those who resist change or to create negative consequences if the change turns out to be less successful than was expected, or if the change yields unanticipated and unwanted results.

Disjointed Incrementalism

This strategy of initiating small, minimal, Level One changes in response to changing environments is sometimes known as disjointed incrementalism. These are short-sighted, piecemeal response to complex social processes. As an example of disjointed incrementalism, we can point to the tendency of many corporations, social service agencies, and educational institutions to turn to new consumers when feeling a financial pinch. A small liberal arts college, for instance, responds to its enrollment crisis by recruiting, for the first time, lower-middle class students, minority students, and vocationally-oriented students. While such attempts are laudable in terms of increasing the accessibility of college to the underserved, these colleges have often introduced these changes without an accompanying campus-wide analysis of the likely impact of such a change on the college's curriculum and without adequate faculty preparation for meeting the needs of these new students.

Similar stories can often be told of insurance companies that recruit major new user groups without adequately assessing the new manpower needs that this new group produces or community mental health clinics that seek to meet the needs of an underserved population without adequate preparation. Haphazard and ill-planned change in any organization thus produces a host of immediate problems that must be solved. In addition, this type of change often creates a climate that encourages additional incremental change. This vicious cycle of incremental change enacted in response to the consequences of other incremental changes can lead an individual or organization into serious and destructive commitments that were not initially intended.

Disjointed incrementalism and a reliance on Level One Change often reflects a strong bias toward action and an accompanying neglect of data collection, analysis and interpretation. An action-oriented plan for change in any organization that is based on an inadequate assessment of organizational needs and resources may yield desirable short-term change, but will rarely produce substantial long-term effects.

Furthermore, one can't determine what type of change, if any, has occurred as result of this effort—for such a program is conducted with *little attention to the collection of information* about current organizational characteristics and goals, Consequently, a successful change effort can rarely be reproduced in the same organization, let alone in another one, since we do not know either how the change occurred or if such an approach would again be appropriate in the same organization or elsewhere.

We are becoming more skillful about bringing about planned change in most organizations. This very fact, however, makes it imperative that we document these efforts more carefully and systematically. Only when changes can be related to a systematic understanding of an organization can we have a clear rationale for selecting specific developmental strategies.

Selecting Between Change and Stabilization

Within any organization there is always the option to initiate stabilization rather than Level One change. There is even the option to question the need for Level Two change. This option is rarely considered, in part because stabilization is not as attention-getting an activity or as exciting as change. A great deal of public (or at least scientific community) attention is directed in contemporary life toward the sciences and technologies devoted to dynamic systems that are constantly changing and evolving; conversely, the sciences and technologies associated with the converse—the field called s*tatics*—is given scan attention. Yet, statics is concerned with very important matters, such as the design of a bridge or building that will not collapse under stress (wind, earthquake, terrorist attack), and the construction of highways and monuments that will endure for many years.

Unfortunately, it is not only a matter that stabilization (and statics) is viewed as boring and frankly ultra-conservative; it is also the matter that stabilization is frequently viewed in the negative -- as the absence of change or as inaction. Effective stabilization must instead be conceived, like effective change, as a proactive, planned process. Ironically, some form of Level Two change is often required if leaders of an organization are to be reflective about the stabilization option. A specific stabilization strategy is explicitly selected as an appropriate means of achieving a specific goal in an organization. It is not to be equated with resistance to change. The latter is rarely either systematic enough or explicitly or

practically linked to central goals of the organization. The former requires reflection and systematic planning.

Any planned change effort (at least at Level One) involves some attempt to modify the speed with which any transitions or transformations in the organization are currently taking place. Conversely, stabilization (and Level Two change) often involves reflection on the impact of these transitions and transformations and involves attempts to minimize variability in this speed. It is not an attempt to prevent the ongoing transition or transformation. A corporation, for instance, has instituted a major performance management program. This initiative requires all managers, directors and vice presidents to identify and provide quarterly reports on specific performance goals. The corporate leaders may wish to adopt a stabilization strategy that prevents other pressures acting on the corporation from provoking other changes that might distract from the performance management initiative. The administrator of a large urban hospital decides to devote most of her attention during the coming month to insuring that a new billing system is being properly installed in a systematic and timely manner. All of these exemplify proactive, planned stabilization in an organization.

When is stabilization appropriate? After an organization has been exposed to repeated change that is either unplanned or has had a significant impact, a process of stabilization is usually appropriate. For instance, a company that has hired (and fired) four business managers over the past three years may want to clarify the role to be played by this person before selecting yet another new manager,. Similarly, a complex curricular reform process at a small liberal arts college usually should be followed by a period of stabilization during which monitoring and strengthening of the curricular reform occurs.

If an organization has remained relatively dormant for several years, then change may be recommended, though it will often be more difficult to achieve than when an organization has created a precedent for change. A significant paradox is revealed in this recommendation, for it is precisely under conditions when change seems easiest to initiate that stabilization is most appropriate, and *vice versa*. A corporation running a fast-food chain that has been very successful for the past five years may be very resistant to any institutional soul-searching, even though everyone knows that success in this business is short-lived, if one doesn't keep pace with the competition. Similarly, the director of a social service agency who has brought in a new business officer every year for the past three years may find it quite

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easy to gain board approval for appointment of yet another new business manager. Such a decision, however, may be much less appropriate than the stabilization-oriented decision to retain the current manager and look elsewhere or more deeply into the source of the problem.

When change initiatives are under way, it is recommended to utilize new personnel who are hired with unique skills as change agents. A Manager of Training and Development is hired, for instance, who possesses exceptional group dynamics skills. A new Director of Information Technology is brought in who also has significant organization development experience. Frequently, these skills are forgotten, misunderstood, lost, or devalued if the new change agent is not allowed to use these skills soon after he or she begins to working in the organization. When the change agent first arrives, he or she has a fresh perspective and minimal interpersonal or organizational entanglements. After a short period of time (usually six months to one year) these initial advantages tend to disappear. The change agent becomes a "prophet in his own land," and thus is often ignored or held in low esteem. If the change agent's credibility is established early in his or her residency, then he or she is more likely to sustain this credibility after the initial glow has worn off.

Stabilization seems to be particularly appropriate when the organization is in an ambiguous situation with reference to mission, key roles, institutional information or consumer needs.
It is often better to do nothing rather than something, if we do not know what the systemic impact of that "something" will be. *A change program will rarely clarify or synthesize a confusing or polarized condition.* Time might better be spent in the collection of further information, in building consensus regarding a particular organizational goal, or in establishing a firm organizational basis for the program by means of a team building effort. These stabilization processes can, in turn, create the necessary conditions for a subsequent change effort.

Change may be appropriate when an organization has acquired new financial resources for either a short period of time (less than one year) or long period of time (three year or more). When new financial resources are available for a moderate length of time (two to three years), then it is usually more appropriate for an organization to stabilize—that is, improve, legitimate or link together—its current resources than to engage immediately in a planned change effort. After the new financial resources are

gone, the organization must sustain its change momentum. This is only possible if the organization has initially stabilized its internal resources so that they might be used for the sustained change effort.

A mental health clinic, for instance, that has just received a large professional development grant, might be tempted to use it to bring in outside experts to conduct short-term workshops on new modes of patient care. Instead, some of the funds might initially be used to improve, legitimate and link together internal resources. Workshops might be conducted in which members of the clinic staff share their own successful experiences in treating specific patients or help each other identify those areas in which they each have specific expertise. Then an external consultant could be brought in to expand their horizons about alternative treatment strategies.

The external consultant would ensure that clinic staff members do not become too inbred or parochial in acknowledging and making use of internal resources. Frequently, organizations that receive grants for professional development programs rely too heavily on external resources and in this way create new morale problems among the staff. These organizations often become too dependent on outside help. Change, in this instance, often creates more problems than it solves.

Finally, change may be the most appropriate approach when the organization is confronted with a clearly formulated discrepancy between its current state of functioning and its desired state. Change efforts are advised if there is support, both within and outside the organization, for high-risk operations – that is, if there is a greater payoff for success than there is a penalty for failure. In these organizations, which are *success-oriented*, planned change is accepted as a given. Such an organization must guard against an attitude of change-for-its-own-sake. A success-orientation, however, is usually quite healthy and supportive of both proactive change and proactive stabilization.

The culture in many organizations, however, is not success-oriented. Rather, the culture supports conservatism with regard to risk-taking behavior. To advance, an employee need not ever have a "smashing success", but he or she must never be party to a failure. In a *failure-avoidant* organization such as this, one is likely to find a preponderance of disjointed incrementalism, as leaders make small changes geared toward short-term gain. Under such conditions, stabilization strategies are often appropriate, as a way of counteracting the negative effects of incrementalism: long-term planning

perspectives must override short-term changes and high but realistic goals must be established to overcome the inertia of failure-avoidance.

Any effective organizational consultant should allow for the potential of both change and stabilization when working with her client. Almost any successful development–whether personal or organizational–moves through periods of change and periods of stability. A developmental effort that provides only for change will be ineffective during those periods when stability is warranted. The choice between strategies that encourage change and strategies that encourage stabilization is often more critical than is the choice among a variety of specific change or stabilization strategies.