

# REFLECTIONS ON MANAGEMENT

WITH TOM GALVIN

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT



## Should Change Agents Celebrate Success and Worry About Failure?

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*Please note: This transcript has been edited for clarity.*

*One would naturally assume that when organizational change appears to be succeeding, that its proponents, the change agents, would feel good about themselves and the organization. And the inverse would also seem to be true. One would expect change, failure to result in disappointment and frustration among the same change agents. Then again, are these the right reactions to change? Success or failure? In my experience, sometimes no reaction is the best reaction.*

*My name is Tom Galvin and these are my Reflections on Management.*

The impetus for this particular [episode] is something that occurred just a few months ago. I was participating in an event and part of this event was a workshop which a professor of organizational change from another business school was hosting. And as these situations went to occur, what happens is that the professor decided to host somewhat of an activity that allow us to replicate one of his empirical studies in which he attempted to more or less correlate these level of success or failure of a change effort with the feelings about commitment to the organization. Precisely what I talked about in the in the preamble here, his research is pretty much shown that there tended to be somewhat of a relationship, but it was not a strong correlation, but it was one where the better off that the change effort was, the better that the change agents in the organization felt and the better that the change agents felt committed to the organization.

And, of course, [the study] also showed kind of the inverse. Now, success, by comparison was a little bit more of a guarded, positive feeling, whereas failure in his study was shown to produce very abject feelings. I mean, it was it was kind of like a rock bottom sort of disappointment. But the relationship being there. So, you know, it just kind of made sense. It was understandable.

But it was it was also kind of funny because, you know, when he did this activity, what he basically did was he gave out scenarios and the scenarios were all identical, except for a couple of things that really gave the signal as to the success of the change, the success level of the change. If you had one type, you know, basically everything went poorly. There was large amounts of resistance or there were any sorts of problems getting off the ground. And it was all basically done using the adjectives and adverbs. So all the nouns and verbs were the same. It's just the adjectives and the adverbs conveyed the sense of difference which which which meant that, you know, if you really didn't know what well, what the other scenarios read, you wouldn't have been able to tell them apart. Well, it's kind of interesting.

So what he did after we all had the chance to read our scenarios is he asked us kind of like an Likert scale sort of thing. You know, "how would you feel in terms of your commitment to the organization? How would you feel in terms of your satisfaction? How would you feel about now? Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." Then he polled the participants to see what they said.

And not surprisingly -- I think because this was a pretty well done and pretty sound empirical study -- the members in this workshop pretty much resembled the empirical results of the original study. It turned out that I was a bit of an outlier because I didn't necessarily see or wasn't really appraised as far as this particular study. So I didn't know the correlation is being looked at in advance.

And so when it came to grading my reactions, that Likert scale, it turned out that I happened to have the least favorable of the scenarios. Mine was the one where the written result of the change effort was the worst and that the organization's response to it. The pressures, the resistance, all of that were the worst. And so the expectation was, is that I would have rated at the far end of the disappointment aspect of the Likert scales.

Well, I read through the scenario and I just naturally graded everything right in the middle. Everything was just neutral. And so then when it came time for everybody to talk about the results they gave, you know, why they how they viewed it, I answered. It was no change. I wouldn't feel any different about myself and I wouldn't feel any different about the about the organization.

And then I even took it a step further after he had let off the game. [There] were those who had the scenarios that were extremely successful. [Unlike them, who rated their satisfaction high], I told them I would have answered the same way -- I would have not been excited. I would have simply said no change across all of these dimensions.

And I kind of thought about that afterwards because he was somewhat surprised, taken aback, didn't really understand why -- even after I explained it. But perhaps after doing organization change for a very, very long time, you just sort of sense that no matter what happens, you know, that there's times to feel good [and] there's times to feel bad. But change never actually ends. So what I had was kind of answering in my response was that it really doesn't matter in the end, because as long as I know that I'm a change agent, I'm going to continue to try to foster change no matter what happens.

Well, I started to think about this afterwards. I started to think about, well, how should a change agent really respond? Because some could probably take my responses [as] showing some extreme jadedness or cynicism, which I can understand. Because if you do reach the point where you're not really willing to show or display any particular emotion based on what's going around you, that can be itself a little bit disturbing to others. And it is.

That's not really what I was saying. But if a change agent is really negatively influenced by a failed change, then that's suggesting that the organization itself has probably got some problems that go beyond just the problem that the change effort was trying to solve. The organization is clearly not committed to the idea of change. You know, it's not a problem with the outcome. It's a problem with the organizational climate that basically says that it wants to scapegoat a change agent for trying to make the organization better, even if that's not the stated purpose. That's sort of what the behavior would sort of resolve to. And certainly if the [results of the] change effort was negative, the ones who

really need to demonstrate commitment to the organization the most, aside from the leadership, are the change agents, because they're the ones who know, "hey, no, not everything is going to work."

This is all part of the learning process. What we need to do is to try to say, "well, if this is if this is not going to work, we've got to find something else." That is because the problem that we were trying to solve is not going away. So doing nothing is still not the answer. If this particular thing didn't work, we [go] back and keep trying.

And then, of course, there's the opposite side -- the positive. I know that when we talk about change, a lot of times we tell ourselves is we've got to celebrate success. We have to take the short term wins, for example, and turn them into positive momentum fostering more change. All of that makes sense. I mean, that's a logical, simple thing to do. That's great. However, the thing is that the change agent who understands complexity and who understands complex adaptive systems knows that at some point a success is going to naturally create conditions [or] changes in the environment that are - - maybe not now, but perhaps further down the road -- ... taking advantage of the vulnerabilities in the plan.

When I talked before about in a previous episode [on] paradox. If we look at organizational change in a complex environment, in a dynamic competitive environment, the opponents are always going to have a say in some way. And the opponents can shift. The opponents can appear at any time. They're going to find ways to try to negate the effects of the change or the natural complexities of the environment are going to do it for you.

And so the change agent understands that the success of change is perhaps a transitory state, that it is something that could erode over time. If we suddenly ceased to put energy into the change, good news can always come with good feelings. But they've got to be tempered with a certain dose of reality. It doesn't mean that you win. As a matter of fact, you know, you never really win in any permanent sense. The pre-existing tensions, the paradoxes, they're they're still there and the vulnerabilities. The plan just may not have been exploited yet.

So what we have to we have to do is change agents is -- in a lot of ways -- we do have to temper ourselves and we have to put our emotional energy, I think, into being a bit more resilient, a bit more circumspect about temporary states of success or failure. And we also have to kind of understand that the organization itself may very well take some strong issue [and] may scapegoat the change agent, may make life difficult for the change agent just because, in essence, they can. I guess I have to ask myself again. Am I jaded? No, it's just a matter of this is what happens when you done change for a while. And experience teaches you to kind of take a step [back], take a breath, understand that change success is a transitory feeling. And so resilience, and not commitment, is really the key. I mean, you know, you want to stay committed to the organization. If there's a lesson to be taken away, it's that we have to measure our commitment to the organization in terms of changes of its climate rather than the success or failure of any particular effort.

If the climate shows hostility toward change spurred by the perception of failure or overreaction to failure or overreaction to the bumps, the natural bumps in the road, that'll occur. Now, that's when the change agent probably has the right to question the commitment of the organization to its members or the organization to its own claims of wanting to improve. The sense of how the climate

changes is really the marker that has to be kind of looked at independently of the change effort, because so many things feed into the climate. So many things feed into how interpersonal relationships within the organization affect things.

My final thought is kind of going back to the professor and what the professor was trying to do. [Again, I'm not going to identify the study as that is unfair, but just that it is representative of a body of literature linking successful change with successful feelings about it.] But sometimes when we're trying to get the right answer in, say, a quantitative study, you know, this is this is probably one of those cases where capturing what is capturing what is going on, capturing the phenomena as we understand it, doesn't necessarily mesh with what we really think should be the case. And I think this study was kind of an example of that. We know that there is some sort of a natural relationship that occurs through ordinary relationships that that good feelings perpetuate good feelings and that the bad feelings can compound.

And so when I think about what the study was conveying this relationship between change, success and good feelings about the organization and commitment to the organization, it is what it is. But it isn't necessarily what should be. And I'm not so sure that it's really teaching our change agents, our potential change agents, how they should behave, how they should operate, if they're to succeed in the long run. Because to a certain extent, if we tell change agents that their success or failure is tied to the success or failure of the change efforts; my fear is that we're going to teach them to be risk averse. We're going to teach them that at the first sign of failure, they're going to be ostracized and removed, which is completely the opposite of what we really want, which is our change agents to be out front, to be innovative, to be encouraging the organization [and] to refuse to be complacent. To encourage the organization to improve itself at every turn. And to encourage all other members to improve themselves and help improve the organization at every turn.

So resilience has got to come with strength of character and rock steadiness, the ability to just understand that success and failure are just part of change and nothing more.

*... And that's all for now. The views expressed are my own and do not necessary reflect the United States Army War College, the United States Army or the Department of Defense. Thank you for listening and have a great day.*

**ALL THE BEST!**  
**TOM GALVIN**