Is There a Difference Between Continuity and Complacency?

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Please note: This transcript has been edited for clarity.

> *We all want to be change agents, don't we? The competitive pressures that many of us feel can cause us to want to make a mark. Make a difference. Be bold. In contrast, we are warned about the changes going on all around us in societies, industries and technologies such that if we don't get on board, we're being complacent. We're falling behind the times. We're potentially putting our competitive advantage at risk. But there is a good side to continuity, are not the values of reliability and predictability important qualities and organizations? So how do we differentiate continuity and its evil cousin complacency so we avoid driving change to the point of distraction?*

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

I'm going to begin by invoking Marianne Lewis's studies of paradox. One of them included the paradox of continuity and change as one of the enduring tensions in organizations. And certainly we see this playing out in the discussions about, you know, how we tend to favor change over continuity at present. It wasn't, I would say, always the case, but certainly that's the language that we hear now, because I believe that we have sold ourselves on the idea that change feels very, very empowering.

It encourages one to question the status quo and be bold. There's a lot of favorable feelings that are associated with not just change for change sake, but change with a purpose and the belief that individuals can really make a difference. On the one hand, I do believe very strongly that individuals can make a difference. However, in an environment of today, where there is a lot of change going on socially and organizationally, it behooves change agents to make proper choices and weigh risks and benefits of pursuing change efforts. And I think that that's been a resonant theme through several of my previous episodes in this podcast. What I want to do is to try to get at this idea of continuity versus complacency, because clearly the change literature -- [in its efforts] to empower individuals to take action -- tend to look at 'not changing' as just a polar opposite of change [or signs of resistance to change]. And the differentiation between continuity and complacency can become rather muted.

I think it's important to understand that \there is a difference. And I want to give a couple of quick case studies to explain this. The first one is when I was a high level staff officer in a military organization, I was working directly for a general officer commanding a very large military unit overseas. And this was, I guess, pushing about a quarter century ago now, quite some time back. So this was an organization that was already undergoing a considerable amount of change and not all of it was deliberate, but sort of foisted upon the organization. So imagine what was going on in the

aftermath of the Cold War with the Soviet Union breaking up and a whole bunch of former Warsaw Pact nations who were looking to the West for partnership?

Well, there were a lot of them, and they all were very interested in engaging, not just with NATO nations, but specifically the United States. And the unit I belonged to was one of the largest units in Europe at the time. And it was looked upon as a resource, in effect, to go ahead and engage with these nations. And at the same time, you also had the Balkans operations that were emerging with the breakup of Yugoslavia. And so, rather than have the organization performing its chartered mission, which was to fight and win a large-scale war in Central Europe, the organization became more or less tasked out for much, much smaller missions, ranging from partnership activities to peacekeeping operations in the Balkans. And this did not require the full unit; this required pieces of it. And so each of these smaller missions were resourced using teams or individuals basically cobbled together to meet the requirement and were sent down.

Now, obviously, the good news of this was that it showed the tremendous versatility of the organization to be able to respond to all of these. I wouldn't say non-traditional, but different types of mission sets, but especially when it came to the partnership activities, the tendency was to look for those members of the teams to have some degree of leadership experience. So we weren't sending whole units of junior personnel. We weren't sending privates and corporals to do these missions. They tended to come from the middle ranks and above. They tended to be leadership positions. So you took out a squad leader or you took out a platoon leader, staff sergeant or or lieutenant teams of that type of type of individuals to go do these missions.

Now, you can imagine that, you know, if the duration of the mission was rather short term, you probably could get away without this being too disruptive. But when you take out the direct supervisors of several teams and cobbled them together to go some place [such] that becomes habit forming -- that is, you get a lot of these sort of requirements at once or in rapid succession -- you can imagine the disruption that occurs to the rest of the organization. Of course, the second in line in each of these teams that I'm talking about, when the leader goes, the next one in line steps forward and does a tremendous job. And you do the best you can. But ultimately, you can't overcome the cumulative effect of these sorts of missions being disruptive to the organization.

So imagine that this was going on for some time and now you have a change in the general officer leader, a new commander comes in and decides that this this has gone on long enough and decides to make as his philosophy the following three words, 'predictability, reliability and stability,' coupled with the fact that he came in at a time when the quantity of these external requirements were starting to ebb. The message was one to the organization that we're going to try to stabilize things. We're going to go back to the traditional mission of the organization, because that's the contract that we have with our higher headquarters, with our stakeholders. In essence, we're going to filter out some of these tankers. We're going to make sure that whatever it is that we're going to be asked to do is going to be valid and that we're you know, we're going to try to dissuade unnecessary tankers. There's got to be a real reason if we're going to continue to do some of these things.

So the irony of this is that in order to restore continuity, the leader essentially was a change agent of a different sort. Rather than trying to change for the sake of initiating something, it was change for the purposes of stopping something or slowing things down to restore the original

purpose behind the mission, to reinforce the [organization's] identity. So it was continuity with a purpose, which I kind of find interesting.

A second case I want to discuss is one that happened much, much earlier. This was before I served. This goes back to the 1970s in the post Vietnam era. Here's one where I will use the names, because this is a very well-known story, at least within Army circles. This has to do with the transition of the Chief of Staff of the Army from General Creighton Abrams round 1974 to who was then the Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, General Frederick Weyand.

Why did the transition occur? Because, unfortunately, Chief of Staff Abrams passed away while serving in office. The typical tenure was four years. And unfortunately, General Abrams passed away only two years into his tenure. And those two years were very significant for the United States Army because it was the time when the United States went away from conscription and went to a volunteer force. And at the same time, Abrams was initiating a lot of actions to try to transform the army from the Vietnam era back to great power competition with the Soviet Union. Obviously, with only two years before his passing, he was only able to do so much. So then this occurs and Weyand steps in. The obvious choice, like if you were to take the choice facing general Weyand at its most simplest form, does he come in and just simply do his best to try to keep Abrams' vision? Or is he going to be a disruptor, essentially a change agent, change the direction and make it suit his own interests, his own purpose for assuming the position? Now, Abrams and Weyand had served together in various capacities over the course of their respective careers and Weyand new Abrams pretty well. So he made the decision that he was going to sustain Abrams's vision, assume that as his own, and serve out the remainder of Abrams's tours and complete those requirements, you know, to try to not to get into too much detail.

It's interesting because way and probably could have, if he wanted to, could have could have continued serving long beyond Abrams's original tour but way and made a choice not to. And basically, I'm going to I'm just going to assume Abrams' role and not disrupt what's going on already. This is a classic case of what I would call a *continuity agent*. I mean, this is neither case. Could you really say, you know, was complacency involved? Continuity was seen as a value, the purpose of trying to continue the organization on a path to. Prove or sustain its momentum. And not go back to a status quo just because we didn't like the change. There certainly was a lot of difficulty and a lot of challenges associated with trying to either, you know, restore a sense of stability in an organization or to ensure that a predecessor there, their wishes or their desires were fulfilled. You know, as much as we talk about agents of change, we ought to talk about agents of continuity.

So let's start with how do we redefine complacency and continuity so that we can kind of separate these two terms and make one really understand the positive one and what we disregard about the negative one. And looking at the two cases, I can come up with a couple of contrasting ideas.

The first one has to do with the organization's identity and competitive advantage in the sense of continuity. Continuity agents are about keeping the organization or restoring the organization's competitive advantage. However, we want to define that. I don't want to get back into some of my previous episodes on competitive advantage, but let's just take that as a given. They want to keep the competitive advantage in the face of constant change in the environment. Whereas complacency

doesn't care so much about the competitive advantage, it cares much more about the individual membership in the organization. Which sets of needs are being put first? Is it the organization's or is it the individuals?

When I think of complacency, I think of individuals who are putting their own needs before the organization. Competitive advantage is mildly interesting. The ability to stay a member of the organization or to shield oneself from the environment is the purpose for complacency. That's what complacency allows. So I think that that is kind of that that barrier. That's how I would separate the two.

And now we can talk a little bit better about what a continuity agent is. Continuity agents preserve the long the large scale, long term transformations when they come into an organization. They look for what needs to be sustained on the present path, or they take over, change a change efforts and they don't change them again for the sake of putting their individual mark on them. They change them if they recognize that the change efforts have not fulfilled their promises or if the change efforts have migrated away from the problem, or if the environment has changed such that the change effort is no longer aligned with what the organization needs.

That, to me, is a continuity agent! The competitive pressures can certainly cause people to want to become change agents, to institute change through ones for changes own sake, for the purposes of making a mark. People who look cynically at leaders trying to instill change talk about the idea that, you know, they don't like change for change sake. They wanted to have a purpose. And one of the things that can help is not just articulating change, but also demonstrating that continuity has a purpose as well, and that we're making wise decisions given all of the turmoil around us of what to change and what to keep stable. And that stability has a purpose. That stability is not about laziness. It's not about incompetence. It's not about protecting one's skin. Continuity is about sustaining the competitive advantage while looking for opportunities to innovate. Let's stop thinking about change or the opposite of change being complacency [or] being barriers. There are a lot of good reasons why we want to think about qualities such as predictability, reliability and stability and promote them in organizations when it serves the organization's needs. Now that's the challenge for change agents and continuity agents alike is to be able to make those measurements.

… 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