

REFLECTIONS ON MANAGEMENT

WITH TOM GALVIN

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT



Entering into the Middle of the Story: Inheriting a Change Effort

Season 4, Episode 7 – originally released 7 April 2020

Please note: This transcript has been edited for clarity.

A common thread I have found in popular change management literature is how to initiate change. Find the problem. Build the sense of urgency. Get things started. And this is because change really is hard to start. But the fact is, many of us will not necessarily be starting change efforts ourselves. We may first walk into a new job and be handed responsibilities over a change effort already occurring in the organization. Sometimes as a working group members, sometimes as a project lead. We can't always count on having a good continuity book or record of the change effort thus far. So when this happens, how should you proceed? How does one inherit a change effort?

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

The connection with a earlier discussion this season about change and continuity definitely comes into play here. But I would really want to focus now on the transition of change from one project lead to another or from a member of the working group to another in large organizations. The majority of the change efforts we encounter [that we are concerned about here are] the ones that we know are going to take a very, very long time to complete. You know, sometimes we're really talking about change that involves a new weapons system or new capability. Think about a new product that requires significant research and development, or science and technology. Years, possibly even decades, maybe. What we're talking about, again, going back to the previous episode, we think about continuity. Obviously, if you're have an organization overseeing the change effort like this, you're going to see a number of transitions of important people involved in the change effort.

The overall sense of continuity is going to be important in order to weigh the differences between, you know, what is going to keep a particular capability on track versus responsive to the environment. We think about how much the global environment changes in the course of decades. If you have a decades-long development ongoing, then obviously you're going to be contending with constant questions about is this capability still what we want when we're talking about that transition? You walk into an organization and you're told that you're going to be in charge or you're going to be responsible for the work of the effort that somebody else has started! Well, that's that, then. It's very hard. It's very complex. And unfortunately, one of the things that I think we could always do better at is maintaining our own records, you know, our own continuity books. We talk about it a lot, but it really is hard, really is difficult to take the time, not just to collect everything and just stuff it into binders or stuff it into, you know, hard drives, shared drives somewhere. You know, the quantity of stuff that we have done over the course of the life of a project. There is a need that we

all recognize that we should distill a lot of this down, to "All right. If I'm going to hand this off to my successor, what are the top three, four things that they need to know?"

Not everybody does that as well as they would like. And so let's assume that, you know, this mythical person is you. And you walk into the organization. What do you do? Spend quite a bit of time thinking about this. And there's a couple of things that I think that ought to be the first sets of questions to ask. And it isn't about what's going on now. It's about what happened when the change effort started.

So going back to an earlier episode in which I described the change story, the first thing that I would recommend is to recreate it -- the change story. To summarize, go back to Season one, Episode four to hear the whole talk. But the change story had three major elements to it. How did you characterize the current state? How did you characterize the undesired future state if you did nothing like how would the problem get worse as opposed to if the problem stayed the same? Could you tolerate it? What is the what was the risk calculus that said that action was required? And then, of course, a sense of the desired future state, which was the outcome of the change effort? The initial thought about what was my experience, my own experiences, that sometimes those historical documents tend to get lost [in comparison to near-term documents needed now].

So what you wind up doing is having to try to reverse engineer the change story rather than being able to go back to the source documents, the complete set of source documents and say this is why we started this in the first place, from which then you can start thinking about, well, what is the delta in the environment since then? What's changed? What is it that has caused us to or has caused the change ever to evolve over time to its present condition?

So then the second thing is to think about the decision space. This sounds obvious, but it's amazing how I think sometimes we forget some of these options. But you really have a choice of five things that you can do. Once you've figured out what the original problem was and how the change effort has evolved to the present time, the decision space, you have five options. One. Pure continuity, keep everything as is. Just stay the course. Whatever is doing appears to be efficient or effective at accomplishing what was originally laid out. OK.

The second one is continue with modifications. Now, this is when a new leader comes in -- you've got to be careful because, you know, a lot of times, as I said in the previous episode, about change and continuity -- sometimes there is a temptation [for the leader] to try to put one's own mark, especially of the way in which the change effort is being managed. Conflicts with your preferences in terms of how you receive information or how you make decisions. In a previous episode, a different previous episode, I talked about the "Story of the Four Commanders," four different metaphors for how commanders, how a leader of an organization receives information or makes decisions. And so if you are a numbers person and the organizations change effort has been largely predicated on carrots and sticks, rewards and sanctions, you know, you are obviously going to make some modifications to the way that the that the effort is managed. I'm not talking about just that. I'm talking about, you know, with modifications. I'm talking about a real no kidding redirection of the change effort based on environmental stimulus. You've got to think about if you're willing to modify the change effort, in what way are you going to modify it? And can you demonstrate that it's going to benefit everybody else, benefit the organization in some way, and not just for your own

convenience? Indeed, you could if it really is important to change some of the parameters of the management of the change effort to suit your needs, then that's OK. But that's got to be very clear, clearly communicated as you know what it is that's going to be the benefits [of modifying the effort]. Everybody else, if you just change it because you don't like it, and that's going to be disruptive and not everybody is going to understand the benefits of the disruption.

Third is a redesign. And I'm not talking about incremental modifications. I'm talking about you're essentially changing the change. We're gonna transform the change effort because we have found a significant misalignment that says that the change effort is not going to head towards the desired future state. But it can be salvaged. I mean, it can be kept on the path. But we have to come up with a modified change story. Something in the environment has influenced us such that we now face a new risk, a new undesired future state. If we stay on the present path, that undesired future state might be like the ones we were afraid of when we started the change effort. But now it's augmented by. If we stand the present path, the change effort isn't going to succeed. And this is going to manifest itself in wasted effort or a capability that we thought would be competitive in the marketplace or competitive from a readiness or preparedness perspective. But now is not. And it's going to create some second and third order effects that will that will negatively impact the organization. We have to come up with an modified change story from which we then explain what it is about the change effort that has to be transformed. And then we move out and come up with a modified strategy, modified plan and modified governance mechanism.

The next one is how to stop the effort. If we find that the desired future state of the change effort is no longer viable or no longer reachable, if it's if it's infeasible, then we want to stop. We should stop the effort. But as I talked about in a previous episode, there are ways of stopping an effort other than just abruptly. We always want to think about how do we set conditions by which when we stop it. We foster more change.

And then the absolute worst case -- which has happened and I have witnessed this -- is to completely undo or reverse the change effort, literally go back to the status quo ante. Now, that's an extreme condition, but it has happened. [On my] web site, [I include] a link to an article by a trio of scholars, it's on the Web site and titled very simply "Reversal of Strategic Change." And they studied what happens when a strategic change basically has to be undone. And they found that, you know, there really is no such thing as going back to a status quo ante. And I think this kind of makes sense to many of our experiences that when you undergo change to go up to a certain point, you know, there's a lot of things that have changed about the organization as a result of the change effort. When you decide to go back and reverse to a previous state, the clear impact is that you have residuals in the organization's memory and culture about the change going forward. And it essentially becomes the second change effort to revert the organization back. And the organization still winds up, even if it is even if the the reversal is fully successful and the organization is back to doing things almost exactly or exactly the way that was doing it before.

The knowledge about what happens in both directions of the change is significant and impacts the way the organization feels about itself and the way how it feels about change in the future. So even that has to be planned. The example I would like to give, which I will probably save for a future episode, is to specifically discuss the case of the National Security Personnel System -- which

[is] getting close to a decade ago now, maybe even longer -- it was an attempt by the U.S. government to instill a different paradigm of moving from a "pay by seniority" to a "pay for performance" system among Department of Defense civilians, which ran into various problems, had to be undone and the old pay for seniority system had to be restored. I think that the you know, the act of going forward and coming back did leave a bit of an impact on the Department of Defense civilians so that I'm going to sort of leave for a for a future time.

But the present concern about, you know, you've done you're inheriting a change effort, you've reconstructed the change story is originally told. You've measured it against, you know, the changes that have happened since the change effort was launched. You know, what is changed in the environment? What's changed in the organization is the change story is still valid. You've looked at the decision space and you've got these five options of what you want to do.

What else do you want to look at? Another thing I want to point out is what is the relationship between this change effort and the change efforts elsewhere in the organization? This is something that definitely doesn't get talked about in in your typical change management literature. I came up with a term which may or may not be friendly to everybody, but I call it "change fratricide." If, for example, you have multiple change efforts where there is something in common that they are intersecting and they conflict, and usually the thing that first comes to my mind has to do with resources. Is this change effort competing for resources or something else with other change efforts in the organization? Is that becoming a barrier to success? Is that becoming a barrier to even getting attention to the effort? What do you do? OK. So how do you navigate this? What what do you think you should do in order to make sure that the change effort continues unabated and that you mitigate the effects of other change efforts on yourself or your affect on other change efforts who might be equally viable? Then, of course, you have to address the new barriers, any anythings that are in the way aside from competition. Those all have to be addressed.

And then finally, you can get back to thinking about, "All right, now I understand the change effort. What's the new vision? What's the new strategy? What's the new plan? How do I communicate that?" And even more importantly, "how do I ensure that everybody understands that we have a new plan and to try to dispense with the old plan?"

If you have incomplete information about changes to the change effort and that some of the individual members in the organization are thinking in terms of the earlier plan, then I think that the change effort could be in trouble. So no question, there's a very, very heavy communication burden that's placed upon the change agent who's inheriting this effort. So I think this is something that I'm pushing for something to try to get a little bit more formalized and make much more of a regular part of the change management literature, because in my mind, the transition of leadership, of a change effort from one person to another is something that is just underrepresented. It it certainly is something that happens routinely. And I think it's important that we talk about it and we think about how do we provide the right tools to our change agents so that they can deal with it. And that way we can keep our change efforts on track.

... 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