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Changing The Rules: How to Avoid the Ostrich Strategy

by Steve Gaspar

Imagine that you and a friend are playing a board game and you are winning. The object is to be the first to get all of your game pieces to your home base. You take turns rolling the dice and moving along and your advantage continues to grow. Suppose, then, in the middle of the game that the rules are changed without warning—now you are to guide half of your game pieces to your home base and half of them to your opponent's home base.

Suddenly the relative values of the game pieces have changed. Low-value pieces (those close to your opponent's home base) are now high-value pieces. And to top it all off, this change gives your opponent the advantage. That wouldn't seem very fair to you, would it?

Just to see what would happen, I tried this exact thing with one of my young sons recently during a simple board game. Without hesitation he let me know his thoughts. "That's not fair!" he said.

"It is fair because the change applies to both of us equally," I replied.

"No. That helps you more than me," he protested, "so I don't want to do it."

Indeed he was right. The change favored me more than him, so to him it seemed unfair. Such is the nature of an unexpected and fundamental change—it can seem and be unfair. And yet fairly or unfairly, such changes happen every day in business. One day you compete with

company ABC and the next day you collaborate with the same people because your old company has merged with company ABC. A technological change occurs and the functional skills which until then had defined your professional advantage are now obsolete. We were in business X and now we are in business Y. Your old subordinate is your new boss.

These examples are similar to the board game change. Somebody changed the rules and it doesn't seem fair. Another similarity is that just as the relative value of the board pieces was altered at the point of the change, the relative value of each employee's skills shifted at the point of the change. Skill sets can become dated overnight, and in turn one's effectiveness and market value can be immediately affected by an environmental change. Of course, some people catch a break and find that an unexpected change increases their value significantly. This article is about the former, not the latter—or potentially in understanding how to create the latter by taking action on your own.

The relevant issue is not *whether* changes will occur that will impact your effectiveness and value in the marketplace. Nor is the issue a matter of *when* such changes will occur. With every business today experiencing rapid change, you may rest assured that there is a large change coming soon to an office near you. The key issue is *what* are *you* going to do when that fundamental change shows up in *your* office?

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People have a variety of reactions to organizational change. Some try the ostrich strategy—hide your head in the sand and hope that change does not find you. This reaction is all too common when you think about what it looks like in the workplace. “Keep your head down, do your job, and it will all work out.” How many times have you heard that one? A variant of this strategy is to naively think that change is only required by those around you. Maybe change will find the person in the next cube over, but not you. “Oh, Bob’s area has needed to change for a long time to get with the times, but we’re all set. They need us. We do the LPT87 report. They’ve always needed the LPT87 report.” Then one day “they” don’t need it anymore—another office does the report, or all reports have been outsourced, or your boss’s iPod can do the LPT87. These “not me” reactions are forms of denial, and are only marginally effective for a limited time. Resistance to change puts people at material risk of being obsolete. Denial prevents recognition of the need to change, which must occur before change can begin.

Another change-resistant strategy is to compensate by doing more of what used to be asked of you. Karl Schoemer, founder of Vision Quest (www.vqchange.com), is a change management guru who has built his business around helping organizations cope with and ultimately exploit change to their competitive advantage. Karl has a great example to illustrate this point. First, take out a piece of paper and write your signature legibly as many times as you can in

30 seconds. Count the times. Now switch hands. Most people struggle to write half as many signatures, many of which are illegible. Stress increases and productivity and quality decrease, just as in every other fundamental change. One reaction a few people have is to write more strong-handed signatures to compensate—to do more of the old.

“I did 50 percent more of the old way.”

“Too bad, you are failing because we only use weak-side signatures now.”

“But I’ll work harder and do 75 percent more of the old.”

“Strong-handed signatures are of no value to us now.”

“I’LL DOUBLE MY OUTPUT!!”

“Good bye.”

This “more of the old” is just as common as the “not me” types of denial. How many people do you know who have put off learning a new piece of software that could save them hours of time? Instead of learning something new, they just work longer to compensate. Part of this dysfunction comes from not wanting to let go of the past, because in the past we were proficient. In the new world we lack the same skill level. Moving to the new means facing our lack of expertise, which is not a comfortable place to go. It is, however, exactly where we must go if

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we are to continuously evolve, develop and maintain our market value as our world changes.

Given the omnipresence of change, a critical core skill is having the ability to quickly adapt to change. A few people are hardwired as highly adaptive to change—they almost seem to seek out change. For them, embracing the new system, the new process, the new headquarters or the new product is like gravity. Change happens, they adapt and they don't seem to skip a beat. For others, dealing with change comes more slowly and with more pain. In either case, a person is more effective if he knows how to deal with change.

Understanding how others deal with change is even more valuable, and a basic necessity for today's leaders. Fortunately much has been written on the topic, and there are many change management models available. Most models describe the feelings, attitudes and behaviors that people experience or exhibit in each phase of change. Change management models provide advice for helping yourself and others move through the change process.

One model is ADKAR. ADKAR stands for Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability and Reinforcement. This model was created by the organization Prosci (www.prosci.com), and is described in detail in the book *ADKAR: A Model for Change in Business, Government and Our Community*, by Jeffery M. Hiatt.

The five steps of the ADKAR model are sequential and cumulative. That is, Awareness must be well established in order for Desire to grow. Knowledge must precede Ability, and so on. The model provides a framework for both successfully implementing a change and for diagnosing causes of unsuccessful change implementations.

"Awareness" is awareness of the need to change. This is not the same as being told that you need to change, because that message can be delivered ineffectively or simply ignored. Awareness is an acceptance that the need to change exists and it is your personal need. Trying to help raise a group's awareness to change might sound something like this, "Going forward we must all provide original receipts for business expenses because expense reports without original receipts are no longer being approved for reimbursement."

Next is "Desire", which speaks to one's motivation to change. As we all know, just recognizing that you need to change does not do much. For example, knowing (awareness) that you really need to cut back on fats, red meat and cholesterol is not the same thing as wanting (desire) to change your diet. Knowing that the next 18-ounce steak you consume may

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cause immediate heart failure is more complete information, but it is still not desire. Desire is not wanting to check out just yet and being open to understanding what to do about it (how about a nice salad?)

“Knowledge” refers to the specific knowledge of how to change. This phase has everything to do with training. For example, suppose that beginning today all memos for your company will be composed in a popular word processing language rather than via e-mail. If your employees understand the need to change (awareness) and want to make the change (desire) then they are ready to go to a training class (knowledge). The sequential nature of the ADKAR model specifically requires that such Awareness and Desire are present prior to spending any time or money on training. I do not have to think for very long to identify a time when I sat through training and thought, “what a waste of time”. Some of those times I had neither the awareness nor the desire to change (and other times I was right.)

“Ability” is having the competency to implement the new behavior. This is the result of practice. A few issues ago in *The Stepping Stone* I responded to an inquiry regarding writing skills. That individual clearly believed that better writing skills were important to her career and she wanted to improve her skills (awareness and desire). My recommendation then was to attend a course (knowledge) and begin writing a journal (practice leading to ability).

Finally “Reinforcement” refers to giving rewards for the new skill or behavior to ensure its continued practice. My young sons are finally shaking hands and saying “good game” after a board game or video game contest. Granted, they don’t do so all the time, but you can be sure that every time they do I pour on the praise (reinforcement). In the business setting, reinforcement can range from verbal praise to cash awards to promotions. The point is to provide some reinforcement for embracing and mastering the desired change.

Why spend the time to understand a change management model such as ADKAR? First, I can use it to evaluate myself when confronted with unexpected change. Such self-diagnosis is helpful in avoiding procrastination and in understanding my own frustrations. A more valuable reason to understand such a model is to be better able to help others deal with change. As a leader this can be a powerful skill. Communication needs vary between stages of change, and as the leader it is your responsibility to communicate to your people in a way that considers their stage of change, not yours. This lesson is hard won. The leader might find herself saying “What is wrong with them?! I told them what to do!” The team might find themselves saying “What is wrong with her?! Why is she making us change?!” In this example the leader is communicating from a place that is well past Awareness and Desire, which is precisely where the team is stuck. They don’t even hear her, and they conclude that she is out of touch.

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Up to this point this article has been focused on dealing with change that happens to you. Here is a final note on creating your own change. Wouldn't it be nice to know what skills would be most valuable for you to add to your skill set? While no one has a crystal ball, good information is available if you know where to look. Here's a suggestion of three places to start: (1) your boss, (2) your subordinates and (3) your boss's boss.

When you engage your boss in conversation about what skills you can develop to be more valuable in the future, you do two things. First, you identify that you are interested in getting better, which is music to your boss's ears. Second, it tells your boss that you value her opinion. Nothing bad should come of this, and if it does then you have a bigger problem.

By engaging your subordinates you get two more things. First, you show them that you care about how you interact with them. Second, you get the gift of knowing the effect of your behaviors on others, which is incredibly valuable information. Frequently the intent of an action is not the same as the effect. Further, we all have behaviors that we don't easily see ourselves. Subordinates can give us that look in the mirror that we need.

Finally, by engaging your boss's boss you also gain two things. First, you get another opinion from someone who matters a great deal in your professional world. Second, you find out what matters two levels up, which should give you

clues as to how to better support your boss. Checking with your boss before doing this is a wise initial step.

Back to the board game with my son—eventually I convinced him to try out the rule change just to see what would happen. I am happy to report that in spite of being at an initial disadvantage he won the game. Then I shook his hand and said 'good game.' □

