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Learning to Lead Change: Building System Capacity
Leadership for Change Library

Change Without Pain:

How Managers Can Overcome Initiative Overload, Organizational Chaos and Employee Burnout

Eric Abrahamson

Boston: Harvard University Press, 2004

218 pages

Too many organizations engage in repetitive change syndrome which is accompanied by three destructive consequences: initiative overload; change related chaos; and widespread employee anxiety, cynicism and burnout. Repetitive change, creative destruction, change or perish, and no pain no gain advice have become prevalent to the detriment of organizational performance.

Abrahamson argues that there is an alternative approach which he calls *creative recombination*. Creative recombination, or change without pain (actually in our view change without as much pain as usual), minimizes disruptive and painful destruction by using assets an organization already has and recombines them creatively in a new and successful fashion.

Abrahamson uses the metaphor of finding useful things in the basement workshop and suggests that organizations should consider looking for valuable assets in their own "corporate basement." How? By finding, reusing, redeploying and recombining the mismatched parts that the organization already has lying around. If no pain no change remains the standard it becomes the excuse for every form of badly managed change. Abrahamson's book focuses on finding an alternative where "less pain equals more effective change."

Five organizational elements are potentially available for recombination: people, networks, culture, processes, and structure. Abrahamson says we should be reviving and extending dormant or latent values, not reinventing them. Abrahamson warns against frequent structural reorganization. Basically, he advocates practicing "the fine art of pacing." Rather than pelting the organization with one change after another, balancing stability and change allows it to attain superior long- and short-term performance, enabling in the long run more changes more easily, more cheaply, and with more success. In effect, pacing allows a company to counterbalance periods of organization change with periods of well managed organizational stability.

The reason that periods of stability are valuable is that they provide opportunities for small-scale trial and error learning, learning the consequences, and doing more small changes that improve performance. As well, periods of stability reduce the pain experienced among a firm's employees and customers.

Tools that slow the speed of organizational change include: treating change as a precious commodity, changing different organizational parts at different speeds, and being fastest — not going faster.

Tools for countering repetitive change syndrome consist of: fighting cynicism and initiative overload, and slowing down to get there quicker.

If change is too slow (excessive stability) Abrahamson recommends accelerating the process by fighting inertia and building change capacity through training and application.

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Finally, Abrahamson emphasizes that organizations need to have standards which build in constant attention to how well the firm is doing, and to recognize that employees are our most precious attitude.

Overall, Abrahamson warns that while "no pain equals no change" is true, it is also true that "all pain equals no change." Less pain, achieving a balance, results in more change.

Why We Like This Book

Change Without Pain treats change as neither good nor bad, and shows which types of change are good, and which are negative. It supports neither change addicts nor those averse to change. This is a book that makes you step back and think about change as a phenomenon and then re-enter change with a fresh and balanced perspective. It contains many tools and guidelines for avoiding overload and for stimulating the status quo.



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