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Building Bridges for Change in Organizations

Anna is the head of human resources at leading design firm and she faces a challenge: Recent growth has led to massive hirings and an influx of new mid-career employees. Many new hires struggle to navigate the firm's flat, autonomous, and team-based culture. "They just aren't asking for help," she remarked to a colleague, "In the orientation we're clear on what's expected, but when they work in groups they don't seek out peers and mentors to give them a hand." After a few months many new hires become frustrated and feel alienated. How can Anna help them adapt?

Supporting change across an organization, whether it be helping employees to seek help and share knowledge or influencing them to lead healthier lifestyles, relies on leaders like Anna to have a deep understanding of how to best affect collective behaviors. Altering deeply entrenched practices no simple task. Too often leaders fail to effectively motivate and engage their audiences. Or they misunderstand the cultural forces that keep these behaviors in place. Even the most sensible and seemingly simple initiatives, such as changing recycling behaviors or email etiquette, can falter. What then can we learn from research that explains how changes in collective behaviors occur?

This article draws together three interconnected strategies that emerged from multidisciplinary discussions among top practitioners and researchers at Harvard's Learning Innovations Laboratory. Like a bridge across a powerful river, successful approaches to change enable people to make the journey from one place of action to another. To help make this crossing, emerging research is revealing the power that affective, social and structural bridges have on supporting such change.

Building Emotional Bridges

"It's the emotional barriers that are often the biggest challenges for collective action," suggests Dr. Marshall Ganz of the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. Ganz draws on his decades of work with a diversity of large-scale organizations, such as the US civil rights movement, the Sierra Club, and the current Obama presidential campaign. He believes that in order

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- Spark discussion among your organizational colleagues.
- Give new ideas to those in charge of leadership development and decision making.
- Create a dialogue between yourself and leaders in other organizations who might find the topic of interest.

to motivate people to adopt new attitudes and actions, leaders must be skilled at creating specific kinds of emotional narrative that enable change. “If your living in fear, you’re in no place to experiment with new behaviors,” Ganz points out. Feelings of fear, apathy, inertia, self-doubt, and isolation can undermine the ability for change. To counteract these emotions, Ganz works with leaders to tell stories that spark a sense of hope, purpose, urgency, efficacy, and solidarity – all are affective states that enable change. When participants are engaged in these emotions they become motivated and new capacities for change can be developed.

Ganz advises that the collective telling of stories should be done in the spirit of organizing versus mobilizing. Mobilizing is the traditional marketing approach of influencing choices by pushing a message throughout the social system. In contrast, an organizing approach engages listeners in the narrative by finding ways to become part of the story through their own actions. “We took an organizing approach in South Carolina in the Obama Presidential campaign,” tells Ganz. “It was effective not because Obama won, but because after the primary over twenty of the local organizers filed to run for political offices.” The approach encouraged individuals to become involved in the change.

In the case of Anna, crafting and sharing stories of help seeking and cooperation might enable new employees to feel at ease with taking on more pro-social behaviors. Newcomers know all too well the mythological stories of her firm’s founder individual brilliance and success. But they are not well acquainted with stories of that highlight help seeking and interdependence. Engaging new employees in examples of collaborative success might well help tip the scales towards better behaviors. Of course, bridging change through emotional narrative is just one approach and Anna may also consider other more social solutions.

Building Relational Bridges

How can change socially spread throughout an organization? After decades of research in the field of social network analysis a key lesson has emerged: Diffusion of ideas and new behaviors reaches a larger number of people and traverses a greater social distance when passed through weak ties (e.g. casual acquaintances) rather than strong ties (e.g. close friends and family). Family and friends move in similar social circles and information one receives will greatly overlap with what one already knows. In contrast, acquaintances move in quite

different social circles and will receive much more novel information, thus accelerating the diffusion of ideas and behaviors.

“For information and disease, this standard model of diffusion is absolutely correct,” Dr. Damon Centola of MIT points out. “However, if multiple social contacts or sources of social reinforcement are needed in order for a change of behavior to occur, weak ties may in fact inhibit diffusion.” His research introduces the notion of “complex contagions,” behaviors that require multiple social contacts before individuals feel sufficiently confident or pressured to adopt the behavior themselves (e.g. fashion fads, unproven technologies, high-risk social movements, change in health behaviors, etc.). Complex contagions require several exposures because they depend on strategic relationships, credibility, legitimacy, and need emotional reinforcement.

The desired help seeking and knowledge sharing behaviors in Anna’s organization may well be complex contagions. New employees may need several reinforcements and exposures in order for them to understand how to do it and to feel comfortable experimenting with them. When dealing with complex contagions, Centola advises against traditional buckshot approaches to training, such as typical orientations, in which fairly random members of a community are gathered together, exposed, then return to their distant social circles. Like a failed New Year’s resolution, most individuals will struggle to sustain newly acquired behaviors on their own. They will quickly revert to old habits that are sustained by the local culture. Instead, it is best to identify clusters of people, 3-5 colleagues with fairly strong ties, and work with them. These groups will be able to socially reinforce one another to sustain the behaviors in practice. And after several cycles of working with new clusters Anna might well have a stronger web of support for all her employees.

But how can these clusters be selected and connected? This brings us to a third bridge to support change that involves patterns of social structure in an organization.

Building Structural Bridges

Top down narratives and bottom up social connections are important, but noted Harvard historian Dr. Theda Skocpol draws our attention to the role that mid-level associations play in bridging change. “Leaders must avoid the simple theories

of change that suggest it occurs from either a top-down or a bottom-up approach,” Skocpol warns. “It’s both and social change occurs through institutions within the larger system that have the capacity to coordinate across levels simultaneously.” Her ground-breaking historical analysis of the changes in the United States, such as the civil rights movement, suggests that what matters most are not grassroots efforts or well designed policies. Instead deep and lasting change of entrenched behaviors occurs by leveraging pre-existing social groups, such as artisan communities or volunteer associations, that are able to coordinate local action across the country.

Organizations have many mid-level social structures, such as communities of practice, unions, and interest or hobby groups. These groups can play a vital role in supporting change in organizations since they connect individuals across organizational levels and do not operate solely at the top or the bottom.

In Anna’s organization there are already communities of practice around disciplines, such as engineering and human factors. And there are informal affinity groups, such as parenting groups or athletic teams. Seeding and developing help seeking and knowledge sharing behaviors in these already existing social groups might go a long way toward bridging the same behaviors throughout her organization.

Lessons for Leaders

With these three bridges in mind we can offer Anna and other leaders of change some concrete advice:

- Understand the kind of change you are aiming for. Is it complex? Does it require people to unlearn deeply entrenched habits? If so, then think creatively about how to leverage emotion, social connections, and social structures in your favor.
- Understand the current stories in play, create stories that can be told that promote enabling emotions. Avoid stories that spark emotions that undermine the change you’re aiming for, such as fear or apathy.
- Focus on working with clusters of people. Don’t work with isolated individuals no matter where they sit in organizations’ hierarchy.
- Understand and leverage your organization’s hidden, mid-level associations. Communities or informal affiliation groups can provide robust pathways to spread the change you are seeking.

For more information on this and other topics, explore the LILA website at:

<http://lila.pz.harvard.edu>

LILA members only can access the following related resources in the LILA website library:

- [“Decision Dynamics”](#) — a Brief by Daniel Wilson (Feb 2008).
- [LILA Event Knowledge Map](#) — Minutes and links to resources from the Feb 2008 gathering.