



THE LAND MINES OF CHANGE

BY JOE RAE LIN

Consider an all-too-familiar vignette that probably occurs daily in organizations around the world. This scenario has been referred to as the “Catch-22” of change. A formerly autocratic manager turns over a new leaf and professes to become more democratic. Hence, he decides to delegate more responsibility to one of his workers. Naturally, the worker, having lived under the autocratic thumb of this boss for many years, mistrusts his motives. It seems that in the past, whenever any subordinates took some initiative on a project and appeared to fail, the boss would be sure to punish them in some way, such as by taking away the assignment. So, the worker takes a wait-and-see attitude, knowing that, in due course, the boss will tell her what to do.

Meanwhile, the boss perceives this worker’s hesitation as a sign of dependency. He figures that he was right all along, that this individual is lazy and can’t be trusted to assume responsibility. The boss takes back the project and vows never to take this kind of risk again. The worker, meanwhile, feels vindicated that her view of the boss was correct, and she vows, in turn, to never assume new levels of responsibility if ever asked to again.

Latent Barriers to Change

This story highlights a number of “land mines”—or latent barriers—in the business of change that managers need to be aware of.

Resistance to Change

The first land mine is launching a change action without first acknowledging and working through workers’ natural resistance to shifts in the status quo. Human beings often enjoy the security of familiarity. It is difficult to part with that which has become cus-

tomary. To do so, we need to know how the change will benefit us as individuals and not only how it will serve the organization as a whole.

In the vignette above, the process would have been easier for both the manager and the employee if they had known what they were giving up and what they were moving toward. Clearly, if the manager planned to embark on a “participation program,” he would have done well to conduct

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a series of informed dialogues with his workers ahead of time. By doing so, he might have learned that, based on the organization’s existing culture, people felt safer taking a dependent position within the hierarchy than “sticking their necks out” and facing the consequences of taking initiative. Responsibility is often accompanied by risk and accountability. Why assume some level of responsibility if all the critical decisions are being handled by those above you?

Lack of Patience

A related land mine is not having the patience to let a new change effort take hold. In the aforementioned vignette, some employees might not throw themselves completely into the new assignment, fearing that during a moment of stress, the boss might resort to his old, domineering ways. From

the manager’s point of view, resisting the urge to intervene in the project can be frustrating, because mistakes and performance lapses are bound to occur. Enduring these errors is often the most difficult task of all during a transition period. Here’s how Bill O’Brien, former CEO of the Hanover Insurance Company, describes this experience (from an interview in B. Frydman, I. Wilson, and J. Wyer, *The Power of Collaborative Leadership*, Butterworth Heinemann, 2000):

“...what kept me up at night? It was when I had to deal with poor performance. I said to myself, ‘If I’m going to do this, I’d rather take a little more time and do it too late than do it too early because I have a human being’s life here.’ Finally, you get signals that tell you you’ve waited too long. Some of your direct reports are coming to you, trying to drop hints that . . . there are missed deadlines—a whole host of things. I erred by being too late. I was late partially by design because I wanted to minimize the fear. For the most part the fear in corporations today is very debilitating so I wanted to keep us at a very low level of fear. I would rather have a lot of other people say, ‘It’s about time O’Brien woke up!’ than having people say, ‘Where is O’Brien going to strike next?’”

Low Readiness for Change

A third land mine is that change efforts are often dependent on the system’s readiness to change. In the Catch-22 case, we have a system that has rarely, if ever, experienced participative management. The worker in question may not even be interested in taking responsibility for her actions,

never having been given the opportunity to do so. Hence, we can say that this worker—and the system as a whole—is in a *low state of readiness*. In what we might call a *medium state of readiness*, at least the members of the community are curious about a possible change, enough to be open-minded about the effort. Still, they may continue to be uncertain about how to make a shift and what the outcome might be. In a *high or primed state of readiness*, the members may have already begun the process of change but just need encouragement as well as support and resources.

In the vignette, both the manager and the worker seem uneasy about engaging in the change effort. Perhaps the manager has been given a mandate to be participative with his workers or to delegate more to them. Exacerbating the dilemma, he himself may not have been given an opportunity to prepare for the change or to build his collaborative leadership skills.

Attempt to Apply “Fix-It” Techniques

Another land mine in the process is the view that people and organizations can be changed through “fix-it” techniques that have been successful with physical or financial assets, such as assuming that one action, say *x*, will automatically produce a change, say *y*. But what would happen, for example, if a product manager decided to increase the quality control over a

product that the sales staff had long ago given up on? The effort may fall short of her expectations, because human beings are more complicated than physical or financial assets, in that we have feelings! Not only do people sometimes fail to do what they’re told, especially if they determine that it is not in their best interest, but they may be affected by others who have their own agendas.

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Any change process, then, has to take into consideration people’s feelings, values, and behaviors in addition to the physical resources they need to implement the desired shifts.

Belief That We Can Decree Change

The last land mine is believing that we can decree change. Change rarely occurs if it is commanded. People will undertake change when they feel committed to both the process and the goal. As Peter Senge likes to say, effective leaders are preferably gardeners or seed carriers who plant the seeds for releasing the energy of others (from an interview with Allan Webber in “Learning for a Change,” *Fast Company*, 24: May 1999). They are

not so ego-involved as to have to be at the center of all change efforts. They allow change to evolve, often first in small doses, until it becomes contagious and spreads to other locations.

Viewed as a collaborative process, creating change does not have to be a daunting task. It can be seen as a natural ecological event that is inherent to our human condition. Land mines may also be seen as barriers that we impose on ourselves only because we create an “us against them” dynamic by believing that no one will go along with us. But what if instead we created an environment in which our fears and aspirations, and those of our collaborators, could be brought onto the table and openly addressed?

Overcoming the land mines of change, then, becomes easier as we involve others in what I call “leaderful practice.” Leaderful practice occurs when all those affected by a change are deliberately involved in the planning and implementation of that effort. In this way, everyone shares leadership, not just sequentially, with different people acting at different times, but concurrently, with all acting in complementary ways at the same time. When we act leaderfully, we develop our capacity to take mutual action. ■

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