# THE PATH OF CREATIVE DISRUPTION: A FOUNDATION FOR SUSTAINABLE CHANGE

**B Y   M A R K   D I L L A R D**

**S**ustainable change happens when people begin to see the world differently. It takes only a momentary abandonment of longstanding beliefs and assumptions for this shift to occur. A few moments of reflection and candor, followed by powerful dialogue among those who care deeply about the results of that conversation, can spark meaningful transformation.

Contrary to popular opinion, real change happens in small disruptive shifts, not through overarching change management programs. A top-down, systemic, structured approach can be useful for implementing a specific initiative. However, lasting and sustainable culture change can only take place through the impetus of people from within the organizational ranks.

"Creative disruption" is the initiation of small movements, the opening up of new avenues of consideration and perspective. This path is qualitatively different from a structured change approach. It creates the foundation for the acceleration and more efficient execution of formal organization change. At the same time, it nourishes the innate human capacity for discovery, curiosity, and reinvention.

## Intersection with Change Management

Not all changes are created equal. Some may focus on a significant shift in behavior or skill. Others target the amorphous organizational culture, with all its inherent complexities and challenges. While admittedly an oversimplification, large-scale organizational change typically involves both of these elements. Nevertheless, most initiatives are attached to a specific project implementation, such as a restructuring or enterprise software implementation. Rarely does one find a CEO willing to support, financially or otherwise, a stand-alone project specifically and explicitly designed as a "culture change."

> **Creative disruption addresses both the technical and human elements of change by building an organization-wide capability in inquiry, listening, and collaborative problem solving.**

A large-scale change that fails to adequately consider both technical and human elements is destined for the trash heap. The technical elements are those that involve the tangible aspects of the change—the "what." Within a restructuring project, for example, these would include reporting relationships, business processes, and technological requirements. The human elements are the things people need to do differently—the "how." These typically include skills, behaviors, and attitudes.

Creative disruption addresses both the technical and human elements of change by building an organization-wide capability in inquiry, listening, and collaborative problem solving. It is not about *doing*; it is about *being*. It's a willingness to let go, if only temporarily, of preconceived assumptions and beliefs about how your organization operates. It's the courage to inquire about others' beliefs and assumptions, particularly those that get in the way of real change. It's the skill in asking questions about possibility and change, and the patience in listening to the response. It's the initiative to take action within the momentum generated from an inquiry into the possibility. Finally, it's a cycle of continuous reflection and learning.

This new perspective starts with each individual making a choice to participate. Once ignited among a core group of people, the stance of creative disruption becomes part of the organizational fabric. Change becomes intentional and implementation of technical changes becomes a creative challenge rather than a reaction to a problem.

This process is not one of disruption for the sake of disruption. It is not a reactionary approach, based on misguided intentions and a myopic view of growth. The path of creative disruption starts with the conviction of creation. What can we collectively bring forth that is currently not here? What are the possibilities we haven't yet explored for creating more powerful results? These questions are framed with the larger context of the organizational vision or serve as the starting point for creating one.

## The Power of Inquiry

Inquiry lies at the heart of creative disruption. Through asking probing questions, people and teams can intentionally and creatively disturb and improve the systems in which they work. The focus is not to unearth problems that need to be resolved but to explore new possibilities. Why do we do things this way? Are we getting the results we aspire to with this process? What are we trying to create?

Within the larger context of change, inquiry helps people become

aware of how their own belief systems are affecting their individual and organizational results. But there's a danger—it is extremely difficult to attempt to shift how someone views the world. Using inquiry as a tool to expose others and somehow make them aware of their own shortcomings is, at best, ineffective. A more effective approach involves initiating divergent conversations around a vision for creative change and possibility. As people within the organization practice this capability, they become aware of the possibilities inherent in their own natural curiosity and creativity.

### Listening for Possibility

There's little value in building an organizational capability around inquiry unless you listen to the collective responses. Heartfelt and earnest listening is both immensely important and extraordinarily difficult. When myriad distractions are vying for our already strained attention, the value of listening can be elusive.

The single biggest challenge to genuine listening is the ongoing stream of internal conversation that invigorates our beliefs and assumptions. That internal conversation consists of experiences, biases, assumptions, and distractions. The essential first step in listening is learning to become aware of that internal conversation. Once aware, we can begin to quiet the noise that keeps us from listening for new ideas and perspectives.

Disrupting the system requires an ability to listen to what's happening within that system. Listening opens doors to possibilities that may otherwise stay hidden. Targeted inquiry is an important element in the path of creative disruption, and it only comes about through the diligence of listening.

### Being Purposeful and Deliberate

Learning requires practice, reflection, and a "slowing down." Too often, we jump from one problem to the next, one conversation to the next, one idea to the next, without ever stopping to deepen our understanding. We lose out by not having the space (literally and figuratively) to reflect, ask questions, listen, and learn. In the quickening pace of our world, we must make being purposeful and deliberate a discipline in support of generative conversation.

### Cutting a Path

So what can you do today? Starting with yourself, begin to cut a path of creative disruption. Inquiry and listening, done with integrity, are contagious. Practice them with a passion and intensity that will ignite a creative movement forward across your organization.

Here are some strategies to consider in cutting a path:

• **Start with You.** Check your own assumptions and beliefs about change. What's getting in the way of your creating the results that matter for you and the organization? Shift your orientation from one of constant reaction to problems to one of creative possibilities. Ask yourself, "What can I create from where I am today?"

• **Look for Opportunities to Disrupt.** Too often a dysfunctional process or system stays that way simply because nobody steps forward to ask targeted questions. Ask questions, and listen with good intention. Create space for others to ask questions, and listen when examining existing processes and systems. Sometimes all it takes

for change to take hold is for one person to initiate a creative process of exploration.

• **Build the Capability for Powerful Conversations.** Design and deliver learning experiences based on inquiry, listening, and other tools that facilitate the disruption of systems. These sessions should focus on increasing knowledge and awareness of how our beliefs and assumptions can impact the results of our conversations and, hence, our organizational results. Create experiences that let people practice these new skills in a safe environment.

• **Create Space.** Interrupt the cycle of reaction. Create space (literally and figuratively) for people to begin to have conversations about things that they care about and are important to the organization. Integrate times for reflective conversation within an existing leadership development or other learning program. Build cross-functional "disruption" teams to ask targeted questions about existing processes and cultural norms.

• **Integrate the Tools of Creative Disruption into Existing Change Programs.** Ensure that key players involved in any large-scale change are well versed in the skills and tools of creative disruption. Whether it's a shift in a technical process or an initiative targeted at the human side, inquiry will enhance the successful implementation of the change and build organizational capability for the long term. ◙

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