



COVERT DISRUPTION

Covert Disruption: an adaptive approach to change

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The Language of Change Management: is it contributing to low rates of success?

Change Management has been around for a while now, and yet 70% [McKinsey Quarterly, 2010] of change efforts fail or do not bring about the desired outcomes in behavior, mindsets or culture. As an OCM (Organizational Change Management) practitioner, I struggle with that statistic. I can't understand why change efforts (specifically initiatives targeted at changing behavior, mindset and culture) led by smart people, armed with great tools and techniques are not more effective, it defies logic!

I am beginning to wonder if the way we think and talk about change is getting in the way and preventing us from increasing our success. What happens when we shift our focus and consider our efforts as adaptation instead of change?



First let's look at the nature of organizational change which has distinct and separate phases:

1. A deliberate beginning -- where we decide to do something different. 
2. A transition period -- where we prepare to do it differently. 
3. An implementation phase -- where we adopt a new way (with varying degrees of success) of doing what we used to do. 
4. A completion period -- where the change is officially over and the change support system is dismantled. Phew! Next. . .

Now consider the nature of adaption which is evolutionary and has no real beginning or end: 

1. A continual series of incremental adjustments
2. Occurs below the level of consciousness and feels inconsequential
3. Is driven by the need or desire to maintain conformity or become a better fit with the environment.

The evolution of the telephone from landlines to smartphones is one example of adaption. Whether you were an early adopter or a laggard moving to the new technology, there is no denying smartphones have changed how we behave, how we view our world and our culture. Yet it is not possible to point to the moment in time these changes occurred. We did not consciously decide to change our behavior, mindset or culture. It's equally important to note that we also did not resist it. Ultimately, we've become better equipped and more capable of living our lives in

the 21st century.

Adaption is highly effective in bringing about changes in behavior, mindset and culture. It is also dynamic, organic and undisciplined. This powerful 1-2 punch begs the question of how we might apply adaption, in a deliberate manner, to increase our success in organizational cultural change.

Understanding the power of adaption

Research from the field of social neuroscience helps us better understand the power of adaption. In simple terms social neuroscience studies how our brains influence and inform our behavior, relationships and social interactions. What we now know is, we are wired to first and foremost **avoid threats** and secondly **seek rewards** in five domains: *Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness, Fairness* (SCARF Model, David Rock, 2008). 

Change is frequently **perceived as a threat** because it decreases certainty (*we are no longer sure what is going to happen*) and autonomy (*we have little to no control over what is going to happen*). Depending on the type of change, we may also experience threats to our status (*I used to be in the know and now I am not*), relatedness (*this change only affects me, or affects me differently than most*) and fairness (*it's not fair that I have to change*). Therefore, the natural response to change is negative, defensive and we are compelled to run away from it. 

Adaption, the process of making adjustments in our behavior in an effort to better fit in our environment, is not perceived as a threat because it's not being done *to* us. We are growing in a desirable direction, at a pace that is comfortable and its happening without us having to consciously think about it. Not only do we have a choice and

control over what we want to do differently, we are solving a problem and making our lives better. This is motivating, thank your happy hormones: adrenaline & dopamine!



Neuroscience helps to draw a subtle, yet meaningful, distinction between change and adaption. Change is threatening and we are compelled to run away from it. Adaption is rewarding and we are intrinsically drawn to it. Given our predisposition to resist the threat of change and our inherent desire to adapt, it's reasonable to conclude adaption is a more successful approach to change. The final question then is how can we take advantage of the force of adaption?

Covert Disruption®: harnessing the power of adaption

Covert Disruption® is a methodology that capitalizes on our desire to thrive and fit in our environment in a way that is non-threatening and fosters engagement. **The aim is to create conditions for change and shifts the focus from overcoming resistance to avoiding it all together.** Let's explore this idea a little more.



Covert because it introduces new ideas and ways of working that solve an existing problem without calling it out as new or different. The new behavior is modeled while facilitating a team through a real [current and relevant] problem they are struggling with; and the new ways of working are a consequence of the solution -- an outgrowth of solving the problem. Teams learn new behaviors and ways of working through observation and experience evidenced by subtle shifts in their own behavior. Since attention is never called to the desired change in behavior or methods it goes unnoticed.

Disruptive because it draws on the phenomenon of social contagion - where behavior and ideas spread in a viral manner similar to colds – intuitively fueled by our natural desire to fit in as well as mirror what we see and experience. The new behavior and ways of working manifested by ‘exposed’ individuals in new situations and new teams continues to amplify and the new skills grow organically. The new ways are adopted not because they have been called out as a new way of working; they are adopted because they are solving real problems and teams and individuals are more successful.

Covert Disruption® creates a reward response **when individuals solve their own problems, grow as individuals and increase their collective success.** It is a natural process that is occurring all around us every day. Think about the incremental changes you make in your life that go unnoticed until you look back and compare the present with the past.



How can we use this to increase the success of change initiatives where we want to deliberately shift behavior, mindsets and culture?

