

Managing Change

While many industries must deal with change, it's probably most prevalent in healthcare. Our external environment is always shifting, and organizations must shift in response. Rules and guidelines are ever-changing. We're constantly asked to do more with less. And in the middle of all this chaos, we're expected to execute swiftly and well while never losing sight of the high-stakes nature of our work.

All of this means constant change is “normal.” It never lets up. Some people manage all of this change better than others, but honestly, it is something most of us struggle with.

I was fortunate that Dr. Regina Herzlinger, professor of business administration, put me on a curriculum committee at Harvard Business School early on, where I learned so much about change management and how it impacted organizations. I was able to spend some time with people from all over the world, talking about the skills that leaders need. The normal leadership skills—communication, hiring, innovation, process improvement, supply chains, etc.—were discussed. But the one thing that came up again and again as a central leadership skill was the ability to manage change. And it is the one area where we often get the least amount of training.

Why does the ability to manage change matter so much? Because it's what allows us to get things done. If you don't know what to expect, you will often quit when things get difficult and turbulence sets in. But as we'll discuss shortly, this is exactly when it's most important to keep pushing.

When Turbulence Hits, Keep the Throttle Down.

Believe it or not, so much of what happens with change is somewhat predictable. Sometimes just knowing what to expect can be really helpful. It not only helps you plan for things, but it gives you a chance to let people know what is coming and that it's normal and expected. If you are interested in learning more about change management, John Kotter, a noted author, is an excellent resource on the topic.

So many initiatives start off well and then slowly lose effectiveness. Some call this phenomenon "sizzle to fizzle." In my experience, things start to fall apart for organizations as they hit the "performance wall." If one does not understand how to move through the wall, they may quit and begin to search for the next initiative. Another initiative may be needed, but executing on and maximizing what you started is what builds consistency in an organization.

Communication is key. Acknowledging the phases of change and letting people know what to expect throughout the process will make a huge difference. It's like when you're running a marathon and you hit the wall. If you don't know a wall exists, you're going to stop. No matter how much you've trained, if no one's ever told you about the wall, when you hit the 19- or 20-mile mark, you're going to stop. The same thing takes place in an organization.

Another analogy that comes to mind is flying in an airplane. If the pilot lets you know that turbulence is coming, when it does take place, it's not a surprise. If you are not aware turbulence is coming, it is

scarier. So let people know that turbulence is part of the process. It is normal for things to get difficult at this point.

Over the years, I've helped many organizations identify and create tools to help them move through the performance wall. One of my favorite stories for helping people understand the change process is the story of General Chuck Yeager, the test pilot who first broke the sound barrier. Right before a plane breaks the sound barrier, it starts to shake. Other pilots who had attempted this would ease off the throttle when the plane started to shake, but Yeager kept the throttle down. And when he kept the throttle down, all of a sudden there was a boom, which we know now is a sonic boom. The plane then enters into a smooth flight.

The point of the story is that when turbulence hits, we need to keep the throttle down. The challenge is that people don't realize that turbulence is not always a bad thing. It means they're getting closer to breaking into the solution.

Chuck Yeager was courageous enough to challenge the status quo. He felt a calling to test the limits of flight. He was up there, and the plane was shaking like crazy, but he was still able to keep the throttle down, and by doing so, he achieved something amazing. In healthcare, we also have to be willing to challenge ourselves throughout our lifetime. Healthcare can be so consuming, we work so hard, and it can make us very vulnerable emotionally. Yet we answered the calling and we achieve amazing things daily.

There is a great scene in the movie *The Right Stuff* that shows Chuck Yeager breaking the sound barrier. If you look closely at who is in that scene, you might notice the fellow who was a little jealous of Chuck who was probably hoping it wouldn't happen. You may also notice Chuck's wife, who had a concerned look on her face and was probably wondering why he was doing this. Similarly, healthcare workers often find themselves in difficult situations, such as coming in to work every day in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic.

THE CALLING

Non-healthcare people are in awe of the bravery of healthcare workers, as they should be.

In healthcare, there are many times we have to keep the throttle down even though we hear messages that we need to slow down. Most of us would probably love to slow down, but sometimes in healthcare you just can't. It's not like we can go out in the street and tell people not to get in an accident, because we need to slow down.

I went through this early on as administrator of Baptist Hospital. There are three hospitals in Pensacola, and there was an insurance company that allowed their customers to go to only two of them (one of those being Baptist). One day they announced that they were going to move to covering all three hospitals. We knew right away that when they opened up access to the third hospital, it was going to negatively impact our volume and thus revenue.

I was brand new in my administrator role. I was nervous. I was probably moving too quickly in forcing changes to account for the new competitor. Some of the managers complained, and corporate brought in an organizational psychologist to interview middle managers. Then they sat down with me to tell me I had spinach in my teeth and that I needed to slow down.

At times, many in healthcare would like the option to slow down. The challenge was, I didn't have the option to slow down, just like some of you don't have the option to slow down. I said, "I can't call the insurance company and tell them not to cover services at the third hospital, and I can't call the other two hospitals to tell them to quit providing services that compete with us. I have to accept this rate cut. I don't have an option to slow down." In a way, I had to keep the throttle down.

But while I did have to keep the throttle down, there were things I could do to improve the situation. I could increase communication,

increase training, and make everyone aware of what was happening and why.

In the book *The Road Less Traveled*, M. Scott Peck, MD, writes that life is difficult, and once we accept that it's difficult, it's not as difficult. I think Dr. Peck is trying to tell us that our expectations are inversely proportional to our serenity. I'm not suggesting people should have low expectations; I'm just encouraging them to not have unrealistic ones. If a person expects that when this project is finished, or this survey is completed, they're going to have a big empty spot in their work schedule, that is an unrealistic expectation. They're not going to have a less busy schedule. Healthcare people are hardworking people who will always have a full plate. Somehow expecting our plate to always be full helps us accept it and makes it less difficult.

It's easy to tell when people start feeling the turbulence. They start saying they need to slow down. But there are times when you have to let people know slowing down is not an option. I've told this Chuck Yeager story many times over the years, and I enjoy getting notes from people telling me that they are keeping the throttle down!

Making Change Happen: How Sequencing and Lack of Clarity Can Derail You

One of the biggest mistakes I had to quit making was trying to do too much at one time.

A healthcare system leader called me and said, "Quint, we've read everything you've ever written and we've tried to implement it. And we're not getting results. See here, we even have a list." And they did have a list of maybe 11 things that I've ever recommended that they had every nurse manager doing. Heck, some of them, I forgot I'd even recommended over the years. They were good suggestions, but I didn't mean for them to all happen at once. It's impossible!

THE CALLING

So I said, “Here’s what I would do. I would talk with each manager and ask, ‘What’s the one thing on the list that you can do?’ Then start with that one. See if the dial turns. I think it will. Then go to the second item. You probably wouldn’t have to go much further down the list. A few items done successfully are always better than many items done unsuccessfully.”

Sequencing is so important. When I look at my early work, I missed the mark on how much change a person and organization can handle. One or two changes can be implemented quite well. Add a third item and it drops the chances of success down to half. The fourth item drops the chances of success to the 25th percentile, and then it gets worse. I see this in my own life. I have a fitness trainer, and if she tells me to do two things, I can successfully do them. If she throws that third thing in there, it’s a whole different ballgame.

When too much comes at someone at once, we lose the ability to implement. Too often we take a firehose approach to change. We just turn on the hose and wonder why people are not drinking the water or not enjoying it. And we waste a lot of water. The key is sequencing. Find one change to make and do it well as you maintain the others.

Former UCLA Coach John Wooden said it best: “When you improve little things every day, eventually big things occur. Don’t look for quick big improvement. Seek one small improvement, one day at a time. This is the only way it happens, and when it happens, it lasts.”

The other issue that keeps us from making changes is lack of clarity. Chip and Dan Heath wrote in their book *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard* that 80 percent of failures are due to a lack of clarity.¹

They also tell the story of how Don Berwick, then-CEO and president of the Institute for Healthcare Improvement, was frustrated by the number of deadly medical errors. He announced a prevention initiative, declaring that in 18 months, he wanted to save

100,000 lives. (His actual language was June 14, 2006, at 9:00 a.m.) To achieve this, he proposed six specific interventions hospitals should undertake and made it easy for them to participate. By the deadline, 122,300 lives had been saved. The Heath brothers credit his clarity and specificity for surpassing the goal. Their expression that “some is not a number and soon is not a time” is one that really reminds us to get clear on expectations.²

The message is: Don't just tell people what to do; tell them how to do it and put some hard timelines in place. Clarity enables engagement and drives execution. People like clear boundaries. Vagueness and uncertainty create anxiety and stress and make mistakes far more likely to happen. Most people truly want to do good work, and they like leaders who make that easy for them.

One more important point: *Lack of clarity often looks like resistance to change.* Many times we think we're being clear when we're not. What we think we said and what others actually heard can be shockingly different. People's being resistant to change may look like obstinance, but it's often a lack of clarity. They simply aren't clear on what they should be doing so it appears they aren't cooperating.

Clarity also promotes accountability, fosters teamwork, improves morale, and cuts down on workplace drama. For all of these reasons, clarity accelerates results and boosts the overall performance of your company.

This is why it's so important to standardize and hardwire processes and practices throughout our organization. It lets us create a high-reliability culture with little variance. Of course, this is critical in life-or-death environments like hospitals for safety reasons. But when we standardize leadership, it also creates consistent experiences for employees. Most people thrive in a culture of consistency and predictability. It makes it easier to for us to live up to our calling...and that's what we all strive for every day.