

“We’ve Always Done It That Way” Is Over—

WHAT’S NEXT?



Progress is impossible without change; and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything.

—George Bernard Shaw

PART 1: Change Is a Process, Not an Event



PATRICK IBARRA is a former city manager and co-founder and partner, The Mejorando Group, Glendale, Arizona, an organizational effectiveness consulting practice (patrick@gettingbetterallthetime.com).

The mindset of “we’ve always done it that way” is over.

Now the question is, what’s next? Are you and your organization changing as fast as the world around us? What lenses are you using to analyze the performance of your contributions and those of your organization? How do you know for sure that you’re being effective, and moreover, your organization is successful? How credible is your organization as a community builder? You should never interpret the absence of mistakes as constituting success. I contend that often in government, it’s extremely difficult to know what’s broken until there’s a crisis, and then you have to deal with the emotional upheaval it creates and weigh the political calculus on how best to proceed.

During these times of unprecedented and disruptive change, leaders in local government must improve their ability to manage a perplexing paradox—how to stay focused on today’s business while building tomorrow’s. This is the “new normal” that allows leaders the opportunity to hit the organization’s reset button. They use the instability of the present to build on and create organizations that are capable of continuous self-renewal in the absence of a crisis. Leaders must develop—both within themselves and in their employees—the

BY PATRICK IBARRA

THE CHALLENGE IS THAT TRADITIONAL ORGANIZATIONS LIKE THOSE IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR ARE BUILT TO RESIST CHANGE.

ability to toggle between being responsive and proactive; this type of versatility is mission critical.

The challenge is that traditional organizations like those in the public sector are built to resist change. Their numerous rules, regulations, and policies limit experimentation, program in traditional behaviors, and reward consistent performance. They have many checks and balances in place to ensure that the organization operates in the prescribed manner. This approach is consistent with the objective of achieving success under current business conditions, but it is entirely inconsistent with achieving continuing success when change is needed. Change must become the new norm; it should be contagious among members of the organization. Organizations should always be changing, both adapting to new circumstances, as well as driving strategic change in anticipation of what's on the horizon.

Throughout this year, my intent is to sharpen your collective 20/20 focus on the future and translate the headwinds of change into a tailwind. I'll employ various lenses—binoculars, wide angle, telephoto, microscope, and magnifying glass—as I explore topics in depth for each of my quarterly Career Track articles. In this article, I'll examine the anatomy of the change process.

Occasionally leaders have a solution searching for a problem; they return from a conference or finish reading a book and believe they have found the silver bullet, not realizing these don't exist. Cautionary tales abound of leaders who decided to adopt a change process, only to find that those initiatives not only did not bring the intended results, but also produced inertia—their organizations became stale and ineffective. I refer to this as change fatigue. Every organization has a cemetery full of good ideas, but the merit of an idea is not enough to achieve success.

Problems or issues define solutions. The challenge is that people are so busy searching for the solution, they forget what the question is. When I'm invited into an organization, sometimes my client has already identified the solution. While I want to rely on their insight and assessment, it's beneficial when we discuss the current situation and I ask them questions such as “what's not happening that you wish were happening?” and “what's happening that you wish would stop?” An assessment segment is crucial before embarking on any change, transitional (i.e., small) or transformational (i.e., large).

It is a symbol of poor leadership if the only changes that occur in an organization are inevitable and unplanned. Where this happens, it is a demonstration of reluctance or inability to look ahead and prepare the organization to meet future opportunities and constraints. While planning cannot completely eliminate the need for unplanned

changes, it helps the organization prepare itself for changes that can be anticipated and minimizes the number of situations where hasty changes have been made in the atmosphere of panic.

Fundamental to motivating change in an organization, it is necessary to have some dissatisfaction with how things are. In that pursuit, leaders and managers need to foster a work environment that enlists the involvement of employees in the performance and future of the organization; to create and sustain a learning-oriented, feedback-seeking climate is strongly encouraged. By doing so, leaders develop their organization's capability by building up their people. Their focus should be on creating a high-(employee) commitment culture as the main lever to institute change. This can happen through a variety of means—providing feedback organization-wide about the agency's performance, engaging employees in random discussions about the impact of trends on the agency, to name just two. In the spirit of the idea that “what gets talked about gets done,” substantive discussions should be regularly held at all levels about the forces for change and how their respective organization intends to respond.

Some typical questions addressed in planning change and strategies of organizational change are:

- What changes are occurring in the environment? What will be their implications for our organization? Our community? Our workforce?
- What changes should we foresee in order to achieve our objectives, improve our performance, increase our standing as a credible community builder, etc.?
- What undesirable changes will occur in the organization if we do not take timely steps to prevent them or at the minimum, mitigate their negative impact?
- What sort of and how much change will our employees be able to absorb and support? How should we help them cope with change?
- Should we implement changes in stages or all at once?
- What will be the relationship between various changes that we intend to make? How will they be coordinated?
- How should we manage change? Do we need a consultant? What would be the consultant's role?
- What should be our time horizon and timetable for implementing change?



Organizational change involves moving from the known to the unknown.

As you evaluate your responses, consider reading the book *Reinvention* by Kate Sweetman, who asserts there are three degrees of change:

- **Continuous improvement:** Consistently upgrading your abilities to achieve results.
- **Renovation:** Performing a refresh in order to make a meaningful leap in performance.
- **Reinvention:** Third and most powerful, totally rethinking your business model and your ability to compete.

People often have a big appetite for change until they read the menu of what it will require in terms of time, effort, and energy, then they decide to go through the drive thru, so to speak. It's extremely difficult to build up capacity for improvement and to leverage change by taking the drive-thru route. Occasionally you have to enjoy a good sit-down meal.

Change must focus on content, people, and process. *Content* refers to what specifically about the organization needs to change—strategy, structure, systems, processes, technology, or work practices. *People* refers to the behaviors, emotions, minds, and spirits of the people who are being impacted by the change. *Process* refers to how the content and people changes will be planned for, designed, and implemented. All three aspects must be woven together into one unified change effort. Often there is an overreliance on the content aspect of the equation and much less attention paid to the people side, with the assumption that people know intuitively what to do once the change has been announced. Simply put, content is the what, people the who, and process the how. All three must be synchronized for the change initiative to succeed.

Essentially, changing is what organizations do, not what you do to an organization. It's a continuous process of an organization trying to align itself with shifts in their external world. It's an attempt to synchronize purpose, process, structures, people, information, rewards, and management systems with itself and with that world they operate in, which is very unintegrated. We really can't change

other people; only the conditions.

Beth Comstock, in her book *Imagine it Forward*, refers to two types of people in the pursuit of change: goalkeepers and gatekeepers. Goalkeepers help you accomplish your goals, while gatekeepers try to keep people from reaching them. We've all worked with these people. Gatekeepers are guardians of the status quo. Not everyone is for progress, especially those who stand to gain the most from maintaining the status quo.

Organizational change involves moving from the known to the unknown. Employees invariably have expectations about the results of organizational change, which play an important role in generating motivation for change. Expectations can sometimes be a self-fulfilling prophecy, leading employees to invest energy in change processes that they expect will succeed. When employees expect success, they are likely to develop greater commitment to the change process and to direct more energy into the constructive behaviors needed to implement it. An important aspect in achieving these positive effects is to communicate realistic, positive expectations about the organizational changes. Information about why the change

is occurring, the impacts to the roles and responsibilities for employees, how it will benefit the department, and how employees will be involved in the design and implementation is most helpful.

The following are what I refer to as the Key Principles of Change, which I use when I'm partnering with a client:

1. The person spearheading the change must be credible. If not, the change initiative will be unsuccessful.
2. Successful change is a continual journey of learning, growing, improving, adapting, and managing the change process. Staying the same or relying on past success is a formula for eventual failure.
3. Quick-fix solutions rarely last. A successful change effort takes time.
4. The incentives (positive or negative) for change must be greater than the incentive (reasons and excuses) for keeping the status quo.
5. A change effort seldom succeeds without the support of one or more change champions.
6. The change process (how change is accomplished) is equally as important as the change product (what is targeted for change). The appropriate steps must be conducted correctly for change to succeed.
7. Involving the employees of the organization in the change process increases their understanding, commitment, and ownership.
8. Positive change is more effective than negative change. In other words, adopting new behaviors and practices is more likely to be successful, rather than simply telling employees to stop doing something.
9. The more that is at stake, the greater the resistance to change and the greater the need to manage the change process carefully.

In order for change to succeed, leaders of organizations must encourage innovation, experiments, and entrepreneurship. To those in leadership roles, this means not only tolerating departures from routine and tradition, and accepting that this entails some risk, but deliberately employing innovators, giving them some freedom of action (i.e., discretion), supporting them, and referring to their example in showing what the organization is able to achieve.

Today's unpredictable environment requires a resilient climate of ongoing improvement. To that end, organizations must treat change as an ongoing process, not an event with a start and end date. Organizational change is not an end in itself. It is a means of adjusting to new conditions and sustaining or increasing performance and effectiveness. Remember, change should happen instantly and should happen instantly every day! **PM**



Find a volunteer coach

through the ICMA network of coaches who are helping prepare our nation's local government professionals.

Whether you are a rising professional or seasoned manager, everyone at any stage of their career can benefit from coaching. Seek career guidance, ask project advice, and gain new perspectives by reaching out to ICMA coaches ready and eager to help you.

Visit [icma.org/1-1-coaching](https://www.icma.org/1-1-coaching) to sign-up as a coach or learner.

ICMA | CoachConnect