



# The Effective Organization

October 2007

## Making Change

What does moving the coffee pot and altering the way an organization does business have in common? As anyone who has ever attempted even apparently minor changes to office routines has discovered, the prospect of change can provoke surprisingly strong negative reactions in many people. While the debate over the location of the coffee pot may resolve fairly quickly, at least once all concerned manage to become sufficiently caffeinated, other aspects of organizational change are not so easily handled.

So why do people react so strongly to the prospect of change? Quite simply, people become attached to their jobs; not so much in a financial sense, but in an emotional sense. Most people define themselves at least in part by what they do. Now this concept is probably not a big surprise. However, when there's a change at work, that change may touch on how people view themselves, or how they view their job. While it is highly unlikely that many people define themselves by the location of the coffee machine, the problem is that it's very hard to determine exactly what it is that someone finds important. In short, even apparently minor or benign changes can trigger fear and anxiety as people start to worry

about some or all of these questions:

- What will this do to the organization?
- How will my place in the organization change?
- Will this affect my job?
- Will I still enjoy working here?
- Will this hurt our product quality (threaten the organization)?
- Will I still measure up?
- Would I be able to get a job in this new organization?

These questions may not come up directly; rather, they may manifest as debate about whether or not the values of the business are being honored, questions about the validity of the changes, etc. Other times, the questions may manifest in a passive refusal to change, or in a constant tendency to "forget" and slip back into the old way of doing things in order to wear down management. Sometimes this works.

In one situation, the head of a organization wanted to make some changes to way the business handled training. Although the

## Upcoming Events

**October 25, 2007** -- *Building an Effective Development Organization*. At the Game Institute ([www.gameinstitute.com](http://www.gameinstitute.com)).

**January 9, 2008** -- *Dealing with Conflict in Client Organizations*. At the Society of Professional Consultants ([www.spconsult.org](http://www.spconsult.org)).

For more information, please visit [www.7stepsahead.com](http://www.7stepsahead.com).

changes appeared to be relatively minor, they triggered a firestorm of argument, and many people walked out. In another situation, the manager of an engineering team was quietly undermined and driven out by the team; there was no open, planned, rebellion, but rather the manager simply became exhausted fighting his team's gravitational attraction to the "old way." Prior to Lou Gerstner taking over at IBM, numerous attempts at organizational change were swallowed by IBM's corporate equivalent of the La Brea tar pits.

Furthermore, once a change is announced, attempting to explain it frequently fails to help the situation. People are too busy worrying about what the change will mean, how it will affect them, and how they might be able to argue against it, to listen to anything further.

So, if change produces such strong reactions in people, what can be done to make the change happen anyway? One popular solution is force: fire everyone who disagrees and move forward. This can work if there are only a couple of dissenters, but can backfire badly if there are more. Even those who did not originally feel threatened by the changes will now feel threatened by the way that they perceive disagreement to have been handled.

A considerably more effective solution is to use a technique known as “reverse goal-chaining.” Reverse-goal chaining is based on inspirational techniques used by famous charismatic leaders such as Winston Churchill, and is similar to negotiation strategies developed by the Harvard Negotiation Project. Reverse goal-chaining is accomplished through a series of steps:

1. Start by discussing the problem or need that is driving the change in the first place. Don’t discuss the actual change, or even that change is necessary. Merely highlight the situation.

2. Describe what the solution would look like. Paint a clear picture of the brave new world, and develop that image until all, or most, people agree that would be a good place to be.
3. Take a step back from the destination. Describe this new, hypothetical, state and get agreement on what it would take to move to the desired state. This state is your new destination.
4. Repeat step 3 until you have worked backward to your current state.
5. Assuming that you have successfully obtained conceptual agreement with each step of the process, you now have only to convince people to take the first step.

While it can take a certain amount of practice to apply this technique successfully, the results are well worth the effort.

Good luck!

## About 7 Steps Ahead



Stephen R. Balzac is the president of 7 Steps Ahead, a consulting firm specializing in increasing individual, team, and organizational performance.

Steve has over twenty years of experience in the high tech industry and is the former Director of Operations for Silicon Genetics, in Redwood City, CA.

He serves on the boards of the New England Society of Applied Psychology (NESAP) and the Society of Professional Consultants (SPC). Steve is a member of the Operations Committee of the American Judo & Jujitsu Federation. No stranger to the challenges of achieving peak performance under competitive and stressful conditions, he holds a fourth degree black belt in jujitsu and is a former nationally ranked competitive fencer.

Building effective development organizations, improving team morale, focus, and enthusiasm, developing effective communications between team members, reducing employee turnover, helping businesses identify and attain strategic targets, and applying sport psychology techniques to business have been some of his most successful projects.

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