

Jeffrey Goldstein's

The Unshackled Organization

Book Review by Eric B. Dent, George Washington University

Everyone who has ever served as an organizational change agent knows the basic strategy for successfully effecting organizational change.

1. Extensively plan and design the change effort (creating a shared vision, developing political support).
2. Precisely assess the current situation.
3. Accurately anticipate resistance to change.
4. Adeptly overcome the resistance through endurance, skill, and determination.

With a variety of different labels, this basic strategy can be found in most current textbooks. According to Jeffrey Goldstein in *The Unshackled Organization*, successful change efforts have little to do with this prescription, and, in fact, most of this strategy *must* be violated in order to successfully create lasting organizational change.

Goldstein offers an approach to conducting change efforts which in several ways stands on end the traditional rules of thumb about change, many of which were established in the 19th century. He claims that this approach is based on state-of-the-art scientific research on physical systems, although he provides very little of the linkages or evidence in his book. Although this approach is state-of-the-art, Goldstein notes that these new insights are "simply a contemporary rediscovery of ancient wisdom concerning the process of change." Moreover, it is not that the model he submits supplants the traditional model but that the traditional model is a limiting case of the more general new model.

Goldstein's model is rooted in the broad area of nonlinear systems theory which includes chaos theory, complex adaptive systems theory, cellular automata, and other approaches to self-organization. He suggests four basic features of self-organization which demand a different approach to change.

1. Self-generated change - not hierarchically driven
2. Nonlinearity, an inherent tendency for change - not resistance
3. Transformation out of chaos - not control strategies
4. Far-from-equilibrium (FFE) conditions - not mere shifts in equilibrium

The notion of self-organization sheds light on a question which has troubled TQM proponents. How do we get (force?) our employees to embrace this bottom-up, participatory process? Are we stuck with the model of the CEO of legend who informed her vice president that either he would adopt TQM or his replacement would? Goldstein's reframing advocates that such a process must be self-organizing and that the role of top executives is to remove obstacles hindering the organization's capacity to self-generate.

Goldstein's second feature pokes a hole in the almost cherished notion of resistance to change. The existence of resistance to change and strategies for overcoming it are widely touted in current management text books (Kreitner (1992), Griffin (1993), and Aldag and Stearns (1991)). The first published reference to research on "resistance to change" in organizations was "Overcoming Resistance to Change" by Coch and French (1948). Although even a casual reader of this article would never believe that the selected title fits, we have been stuck with the term *resistance to change* ever since. The term may have been selected because of Coch's and French's close alliance with Lewin, who at the time was developing force-field analysis and was accustomed to thinking in terms of forces that were driving or restraining a situation.

Goldstein joins Senge (1990) and Bridges (1988), among others, in advancing far more useful perspectives about change efforts which do not go as senior managers and change agents planned. Senge notes that resistance is neither "capricious or mysterious." He claims that resistance to change occurs when the changers have not identified a balancing process (compensating feedback loop) which needs to be altered in order for the change to be effective. This system is trying to maintain some implicit goal which was not part of the change process.

Bridges sees attempts at overcoming resistance as self-defeating unless change agents recognize its "world-protecting" basis. He proposes a three-part model: endings, neutral zone, and beginnings for describing transitions, rather than changes, which cannot be managed using rational processes. What has been labelled resistance to change would be in Bridges' terms, inadequate attention to the endings and neutral zone stages of transition.

Ironically, Goldstein's view harkens back to Lewin's force-field analysis. Rather than searching for what is driving the resistance, Goldstein recommends trying to identify to what employees are attracted. If employees are not embracing a change, it is because they are more favorably attracted to something else. Goldstein's new model "moves the issue away from how or what a system resists to how and to what a system is attracted."

Another aspect of the non-linearity is the dismissal of the linear expectation that small changes require small change efforts and large changes require large change efforts. Goldstein produces several examples of the fallacy of this linear assumption.

The third feature of self-organization calls into question the efficacy of control strategies for effecting change. A goal of traditional change formulae, albeit of management itself, is stability. A good manager removes unpredictable variations from budgets and work performance, to name a couple. Vaill (1991), in using the metaphor of "permanent white water" to describe the organizational milieu, suggests, however, that instability rather than stability is the norm. Goldstein offers several techniques for increasing this instability. Difference questioning, for example, is a non-consensus-seeking method for magnifying the differences in viewpoint. Rather than dampening departures from organizational norms, these departures are encouraged and promoted as a way of discovering new directions and strategies.

This avoidance of stability is built in to the final feature of self-organization, FFE conditions. The traditional view is represented by Lewin's classical model of unfreezing-moving-refreezing. The major shortcoming of this model is that it provides no explanation for the introduction of novelty. How does growth occur in an equilibrium-seeking system? Goldstein exhorts that "system transformation takes place only in a FFE condition." FFE has characteristics similar to Bridges' neutral zone - disorienting and disconnecting together with innovating and developing. FFE conditions force a change in the complexity (either more or less) of the system. Goldstein asserts that a change model based on FFE conditions is an exact fit in a world of permanent white water.

Goldstein has done an exceptional job of demonstrating how non-linear systems theory approaches can be applied to organizational change. He has assembled an impressive collection of ideas although they do not yet seem to constitute a model, yet he uses the term regularly. *The Unshackled Organization* is filled with helpful and appropriate examples for change agents who would like to try these ideas. Goldstein offers a number of techniques for fostering FFE conditions and self-organization. He also does a nice job of presenting these concepts, which may be counterintuitive for audiences steeped in the traditional model. He provides helpful tables about properties of nonlinearity, characteristics of self-organization, nonlinear self-fulfilling prophecies, methods to generate FFE conditions and self-organization, and several others. *The Unshackled Organization* is a "must read" for every practitioner of organizational change, and anyone who is interested in how the new sciences of complexity and chaos theory are being applied to organizations.

References

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