Why Organizations Thrive – Lesson 5: Make one big change at a time
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I'm in the process of writing a long article entitled: *Why Organizations Thrive*. The article details fifteen lessons I learned while growing the Oregon League of Conservation Voters (OLCV),[1] buttressed by my observations of dozens of other groups both in Oregon and across the country.

Collectively, I believe these lessons are a very useful set of principles that Executive Directors can use to improve their organization's capacity to fulfill its mission.

This is Lesson 5: Manage one big change at a time.

Thriving organizations change. Constantly.

The reverse is also true: organizations that don't change become stale.

So change is good.

But managing change is also hard.

Whether it involves new staff or new staff roles, new programs, or new organizational systems, bringing change to an organization is not to be taken lightly.

Which brings me to my point: leaders wishing to push change should focus on one significant change at a time.

Why shouldn't you just identify all the significant changes necessary and move forward on all fronts.

Perhaps we should start by asking why thriving organizations change.

Mostly it's because thriving organizations grow by attracting an ever-larger amount of resources (both dollars and time). As an organization grows, it generates new capacity and it must change at some level to effectively utilize that capacity.

[1] I served as OLCV's Executive Director from 1997-2009. During that time, we grew from a permanent staff of 1.5 to 11, and a budget of around $200,000 to more than $1 million.

Occasionally a thriving organization has hit a patch where it's not growing in resources, but changes because it makes a significant adjustment in strategy to deal with changed circumstances.

Or, change comes because a new Executive Director is hired who has a different set of skills and priorities. He or she needs to change systems to match up with his or her strengths, weaknesses, and vision.

Under any of these scenarios, those plotting out multiple changes are usually better off sequencing them in time rather than trying to push them through simultaneously.

The primary reason for this is because change is a huge time and attention-sink for the Executive Director.[2]

If managed properly, significant time needs to be taken when planning the change, during the implementation, and then tinkering with the results until you're sure that the change is working out the way you had hoped. Almost always, things take longer than you expect.

This is true whether the change involves a new fundraising database, a new communications program, or the launching of an annual big fundraising event.

Change can also face resistance, as people can be satisfied with the way things are now. Not everyone will share the leaders' passion for making the change.

Resistance might be active sabotage or more often passive behavior that negatively impacts staff morale, cohesion, and teamwork. As a manager, you need to be sensitive to this and secure buy-in from others, identify any reasons they may resist, acknowledge that resistance when it's legitimate, and figure out how to rally the change through to its conclusion.

There is an entire field of study called change management which those who are interested can study. But mostly it boils down to the fact that when you're seeking to institute some change at your organization, you need to manage both the substance of the change you're trying to instigate <u>and</u> the process of getting there.

Trying to simultaneously manage two significant organizational changes can overtax the abilities of even the most competent manager.

That's why in planning out a series of changes over the course of a year or even longer, it's best to map out a sequence – first this, then that, then the other thing. Implement the new fundraising database in quarter 1, the new accounting system in quarter 3, and the new personnel evaluation system in quarter 4.

If you feel taking this approach will take too much time overall, there are a couple of options.

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[2] For really large organizations, with budgets in the several millions of dollars and separate divisions, the lesson here may be less appropriate, if the changes being considered are primarily under the purview of different managers and the changes are to systems that don't interact.

One is to simply push the boundaries on how quickly each individual change can happen so that the overall sequence takes less time.

Another is to add in a bit of overlap, where you begin the initial stages of a second change as the first change is wrapping up.

But as a general rule: don't try to do them all on the same timeline.

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