Healthy Futures GROUP

Healthy Organizations Project: Emerging Insight

Getting Healthy — Staying Healthy (Summary)

by Peter O'Donnell

President, Healthy Futures Group

The Implementation Challenge:

Growing Past the Barriers to Change

Over the past few years, a certain pattern has become more and more common in organizations. It begins with an organization acknowledging the need to change, with management and staff working hard to implement major changes. Typically, there are early adopters, eager to experience the benefits of the anticipated change. There may even be the beginning of a second wave of buy-In from others who are beginning to see the potential. There are likely still some resisters, but they are under increasing pressure to come on board. But then, seemingly without warning, the pattern shifts a few months down the road. Enthusiasm flags, and resistance begins to grow, sometimes even among those who were leading the charge at the outset. The commitment to follow through with the change initiatives weakens and, eventually, dies.

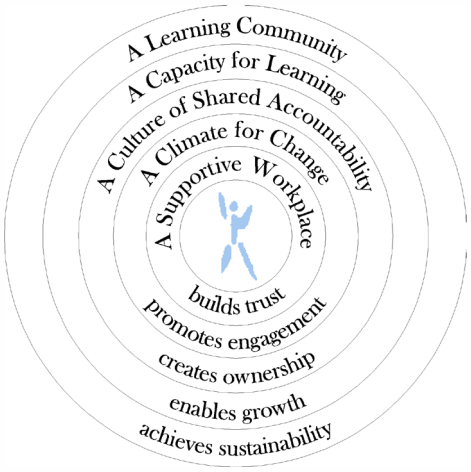
In recent years, many organizational leaders and consultants have been searching for insights into the underlying causes of this pattern. Their efforts are providing some helpful insights into why certain organizations are more successful than others in implementing change initiatives, and why some organizations struggle or fail despite being just as creative and sincere. In short, the key missing ingredient in many organizational change efforts is readiness. Simply put, some organizations are more ready than others to meet the implementation challenge. These organizations succeed despite having fewer resources, bigger obstacles, or even less well-conceived strategies and plans.

So, what factors determine readiness? At this point, there seem to be five key elements, linked together in a five-level developmental model. By that we mean that an organization, just like a person, must successfully meet the requirements of one level in order to be fully ready to face the developmental challenges of the next.

The five levels are:

- providing supportive workplace conditions
- creating a climate for change
- building a culture of shared accountability
- enhancing capacity for learning
- nurturing learning communities

The diagram on the next page illustrates the relationship between these five 'levels.' This model places the individual at the centre of organizational health. Beginning with the provision of a supportive workplace, each successive developmental level supports the individual's growth in commitment to the work of the organization, and their relationships with others who share their commitment to that work. At the 'highest' level, this commitment brings committed people together in communities of practice that transcend traditional organizational divisions, and create truly sustainable joint ventures.



1. Providing Supportive Workplace Conditions to build trust

This most basic level of organizational development involves putting into practice some fundamental changes identified through the work of people like Carleton University's Dr. Linda Duxbury. Her ongoing study of such important aspects of working life as work/family conflict have led to important insights into what makes for a supportive workplace. In a nutshell, Dr. Duxbury challenges organizations to begin treating people as people. People with lives that go beyond their job descriptions; people with competing demands on their time and attention; people who need to feel valued and supported for who they are, not just for what they produce.

2. Creating a Climate for Change to promote engagement

This second level extends the principle of valuing the individual further. At this level, organizations need to act in ways that make clear their commitment to equipping and supporting the change efforts of their people. In most organizations, we can identify four key areas where specific support is needed in order to encourage full participation in organizational change efforts…

- *Communication* - how information if shared, how input is sought, and how decisions are made
- *Support* - equipping staff for the challenges of the future, both organizational and personal
- *Structure* - creating a sense of 'connectedness' - an organization where people are committed to the 'work' , and also to each other
- *The Future* - engaging as many people as possible as co-creators, indeed, as co-owners of the organization

3. Building a Culture of Shared Accountability to create ownership

This third level deepens the commitment to the individual, which was the basis of the first two levels. Shared accountability aims to create what leading management consultant and author Margaret Wheatley calls the 'leaderful organization.' According to Wheatley, and a growing number of leading organizational development thinkers, the most sustainable and most productive organizations of the future will look very different from our traditional 'command and control' hierarchical 'machines.' Shared accountability both requires and nurtures the free flow of information to everyone within an organization. It also demands a major organizational investment in building and maintaining a wide variety of relationships and networks through which the organization's work is done. And, it requires a commitment to the ongoing practice of refining and affirming a shared vision to which everyone contributes.

4. Enhancing Capacity for Learning to enable growth

It is at this fourth level - and only once the developmental challenges of the first three levels have been met - that an organization is able to implement the principles and practices of what we call the 'learning organization.' The reason is simple - the underlying values of the learning organization are the same values that compel an organization to face the challenges of the first three levels. Conversely, failure to attend to these challenges sends a confusing message to the members of an organization. It's like saying, 'Do as we say (or claim), not as we do.' It's no wonder that so many organizational change efforts prove to be unsustainable, when people are given such obviously mixed messages. On the other hand, when an organization genuinely affirms the value of its people, supports their engagement in the change process, and equips and empowers them to exercise shared accountability, the result is tremendous energy, and a natural thirst for continuous individual and organizational learning.

5. Nurturing Learning Communities to achieve sustainability

But, there is a fifth level, which is also critical to the long-term sustainability of any change initiative. It involves broadening the base of support for ongoing learning and change. It means establishing 'learning communities' that cut across organizational lines, engaging a widening circle of people committed to collective learning and action. We sometimes call these 'communities of practice', and they have been extremely influential in bringing about system-wide change in many areas of human endeavor over the years. Anthropologist Margaret Mead summed up their role when she said, 'Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world, indeed, it is the only thing that ever does.

Conclusion

A few years ago, several researchers at the Harvard School of Business completed an evaluation of a large number of organizational change initiatives, arriving at some very clear conclusions. First, they suggested that there seemed to be two fundamentally different strategies for bringing about change. One strategy they termed fear-based, and the other they termed hope-based. The first seeks to motivate employees by means of the threat of organizational failure, and its attendant dire consequences for workers. The other focuses on improving employee confidence, and encouraging engagement in the change process, by providing the kind of supports outlined above. Their findings suggest that fear-based strategies tend to produce quicker results, but rarely sustain these early gains in the long run. On the other hand, hope-based strategies take longer to show results, but have the capacity to be self-sustaining - in fact, often produce accelerating change and growth.

Once again, the central lesson is that we should be focusing on the health of our people first if we are serious about maintaining the productivity of our organizations, and of increasing our capacity to create healthy change.

Taking the Pulse of Your Organization:

Maybe It's Time for an Organizational Health Check-up

There's Some Nasty Bugs Going Around

Wouldn't it be great if there was an organizational equivalent of the 'flu shot', that would protect our organizations from the common forms of malaise that befall them. Let's face it – there seem to be a host of 'bugs' going around these days that are claiming far too many victims. What's worse is that many of these seem to take years to develop but, by the time we detect an 'outbreak', it's too late to prevent a full-scale epidemic, and its potentially devastating consequences for a once-healthy organization and its often unsuspecting staff members. Isn't there something we can do to identify and spot the early warning signs of these common 'spirit killers', and take steps to avoid or lessen their damaging effects?

Well, to continue the analogy, maybe it's time to start having regular organizational health check-ups. Imagine the potential benefit of taking time regularly to take the pulse of your organization – to perform a variety of 'tests' to assess your health on a variety of essential components of organizational capacity and fitness. Better yet – imagine being able to diagnose the root causes of your organization's most debilitating maladies, and then taking steps to restore your 'patient' to health. And, ideally, it would be even more exciting if such a check-up would enable you to prevent the onset of the most damaging of the afflictions that infect so many of our organizations.

Just to get yourself into the mood for this task, perhaps you could take a few minutes to sit back and reflect on some of the 'maladies' afflicting – or threatening – your organization's health and performance. What are some of the symptoms that tell you there's a problem? What complaints do you hear most frequently? How might you categorize and cluster these symptoms? Do you have a name for the 'condition' (e.g. management/staff communication channel stenosis – a blockage that restricts the flow of information?) What do think is causing it, and what are its consequences? Are you aware of any proven treatments, and what would it take to implement them in your setting? What can be done to prevent the condition from worsening… or even from occurring in the first place?

Diagnosis and Treatment

Over the past few years, during the time we've been writing these articles, my colleagues and I have been working to develop a practical 'diagnostic' process, which could facilitate effective treatment and, ultimately, prevention. The results of our ongoing efforts have been heartening, judging by the experiences of some of the 'test patients' that have tried out some of the simple tools and procedures we have developed. Through their creative application of these resources, we've learned a lot about how organizations can not only obtain useful feedback on their current state of organizational health, but also begin the process of restoration and even prevention. The most important factor in this organizational health 'breakthrough' is really no surprise at all – it's certainly been a theme in most of the articles in the series:

More and better communication
increases awareness of current reality,
surfaces deeply rooted causal factors,
makes key threats to organizational health discussible,
and sets in motion a natural process of healing and health promotion.

We had clear confirmation of this key determinant early in our work in this area. In the early research phase, we discovered that the interviews we conducted with a wide variety of volunteers were doing more than simply helping us to identify key indicators of organizational health. They were also raising people's awareness of what was important to them, and challenging them to find ways to make these issues discussible in their own settings. We also realized that we needed to avoid developing checklist-type 'inventories' and sterile data analysis and feedback mechanisms for assessing organizational health, because these would eliminate a key dynamic in the process – talking.

As a result, we have focused our attention on creating a list of discussion starter questions. These questions, listed below, can be 'rated' using a simple scale, but are meant to function primarily as a way of 'priming the pump' for dialogue regarding fundamental issues that rarely get discussed in most of our organizations.

Listening and Learning Your Way Toward Health

We then designed a full-day workshop as one means of focusing people's attention on such a dialogue, and made it a 'leaders only' invitational event. This has proven to be a quite successful means of introducing key decision-makers to the issues – and the need for dialogue. But what has been a somewhat unanticipated benefit of doing these workshops, including a shorter version that can be tied into other training events, has been to see how the participants have gone beyond our process to make the 'check-up' a part of their organization's culture and core learning process.

One of the first innovations, for example, was in how several of the Executive Directors took the time to distribute a pre-workshop survey to their staff in order to have more raw material to inform their participation. Others went away from the workshop with plans to share what they had learned in 'brown bag' lunch presentations in their workplace, and in other settings. They understood the importance of engaging more people in the diagnosis – and, more importantly, the dialogue – to promote ownership and participation in the organizational health promotion process.

Questions to Seed the Dialogue

The following questions, listed by 'level' in our developmental model, are adapted from the pre-workshop 'Organizational Check-up Questionnaire' we distribute to workshop participants. That instrument uses a simple seven-point rating scale to produce a 'score' for each level of the model. But, as indicated above, the score doesn't matter as much as the process of building awareness and, most important of all, engaging in dialogue with a view to surfacing the issues, and jointly seeking solutions.

Providing Supportive Workplace Conditions to build trust

1. In our organization, do people feel they matter as people, beyond their job performance?
2. In our organization, are accommodations made for life outside of work. For example, if an employee's child is sick, can they work at home or use flex hours?
3. Is open two-way communication between employees and supervisors the norm in our organization?
4. To what extent does 'Give 'em an inch and they'll take a mile' describe how employees are viewed – or treated – in our organization?

Creating a Climate for Change to promote engagement

1. Do people feel that they have access to adequate, timely information about what is happening in our organization?
2. Does our organization support ongoing opportunities for employees to improve their capabilities and their readiness for the future?
3. Does our organization's structure and policies support effective decision-making and follow-up action at all levels, throughout the organization?
4. Is there a clearly defined mechanism for involving employees in shaping the future of our organization?

Building a Culture of Shared Accountability to create ownership

1. Do employees have the means necessary to take action when they identify a problem within our organization?
2. Are creative thinking and responsiveness to change fostered at all levels, throughout our organization.
3. Do employees take pride in the way their work contributes to achieving the overall vision of our organization?
4. Would employees characterize this organization as one that 'truly believes in its people and shows it?'

Enhancing Capacity for Learning to enable growth

1. Does our organization communicate clearly that we value individual and collective learning by including it as an essential part of everyone's job?
2. Are we genuinely committed to building learning into everything we do, and to helping our people to continually develop their learning capabilities?
3. Do the leaders of our organization model a commitment to learning and growth by participating in their own – and others' – learning initiatives?
4. Do we provide practical support – including the investment of significant resources - to encourage individual and collective learning initiatives?

Nurturing Learning Communities to achieve sustainability

1. Does our organization support people's participation in internal and external learning communities where learning – not tasks – is the focus?
2. Is our organization characterized by ongoing collective learning throughout, and do we provide adequate recognition of this learning, and its benefits?
3. Do we encourage people to find opportunities to extend the benefits of our own learning to others, both within and outside our organization?
4. Does our organization consider 'system wide' learning a priority, as shown by having a strategy to achieve this, and making a genuine investment in implementing it?

Growing Toward Health... Together

Feel free to experiment with when, where and how you use these questions, and let us know what works for you, and how the process is helping your organization. Distribute the articles in this series to everyone who participates, to deepen their understanding of the key determinants of health at each level of our model. Take time to reflect on the content, and lessons, of these dialogues. What are you learning about your organization? Where are you healthy, and how can you maintain these areas? Where are you not, and how can you 'treat' these conditions at the root cause level and restore yourself to health? Where are you vulnerable to 'infection', and what can you do to prevent future problems in these areas?

Most of all – listen, learn… and grow toward health… together.