

# Using Self Theories to Manage Organizational Change

By Robert D. Caplan, PhD

The director of re-employment programming for a mid-Atlantic state listened to me with what could be best described as half disinterest and half skepticism. I was describing a carefully tested reemployment intervention known to prevent depression, promote long-term employment, and generate significant gains in lifetime earnings (Caplan, Vinokur, & Price, 1997). Hopefully she would find the program appealing. Hope notwithstanding, the director concluded "We already have a program that works, so I don't think it would make sense to adopt this one."

"I'm glad to hear that," I replied. "Perhaps you could give us some tips for improving our own program. It would be great if you and your staff could visit one of our nearby sites and make some suggestions. If we could visit one of your sites at the same time, we might learn even more." The director agreed, and we exchanged site visits and scheduled a meeting for a month later to compare notes.

When we met, I asked for impressions and fielded comments such as "Your staff looked so fresh and lively. Are they new?" and "The participants really talked a lot; it's difficult to get our clients to participate." The disinterest and skepticism had evaporated.

Although hardly clairvoyant, I had come prepared for such a response. If my colleague and I were to succeed in implementing a training program for state staff, we would need folks to believe they were capable of making the required changes. We would also need top management's confidence. However, by the time an organization asks a consultant for help, those asking for help may doubt that change is possible. I suppose one might call this attitude low organizational esteem.

I handed out an open-ended form labeled *Organizational Readiness to Innovate*. "Before we work together," I said, "I need to find out whether you have the ability to benefit from our training. I'd like to ask you some questions. These questions are based on careful research on why some organizations are able to implement innovations successfully and others are not."

"For example, organizations are more likely to succeed if they have a history of successful innovation. Can you give me some examples of recent, successful changes that you made?" Other questions of a similar nature followed.

Suddenly our roles had shifted. The director and staff were making an argument for why they could succeed, whereas initially I had been in that role. The meeting ended with my saying "you have described characteristics known to lead to successful innovation in organizations. So you can expect to be successful." There were smiles around the table.

For the record, the training program was a success. Quiet participants were now active discussants taking an empowered role in pursuit of their employment.

## **The Importance of Self-Theories As a Guide to Managing Change**

The preceding case provides an illustration of how theories of self can be applied to reduce resistance to change and promote the adoption of innovations. True to Kurt Lewin's dictum that "there is nothing so practical as a good theory," testable theory and its research base guided the consultant's behavior.

Theory and research indicate that people generally will act in ways that protect their sense of esteem and competency even if it means refusing the help of others such as a consultant (e.g., Fisher, Nadler, & Whitcher-Alagna, 1980). The director's comment that she already had a perfectly good program is one example. To paraphrase the director, "Bob, if I were to say that your program is better than mine, it would mean I'm incompetent, and since I'm not, I'll maintain that we already have a good program."

Her offer to help is another example. "If I'm competent, then it would be consistent for me to meet your request for help and help you learn from my program." The consultant's request for the site exchange triggered these responses while conveying a message to the client that "it sounds like you are competent and perhaps I can learn from you."

Once the client concluded that the proposed change would be beneficial, another consultant concern arose relevant to client self-concept. Most value-expectancy models of motivation distinguish between the belief that a course of action is beneficial and the belief that one has the capacity to carry it out (e.g., Bandura, 1989). For example, smokers and overweight persons may know that changing life style is important but may believe they are incapable of doing so. To address this issue, the consultant took steps to enhance the self-efficacy of the client.

The consultant interviewed the client on readiness to innovate based on an extensive literature on characteristics of successful innovation in organizations (Rogers, 2003). The psychometric validity of the questions was less important than its value in getting the client to generate esteem-enhancing examples of success. Once these examples were generated, the consultant used them to reinforce expectancies of success and raise motivation to carry out the innovation. Of course, had the client "failed" the readiness test, the consultant would indeed have needed to reconsider whether to proceed with the innovation.

Further building on self-theory, the consultant engaged the client in self-persuasion (e.g., Cialdini, 2002). All other things being equal, the more similar the source of persuasive information is to the self, the more it is trusted as honest and valid. This principle is one of the reasons that peer groups are particularly effective in promoting adherence to change. Based on this principle, for better or worse, one's own perceptions are particularly persuasive.

To tap into this principle, the consultant suggested that the client visit the consultant's site. The visit to a successful site would lead to a self-generated conclusion that would be trusted more than the consultant's words and any fancy graphics. This principle was also applied with the readiness-to-innovate interview. The client was given the task of generating self-arguments for why the organization would likely succeed in implementing the innovative program.

In both instances, the use of self-persuasion maximized a key need that can be threatened by organizational stressors such as the introduction of change, the need to **personally** exercise control (e.g., Sutton & Kahn, 1987). For more than 50 years, research has demonstrated that opportunity to exercise control enhances well-being while promoting the adoption of innovations.

### **Conclusion**

There are numerous prescriptive theories of organizational change. They deal with a far broader agenda that has been covered here. Examples include optimum ways of enhancing decision-making, teambuilding, reward systems, and organizational structure. Whenever consultants address these topics, organizational members are likely to ask, "will this intervention undermine or enhance my sense of esteem and reputation?" and "Is this a trusted source of advice?" Un-addressed, these questions can greatly increase the consultant's odds of failure. Addressed, the resulting attention to the importance of client self-esteem and confidence can increase organizational willingness and ability to adopt new and promising courses of action.

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