



Assessing and developing organisational capacity to change

“If you don’t change the direction in which you are going, you might end up where you are headed” ~ Chinese proverb

There are two different conditions in which the old Chinese proverb applies. As good luck would have it, both are resolved by a common remedy. The first condition is one in which the organisation has not been subject to much external or internal pressure to change, and so has never developed the capacity to change. The second is where the organisation has been subject to very considerable change, and there are doubts about its capacity to handle even more change. If either of these apply, worry not. Recognising the nature of the problem leads to understanding and being able to apply the solution.

There are four aspects of capacity to change that are important – one conventional, the others less so:

Physical and intellectual capacity

This is the time-honoured model of releasing time and energy for non-operational activities. If the whole of the organisation is totally tied up with the day job, there is no capacity left over to change anything. Even incremental development of the way things currently get done is something of a challenge. This condition is sometimes referred to as 'stop the world – I want to get off!'. The trick is to search for ways of relieving the pressure on short term numbers; to find small developments that include both business objectives and the release of peoples' time; taking action to reduce stress levels; creating opportunities for cross-boundary problem resolution; increasing connectedness across the organisation. All good stuff, but if the other three dimensions are neglected, challenges will remain.

Creating an enabling organisational climate

This is all about the soft and squishy stuff that industrial psychologists love to focus on, and that hard headed business people decry. But it's real and critical all the same. This is all about stimulating people to challenge existing norms in the sure knowledge that it is safe to do so; it is adapting control mechanisms to the needs of handling unpredictability; it concerns importing external perspectives into everyone's thinking; critically it requires peoples' understanding of their roles and contributions to be expanded beyond the mechanical 'is' to a more inspiring 'should be' vision of the future. Experimentation and experiential learning need to become safe, otherwise there is no change capacity to draw on.

Creating high levels of engagement

This requires high levels of exchange of information and ideas across, and up and down the organisation. It means that everyone has to be part of the change process. It requires all management decisions to be anchored in organisational realities, (as distinct from being flights of fancy). It means replacing detailed plans and controls by clear goals and discovery. It requires a distinct shift away from hierarchical thinking.

Strategy and change

The business strategy must signal the need for change; the change process must be seen to be supporting delivery of the strategy. It requires an acceptance that when the future is unpredictable and unknowable, long range plans and specific goals have little value. Strategy and change both have to focus on 'moving away from' much more than 'moving towards'. Strategic intent and direction become critical. So does understanding the current state that has to be left behind. All challenging; all do-able. It just needs a little shove to get the process of building capacity for change to get it started – and change follows automatically.

“... the solutions to most organisational problems are already known to the workers – but their bosses prevent them from implementing them.” ~ Joynson and Forrester (1995) + Grint (Fuzzy Management - 2001)

Building capacity to change

'People resist change' is one of those oft-quoted mantras that, when examined closely turns out to be far from the truth. A better statement of the issue is that people resist change, when they do not understand the change, and the need for it, and feel threatened by it. The reality is that all large organisations contain high levels of frustration. In those circumstances, people who help identify the need for change; contribute towards its design; and are part of the implementation positively welcome and support change. In fact, there is considerable evidence to suggest that the only resistance likely, when those conditions are met, is that operational people generally want more change than management.

So the question left on the table is how best to engage with large numbers of people to develop capacity to change – and start the change process.

Magus Networker

Creating the conditions for change is one of the key goals that Magus Networker was designed to achieve. Stimulating and enabling change that is coherent and self-organising is another. Creating developmental actions that do not encounter resistance is a fundamental characteristic of all Networker applications.

Conventionally, Magus Networker is custom-configured by the user for each problem resolution / organisational development application. Now the developers of Magus Networker have designed an application specifically targeting the issue of developing organisational capacity for change. This is in the form of a template that can, however, still be adapted to the specific needs of each organisation. The Magus Networker process uses front-end analysis to enable this adaptation, and the design of the group.



The design of the 'capacity for change' application uses extensive research into the creation of conditions that enable change capacity to be developed. It deals with both systemic and cultural drivers of emergent change, with the question set focused very specifically on capacity.

As with all Magus Networker applications, the information generated is self-validating – it is beyond challenge. Faced with a 'real-world' description of the current state, people develop insights that enable hidden heroes to be identified; gaps in information and communication networks to be located; blockages to change to be actioned. As organisational constraints on change are identified by a process of cross-functional review, the conditions needed for developing change capacity are automatically in place.

Magus Networker is part of a complete methodology for resolving organisational problems and developing greater performance. It handles complex data sets with ease, providing powerful insights into the nature of the problem, and its causes. It does this through graphical reports presented as network charts, that illuminate all the complex working relationships, formal and informal, that actually drive organisational performance. The Magus Networker process enables many people to be engaged, through open dialogue, with their attention focused on the issues, causes and actions illuminated through the network charts.

As with all Magus Networker applications, the process is fast, requiring weeks, not months. Developmental action flows automatically from the analyses for cause. These actions include those taken by delegates to the Magus Networker workshops, and by the people in management roles who sponsored the process. By default, priorities are determined according to the goals agreed at the start of the process.

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