Avoiding Repetitive Change Syndrome

Based on the article by Prof. E. Abrahamson, in MIT Sloan Management Review, Winter 2004, p.93-95
Change or perish?

• It’s often not an either-or choice
• In organizations that pursue too much change, to fast,
  • Change and perish can be the result
Popular Thinking

Change is good and more change the better
Advice on how to Change: Three common features

• Motto: “Creative Destruction”
• Justification: ”Change or perish”
• Rationale: “No Pain, No Change”
Contemporary Approach to Change

- Divorcing to remarry
- Gutting the house to rehabilitate it
- Downsizing the workforce to rehire
- Ripping apart the organization in order to restructure
Change is necessary

• Sometimes
• But could be highly destabilizing
• Painful change-management process over prescribed
Repeated Change Efforts over the last 20 years

- Too much destruction and not enough creation
- Many organizations change \textit{and} perish
- Worse, change \textit{and therefore} perish
- Excessive levels of change-related pain render change slower, more expensive and more like to fail
- “More Pain, Less Change”
- Staff living through continuous rounds of changes suffer
- Corrosive effect on organizations
Symptoms of Repetitive Change Syndrome

1. Initiative Overload
2. Change-related chaos
3. Staff cynicism and burnout
Jennifer

- A mid-level executive working in an organization for three years
- She had three CEOs, each with their own mission, vision and a 100-day plan
- Her own boss changed 4 times
- As she said, “One day this top team is in favour, another day that one is. One day this is the strategy, another day that is. One day this is how we implement, then it changes the next day.”
- Strategic execution swings like a pendulum between one approach and another.
- Everything changes repeatedly – not only leaders, managers, strategies and priorities, but also the culture, processes and reward systems
- For her “everything will change again in six months”
- Is not “resistant to change” but “resistant from change”
- Struggling in an organization exhibiting all the symptoms of repetitive change syndrome
The First Symptom: Initiative Overload

- Organizations launch more change initiatives than anyone could ever reasonable handle
- Change initiatives started but never completed
- So many initiatives already in progress and staff so overworked that launching another one effects routine operations and service to clients
The second symptom: *Change-relate chaos*

- State of upheaval that results with so many waves of initiatives
- Hardly anyone knows which change he or she is implementing
- Leads to anxiety and political infighting
- Staff and clients find it difficult to know what procedures to follow, who has responsibility for what tasks and who to turn to
- The greater and more protracted the speed of change, the greater the chaos and the more time needed to resolve it
The Third symptom: *Staff burnout*

- Cannot be understated
- Expressed as cynicism
- Expressed in gallows humour
- Demonstrated by the popularity of Dilbert's cartoons
Repetitive Change Syndrome (1)

- Effects the organization’s capacity to make further changes
- For every change initiative added, another one slows down or disappears
- Older initiatives are not even completed and are eventually forgotten
- People begin faking it, appearing to cooperate while going on “business as usual” a subtle form of sabotage
- Or, they launch their own initiative with great fanfare hoping that it would get the attention of management
Repetitive Change Syndrome (2)

- Starts taking time away from routine operations
- Time spent on change takes away time spent on routine operations
- Important routine operations are not carried out
- Problems go undressed until they can no longer be ignored
- Firefighting becomes the norm
- Increasingly focused on internal change and less and less on client needs
Why is repetitive change syndrome so prevalent?

Management often not aware of the effects of constant change on their organizations.
Organization’s Change Engine

- Analogous to a car’s engine
- Management need to know how fast the organization’s engine is going, how well it can cope with the speed and whether it is running too hot or too cold
- Some can handle relatively high speeds, but few know actually where the red-line is – the point where the speed of change damage the organization’s capacity to make further changes
- Managers in excessively stable organizations do not know when the change engine is about to freeze up
- By asking small samples of staff at regular intervals, they can measure the current rate of organizational change, the degree of organizational stability, and the damage that excessive change (in some cases, excessive stability) has inflicted on the organization’s capacity to make further changes
Organization’s Speedometers

- Many organizations, divisions, departments and sub-units lack them
- Without them, don’t know how fast they are going
- The speed of change is increased until it is dangerously too fast
- Monitor the rate of change by asking management to prepare a list of important change initiatives (and expected duration) and estimate the relative magnitude of change
Organization’s Tachometer

- Using another survey to find out the rate at which the organization’s change engine is revolving
- Warning when it is over-revving or redlining
- Ask questions to identify staff burnout and cynicism and but also initiative overload
- Initiative overload is the proportion of time staff are spending on change initiatives
- If it is more than one-third overload is severe
- Should also measure change-related chaos – the multiple disruptions that occur without the old controls in place and new controls have not been implemented
Organization’s Temperature Gauge

- Measures actual trouble – the results of repetitive change syndrome
- Survey of clients to determine quality of service provided, staff performance
Organization’s Gauges

- Speedometer, tachometer and temperature gauge
- Drivers (management) cannot keep their eyes fixed on them rather than the road ahead
- But they cannot also ignore them
- Can never be a viable alternative for good intuitive leadership and should never be used as such
- Used to provide the monitoring tools that leaders can use to develop, hone and check their intuitions
Creative Destruction

• May be necessary and even preferable in certain situations
• Stable organizations may need a rude awakening it provides
• May be the best way to achieve change with the least amount of pain
“Change-aholics”

- Organizations that have changed more aggressively, quickly and repeatedly than any organization can hope to do successfully
- Creative destruction cannot be the only option
- Management must look the organization dashboard – speedometer, tachometer and temperature gauge – to prevent repetitive change syndrome from overwhelming their staff and the clients