

# Organizational Change Capability: Undervalued and Deeply Needed

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**I**nternal and external experts in organizational development (OD) and managed change have the capability to deliver results on matters that go to the very core priorities of any organization, yet they are generally undervalued and too often isolated from others doing similar work. In order to understand these dilemmas and challenges, I will first identify some of the ways that OD experts add value (as indicated by the four articles on organizational change in this issue of *Perspectives*) and then consider forces that may complicate the role. I will also identify how LERA as a professional association can be a valuable home for experts in organizational change.

## Key Principles

The articles in this issue of *Perspectives* demonstrate positive results from OD change initiatives—both for business organizations and for unions (as organizations). Key organizational change principles are woven throughout these articles, including:

- **Shared Vision:** A clear, shared vision of the aim or goals to be achieved
- **Stakeholders:** Assessing the interests of key stakeholders relative to the vision
- **Standards:** Visible, measurable standards for operations that will achieve

the aim or goals, and standardization of operations as a baseline

- **Competencies:** Identified knowledge and skills that correspond to the standards and that can be established throughout the organization
- **Change Models:** Concise representations of steps in the change process that can be used on a distributed basis
- **Training Curricula:** Translation of the competencies and change models into training designs that will build distributed capability
- **Facilitated Interventions:** Interventions that link communication, training, and application of the tools and methods—on social and technical dimensions
- **Sustained Change:** Maintaining a change initiative in the face of leadership turnover, erosion of resources, and other restraining forces
- **Evaluation and Feedback:** Mechanisms to monitor results and adjust as appropriate

Too often, change initiatives follow the sequence of “ready, shoot, aim”—with change initiatives launched before there is a clear, shared vision of the goal or target. As the article by Susan Schurman on AFL-CIO Central Labor Councils notes, the revitalization of these re-

gional organizations first required clearly specifying what their new role needed to be. Similarly, the article by Rachel Hendrickson indicates the necessity of establishing a shared vision rooted in a return to a focus on organizing (broadly defined) by the NEA. Pamela Posey and Peter Sorenson highlight the need for these goals to be visible and in a format that is understandable, whether in service or manufacturing operations. Importantly, these are not imposed visions, but visions that are shared by key stakeholders, which requires dialogue and some flexibility on the part of champions of the change.

Closely connected to the shared vision, are the specific operational or behavioral standards. For example, knowledge of the competitive industry context distributed across the workforce is a standard highlighted by Art Wheaton and Charles Whalen in their article on industry education. In the same way, clear standards were identified for Central Labor Council operations as noted by Schurman. Implicit in these standards is also the assessment of the current state of the organization relative to these standards—a baseline for the change process.

In order to improve on the current state, the cases examined in these four articles highlight a combination of competencies, change models and training curricula. For example, Hendrickson notes that the NEA trained its Uniserve representatives in the use of its Target of Opportunity tool, which involves building capability in a five-phase change process (Assessment, Diagnosis, Commitment, Intervention, and Evaluation). Wheaton and Whalen highlight an underlying change model that involves unfreezing current mindsets in the workforce, introducing new industry perspectives and re-centering mindsets with the new information.

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Finally, as Posey and Sorenson point out, the actual process of facilitating change has both social and technical dimensions that are highly interdependent. Implementation and assessment has to be along both dimensions. The industry-education initiatives described by Wheaton and Whalen have continued over many years, reflecting the work of champions and attention to sustainability. Where this has not been the case, there are also lessons to be learned about the importance of feedback and adjustment.

### Underlying Challenges and Dilemmas

These and other organizational development principles are sensible and effective; nevertheless, organizational leaders (usually in the absence of OD expertise) too often apply them incompletely or sub-optimally. Numerous reasons are given for the failure of change initiatives to deliver on their main goals, but there is a clear consensus that such sub-optimal performance is all too common.<sup>1</sup> At a time of fundamental and accelerating change in the nature of markets, technology, and society, the importance of appreciating expertise in organizational development and change will only increase.<sup>2</sup>

Consider the role of



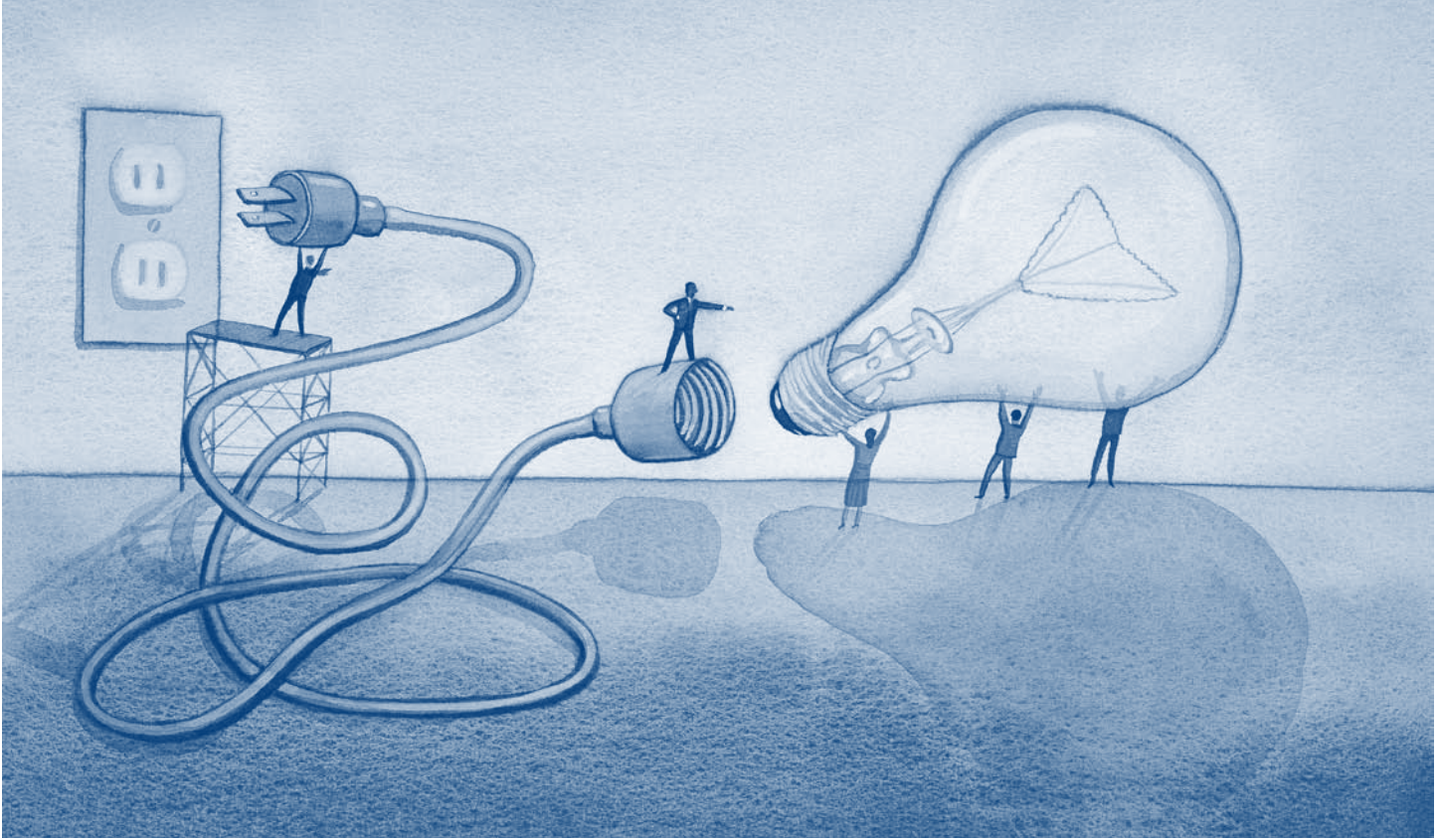
Figure 1. Two Dart Players: Who Did Better in This Round? Who Will Be Better Able to Improve?

standardization in a change initiative. Typically, the current state in an organization is that there is a high degree of variation in practices relative to the standards (which are not always clearly established in the first place). A key lesson from quality change initiatives is that it is hard to improve on a foundation that is highly variable. Consider the diagram in Figure 1, which shows results from two games of darts.

As this figure illustrates, Player A may have a higher score (with more darts closer to the bull’s eye), but Player B has less variability. In the future, the coaching for Player B is clear, while it is not at all clear what to say to Player A. This same principle is true with any organizational operation—standardization is a necessary foundation for continuous improvement. Yet, managers will rarely invest the time and resources needed to standardize operations and behaviors. Instead, the focus is on target or pilot areas where quick successes can be achieved. While there is value in early successes, an unfortunate byproduct is increased variation in practice and an even less stable foundation for improvement.

If we unpack the situation further, we find that leaders are more highly rewarded for new change initiatives that show initial signs of success, not for sustaining change initiatives

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that they inherit from their predecessors. The churning that comes as these leaders are rewarded with new assignments further undercuts stability. At a deeper level, there are values that underlie the work of many change agents that center on empowerment and engagement of the distributed workforce, which is contrary to assumptions about the importance of being in control and maintaining authority that are held by many leaders—a dichotomy that goes back to Douglas McGregor’s contrast between Theory X and Theory Y.<sup>3</sup>

When change initiatives do fall short of their objectives, it is often the people who have remained associated with the effort that are blamed—the very ones who are working hard to sustain the change. As the quality expert, W. Edwards Deming often stated in his presentations, “Don’t blame the people, . . . fix the system.”

### LERA’s Role

While the Labor and Employment Relations Association (LERA) has always been a home for selected experts in organizational development and change,

this has not been through the intentional outreach and engagement to the OD community. Indeed, too many internal and external experts in organizational change operate with relatively closed networks of other practitioners schooled in selected principles, such as lean production, six sigma, socio-technical systems, appreciative inquiry, organizational learning, dispute resolution, or others. These communities of practice are important, but they do not always bring together the full array of labor, management, policy makers, neutrals and scholars that LERA encompasses.

Thus, these essays can be seen as the beginning of a much larger dialogue on organizational change and development within LERA. As the dialogue unfolds, there is room for a shared vision to emerge—one centered on advancing the principles of change management in the larger context of theory, policy and practice in labor and employment relations. Then we can anticipate everything from standards to an intervention and evaluation, all staying true to OD principles

as we have seen in this issue of *Perspectives*.

### NOTES

1. For scholarship on the limits of too many change initiatives, see: John P. Kotter, *Leading Change*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996; Peter Senge, Art Kleiner, Charlotte Roberts, Richard Ross, George Roth, and Bryan Smith, *The Dance of Change: The Challenges to Sustaining Momentum in Learning Organizations*, New York, Doubleday: 1999; Edward E. Lawler III, *From the Ground Up: Six Principles for Building the New Logic Corporation*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2000; Jeanie Daniel Duck, *The Change Monster: The Human Forces that Fuel or Foil Corporate Transformation and Change*, New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001; William Bridges, *Managing Transitions: Making the most of Change, Second Edition*, Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press/Perseus Books, 2003; Joel Cutcher-Gershenfeld and Kevin Ford, *Valuable Disconnects in Organizational Learning Systems: Integrating Bold Visions and Harsh Realities*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
2. For scholarship on these fundamental changes, see: Michael J. Piore and Charles F. Sabel. *Second Industrial Di-*

There is room for a shared vision.

*vide: Possibilities for Prosperity*. New York: Basic Books, 1984; Thomas A. Kochan, Harry Katz and Robert McKersie. *The Transformation of American Industrial Relations*. New York: Basic Books, 1984; Joel Cutcher-Gershenfeld, et. al. *Knowledge-Driven Work: Unexpected Lessons from Japanese and United States Work Practices*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

3. Douglas McGregor, *The Human Side of Enterprise*, Annotated Edition. Joel Cutcher-Gershenfeld, ed. With a new introduction and annotations throughout the text. New York: McGraw Hill (2006: 1–423).



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