Change: The Map is Not the Territory
A Typical Scenario

Does this sound familiar?

“Our change in strategy is clear. In order to grow at a faster pace than our competitors, we will need to re-focus our marketing, sales and digital strategy to penetrate the growing millennial market, the consumers who will drive the economy in the coming decade. To accomplish this goal, we plan to re-direct resources and invest in building new organizational capabilities. This shift in direction will also require that we re-organize ourselves from functional silos to a networked structure and establish platforms that enable greater connectivity and interactivity internally and with our target market. We must move quickly, however, as it won’t take long for our competitors to follow our moves.”

Navigating Change in a Complex World

Scenarios like these are pervasive and continue to grow as a matter of survival for many organizations. Now more than ever, organizations must be adept at anticipating their next move and “navigating change,” once they have committed to a new direction. Navigating change successfully in a complex world requires a different orientation than what many of today’s leaders are used to. It is not sufficient, for example, to pursue a change strategy as depicted by the scenario above, without holding the broader context or environment within which the change will occur. In fact, it can lead to outright failure, since the environment is ever changing and will influence the best laid plans in different ways, at different times. In other words, leaders need to continuously explore what is unknown and uncertain even as they move ahead with apparent clarity and urgency. Before taking a closer look at this particular orientation towards change, it is useful to consider a broader view for navigating change in the 21st century.
A simple way to think about navigating change is: 1) knowing your destination (even if it is somewhat ill-defined or could morph along the way), 2) understanding current dynamics, and 3) taking the necessary actions to get to where you want to be. Our work with organizations continues to verify that the path between the current and future state is dynamic and non-linear, and often there will be back sliding before true progress is made.

Our 21st century view builds upon many of the traditional methods for managing change, but recognizes that times are dramatically different and the types of changes organizations are embarking upon continue to grow in complexity. While technological advances, demographic and social changes, and environmental considerations are causing organizations to change in new ways, how people move through change and what they need to travel from the current state to a future one, has not.

Our view addresses both of these phenomena. The various elements are integral to one another and highly iterative. The various routes, sign posts, and landmarks that pave the way for Navigating Change in the 21st Century from our perspective include:
Holding the Broader Context

As stated previously, one of the most challenging aspects of navigating change in our present environment is the ability for leaders and other change champions to hold the broader context (or system) when moving in a new direction. This is because whenever you make a change in one area, there is an impact or ripple effect in many others, not all of which can be anticipated or controlled. Who could have anticipated that cab drivers would stop traffic in protest against Uber’s market disrupting ride-sharing business model? What will be the next change move for Uber’s leaders as they consider this obstacle? Another way to think about this is the extent to which efforts to change will influence and be influenced by the environmental context in which the change is happening. Often a change map is developed to lay the groundwork for moving in a new direction, and this can help lead the way extremely well; however, it cannot provide the complete picture. As the saying goes, the map is not the territory.

Taking Stock of the Environment

True change leadership gets demonstrated in the ability to handle the unexpected like turbulent (regulatory) winds or the tigers (unexpected budget cuts) that wander out onto the path.

In addition, we know that context, or reality, shifts every day like the angle of the sun. We get up each day affected by the experiences of the day before and step into the new day in a different place than where we were yesterday. Organizations manifest this collective shift in reality by all of the people within it and as a result of all of the touch points they have outside of its borders. And so, what seemed like the “right” approach for pursuing change at one point in time will likely require re-thinking at various points in time thereafter.
What does taking full stock of the environment entail? How can anyone possibly anticipate that which seems camouflaged or a roadblock that is so new, it didn’t get on the map? While difficult, it begins with reflecting on questions that push beyond the change itself (the new digital strategy, product launch or organizational design) which can help to describe the territory, such as:

1. What other changes is this organization experiencing? How are different units within the organization experiencing these other changes – the same or differently? What is the organization’s capacity for change right now?

2. What changes are occurring in the external environment (political, local, social, etc.) that could either influence or take our attention away from this one?

3. What do I know about the leaders who need to be engaged or who may be impacted? Is anyone new? What motivates them?

4. What are our various stakeholders (both internal and external) doing differently as we move in a certain direction? What sense should we be making of their actions?

5. For organizations with multiple locations, divisions or geographies – how is one company location different than another? Are their cultures the same or different?

6. How do people interact? Are people easily accessible to one another? In what ways and how quickly (or slowly) does information flow?

If you have ever hiked in the national parks, you know that at most trail heads, there is often a map enclosed in a glass case or available to the hikers that depict the trail’s path in topographic relief. There might also be a description of the hike with a difficulty rating. The wise hiker will rely on this information and also know that the actual hiking experience will greatly depend on the weather that can be expected that day, whether she is dressed appropriately for the hike, and even the stories others who have hiked that same trail tell about “what it’s like” to reach the top. Given these conditions about the territory, the hiker’s actual experience will be affected, and no two hikers will necessarily experience the same hike in the same way.
Those who lead organizational change know that the process needs to be navigated fluidly and flexibly, and that any general orientation or project plans established early on will need to be constantly revisited and refined as the change unfolds. The opportunity here is in the initial assumptions we make about the change journey based on our knowledge of the environment. It’s also about opening ourselves up to the possibility that there will need to be unique approaches, rapid modifications, and even general overhauls for the different environments that exist inside and outside of our organizations. There might be one map for the lower elevations based on its terrain, climate and habitat, another potentially for the higher elevations, while keeping ourselves open to the unexpected squall.

Here is an example:

A client embarking on a dramatically new strategy to improve support to its customers, along with substantial organizational design changes across all of its office locations throughout the United States, started with two pilots, in two different cities. They fully expected to adapt the design and/or the implementation approach as a result of these initial roll outs. They felt the actions they were taking would lead them in the right direction, and initially, they did.

For example, with respect to Knowing Where You Are Going, the leaders in each location knew the design would be a key factor in achieving their office growth strategy and hitting their financial targets for the year. For Executing With Speed, one leader set an ambitious, four-month timeframe to accomplish the re-design which conveyed his strong passion and urgency for the change. When it came to Building Momentum, groups of employees and customers who would be impacted were convened to provide input and voice their opinions about the new strategy and design. For Sustaining Impact, a training program was developed to imbed a shared standard of performance in supporting the customer and an engagement platform was developed for customers to provide feedback as they experienced the changes.

A simple way to think about navigating change:

1. Knowing your destination
2. Understanding current dynamics
3. Taking the necessary actions to get to where you want to be.
As the process touched more people in the different locations and various events occurred, it became clear that one location was progressing much more smoothly than the other. In fact, there was growing hostility to the organizational design in one city, so much so, the project sponsor had to make multiple trips to the troubled city to allay fears, shore up key leadership support, and even agree to hold off on implementing aspects of the design. Same business, same organizational design changes, same change process, yet very different preliminary results. Logically, results should not have been so far apart for the two locations. Upon closer examination, however, the following environmental differences were discovered:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Environmental Factor</th>
<th>Troubled Location A</th>
<th>Successful Location B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organizational Capacity:</strong>&lt;br&gt;the logical, emotional and physical energy to hold multiple changes at once</td>
<td>A number of other changes were going on at this site, including a major office re-location viewed positively by some, but causing discontent for others.</td>
<td>The atmosphere was not as frenetic with change; another organizational design change was about complete, so there was capacity or “space” to contemplate a new one.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leaderships’ Profile:</strong>&lt;br&gt;The characteristics (style, experience, motivation, etc.) of key leaders (e.g., prone to focus on the short term vs. long term)</td>
<td>The top executive was relatively new and still establishing credibility among his peers; his style was more consensus driven with a preference to appease rather than make waves.</td>
<td>The top executive was a well-established leader who was direct and hands-on; she was inclined to get personally involved and stay on top of changes regardless of their magnitude.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Local Community:</strong>&lt;br&gt;e.g., political, economic and social conditions that touch those involved with the change</td>
<td>The election for city mayor was occurring where the outcome could have a significant impact on this office; many senior leaders were spending time engaging city officials and could not provide support to the redesign when needed.</td>
<td>There were no local issues at play for this location.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Physical space:</strong>&lt;br&gt;The proximity of people to one another and structural openness or closedness of the space</td>
<td>This office was much larger, in two distinct geographic locations; in the larger space, it took up many floors in a building. There was a greater reliance on formal and digital channels of communication.</td>
<td>This office, being smaller, could fit everyone on two floors of a building; the office space arrangements were more open with fewer closed offices. Information flowed quickly through “water cooler” conversations and other informal channels.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
None of these environmental considerations were direct causes for upheaval in one location or smooth sailing in the other by themselves. However, overall knowledge of the differences in environment, simply by asking the right questions, could have directed the implementation team to navigate the change differently in one location in comparison to the other. Strong winds at the top of one mountain in the range may require different preparation or perhaps finding another route.

Will these always be the environmental considerations to look at? In all likelihood, no. The territory or organizational context is likely to be different from one organization to the next. The key is to remember that regardless of the change map that is used, environment matters. It can very well be the territory, in the end, which influences the road you take to get from here to there – and the ultimate success of your journey.

What does your territory look like?