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Tutorial 4

Decoding Organizational Change

Instructors:

KATE SIECK
RAND

STEVEN GARCIA
Team One

Businesses are infamous for their rich lexicon of words to describe change: growth, revitalization, reinvention, innovation, revolution, evolution, and every manner of “do something different.” But what does all of this mean? How do these different terms work? What do they imply about the process of change? And under what conditions might they succeed? That was the question driving this tutorial. Starting with some introductory concepts from cognitive and linguistic anthropology, we took a pass at the conceptual models underlying some of the more popular terms in this vocabulary. We presented three – Growth, Disruption, and Innovation – while the tutorial participants completed four additional ideas: Pivot, Lean, North Star, and Unify.

SETTING THE STAGE

We began with a quick jaunt through cognitive anthropology and linguistic theory. At core, both proffer a perspective on culture and meaning as *differentially shared*, as opposed to monolithic and all-encompassing. Thus, while we may share a rough understanding of “family” or “hard work,” the unique circumstances of our lives will color our interpretations of those words in different ways. This introduces opportunities for discordances in meaning when we are talking about a topic.

This is especially problematic in the business world. In a day and age when metaphors abound and the thesaurus function is at-the-ready to spark variety in our writing, the potential for misunderstanding increases as we grab at words without a sophisticated understanding of their disciplinary or historical framework, or the variety of ways in which they are deployed. For example, when I say the word *team* to describe how I want colleagues to behave and interact, I may be thinking something like a track relay team, where everyone fulfills essentially the same role but we focus on hand-offs and communication. For you, *team* may conjure images of baseball, with nine unique positions, each with different strengths and contributions to the whole.

This is one of the major contributing factors to misunderstandings, miscommunications, and hard feelings between co-workers, and with clients. We all think we agreed to X, but in reality, one side thought Y, whereas the other thought Z.

THE LANGUAGE OF CHANGE

We see this situation arise repeatedly when the opportunity centers on change. Change for an organization can be both exciting and terrifying. And in the midst of high-stakes emotions, we can often forget the details about what is happening and why. Hence the sloppiness with which we pull out phrases like *revolution*, *disruption*, *diversify*, *agile*, *break-the-mold*, *advance*, *toggle*, and yes, *innovate*. All are different models or concepts of change, but all mean different things.

At this point in the tutorial, we introduced a structure for framing these terms: what is the historic and/or disciplinary home of the concept, and how does that shape a structure and process for this particular variant of change?

Consider “growth” as the first example. We adopted the framing from human biology, in which *growth* (the expansion of an organism; the measurable increase in one facet) is distinguished from *development* (the increase in complexity and differentiation of features and functions). Evidence from detailed daily tracking studies of infant growth indicates that it is a saltatory process: specifically, periods of no growth followed by intense bursts of growth. A “growth curve” then is a smoothed-over version of reality. We then discussed the factors that promote or inhibit human growth – hormones, diet, sleep, stress, and your genetic inheritance. As we translate this into a business framework, we see that change-through-growth necessitates:

- periods of quiet when no growth happens (we do not grow every day; some days are “rest days”)
- the well-timed interplay of internal and external factors
- provision of specific necessary resources (growth and lean are often contradictory)
- a focus on one metric (you can’t grow everything at the same time)
- well-functioning communications (hormone “messengers” are the critical element in growth – when they are missing or ill-timed, everything falls apart)

Certainly there are alternative models of “growth” that one could use to structure the concept. Our core argument emphasized the need to choose a model, and follow it out to assess how it structures a change process.

We then proceeded to apply this same process to Disruption (looking to military history) and Innovation (looking to laboratory science for its structure). The teams then conducted similar exercises for Pivot (turning to physics and engineering), North Star (from astronomy and navigation studies), Lean (from human biology), and Unify (from marriage and kinship work).

WHY BOTHER?

Constructing models may seem a bit silly, but there is value in them as a talking tool with clients and colleagues. If a client comes in clamoring to be “lead a revolution” in their category, do they have the proper systems and structures in place to make that happen? Would they, perhaps, be better positioned to “innovate” or “pivot” the category? When is evolution a preferred strategy to disruption? How are agility and toggling different?

By constructing models, we have a starting point for a conversation where we often assume a shared understanding. This enables everyone to stop for a moment, consider the options, and move forward in a thoughtful, planful way. Yes, change is inevitable. But this helps it be more exciting than terrifying.

Kate Sieck, PhD, is an anthropologist at RAND Corporation whose work focuses on the social determinants of behavioral and cognitive change. A cultural anthropologist by training with expertise in cognitive models and linguistics, she taught undergrad anthro courses for 10 years before launching a career in the business world. She has conducted research around the world and delivered keynote presentations at diverse venues, from NASCAR to the American Psychological Association.

Steven Garcia is a cultural anthropologist at Team One, a full-service marketing communications agency specializing in premium, luxury, and aspirational brands. With over 10 years of experience as a strategic planner spanning across the luxury, automotive, casual dining, financial and technology categories, he recently assumed a new role at Team One where he is building an anthropology practice and conducting cultural analysis to inform brand strategies and consumer insights. He is a M.S. candidate in applied anthropology at the University of North Texas.